Children and Play in Mayurbhanj District, Odisha

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This thesis is wholly my own original work, except where otherwise cited in the text.

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic and conceptual examination of peer play among school-aged children in rural North Odisha, India in 2008. In contrast to theorizations of play as socialization and transformation, this thesis develops a view of play as 'interaction', or dynamic exchange, with implications for cross-cultural ethnographies of play.

Despite the ubiquity of play scholarship, play remains an ambiguous concept. Anthropologists are particularly interested in play as either a modality of socialization, i.e., as children's enculturation into adult social and economic roles for their own future adult roles (thus perpetuating existing social structural/cultural paradigms); or as transformative performances that either actualize cultural change, or present a plethora of possibilities for cultural transformation and foster flexibility of cultural adaptive potential. However, the present ethnography provides evidence for a synthesis: play as a mode of interaction/dynamic exchange with context. The ethnography suggests that the socialization model represents children as too passive and the transformation model inadequately accounts for external processes and structures that shape children at play. The synthesis suggests that children at play are involved in dynamic exchanges with context: they imbibe their contexts through sensory-motor exchanges; they are constrained by their environment and micro and macro forces which shape them and their play performances; they make autonomous sense (and nonsense) of their lived experiences and circumstances; and they do in fact shape and transform context. This model of play as interaction is supported by insights from a combination of Sutton Smith's theory of play as performance and from enactivism (a cognitive development theory).

In the Santal and Ho dominated block of my research in Mayurbhanj district, play is central in children's peer sociality and interactions with local landscapes. This thesis examines the relationship between children's play acts and the contexts within which they are performed. In particular it draws connections between young people's enactments of play and rural Odishan senses of spatiality, village sociality, sacred/festival performances, gendered identities, conceptual paradigms, schooling and children's work.
The thesis also focuses on interactions between local contexts and state policy and administration. In tribally dominated areas such as Mayurbhanj, recently invigorated state and international projects of rural development emphasize schooling as never before, increasingly impinging upon children's lives. Mayurbhanj children have also long been important participants in the socio-economies of their home villages, where agri-forestry is both the predominant economic livelihood, and encompasses a sacred complex of beliefs and practices and village social relations. This thesis treats Mayurbhanj children's autonomous peer play as a special mode of social and socio-spatial interaction and individual-collective sense making, taking account of interactions between changes and continuities in conditions of their lives. This study has critical and practical implications for the current macro-economic project of schooling. In rural schools, the schooling project emphasizes the transmission of bodies of knowledge/texts, particularly through rote learning and under-emphasizes student-centred sense-making processes and the playfulness that exists and is quite characteristic of children's autonomous enthusiastic sense-making and innovation in rural settings outside of schools. The notion of play as interaction thus has critical and practical applications: for cross cultural play ethnographies; for understanding children's play as both experience and social cognition; and for rural school learning strategies.
Acknowledgements

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<td>A geo-political and economic administrative area that encompasses subdivisions of panchayets and villages</td>
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Introduction

Bicycles are the primary mode of transport in Mayurbhanj villages (Odisha). Each Saturday hundreds, if not thousands of sturdy bicycles laden with sacks of produce, or shopping bags of the week’s household vegetables come and go from the crowded Jamda market. Cyclists greet friends and relatives on the road and exchange news and convey messages. In fact the bicycle is a key instrument in a sophisticated inter-village communication network by means of which people in any given village have frequent local news updates. I often found that the exact times and places of where I had been were already known by my adoptive family on my arrival home after a day’s fieldwork. “Where are you going”? was the common question to anyone cycling along the road. Getting a response, the inquirer would often ask the cyclist to pass on a message, elicit specific news about someone, or pick something up. Cycling in the villages frequently involves carrying a passenger. Women, some who never learnt how to ride, often travel sidesaddle on the back carrier of a male relative’s bicycle, with a baby on their knee. Small children generally ride on the back, or front-bar of an older caregiver’s bike.

Figure 1  Children’s photo-voice photo
The above photo was taken by one of the children during a photo-voice exercise that was part of the methodology of this ethnography (see p 42). Creatively posed shots such as this one are a feature of a number of the photos that children took. In this image the subjects play with the familiar bicycle. Every-day 'double-dinking' a passenger is taken to an extreme. The mainstream bicycle culture of Mayurbhanj provides the context within which these children enact their own ways of playing with the familiar. They are not only playing with the concept of the bicycle but with the possibilities of photography. The photographer opts not to replicate the sober poses of studio photography, common in the villages, offering instead a novel reinterpretation of a bicycle portrait.

Why don't children at play pattern themselves obediently and consistently on adult-modeled utilization of resources such as bicycles? Why instead is the bike a medium for tricks and antics? The answer may lie in the imaginative faculty that is central in children's play. Play offers an arena where children don't have to rein in their imagination, in a temporary but indispensable separation from the material exterior world. Set in what Winnicott calls the 'third space' between the external world of objects and the inner world of dream and thought, children at play creatively explore their own experience while keeping a curious eye on the universe that surrounds them (Factor, 1988: xii). As Factor suggests, play is the medium and the message, the mechanism by which the young make sense of a bewildering world without danger to limb or reputation (most of the time!). For in play, behavior, even though functioning normally, is uncoupled (and somewhat buffered) from its normal consequences. Therein lies both its flexibility and frivolity (Factor, 1988: 21).

If there are universal features such as imagination and experience in all children's play, there is still diversity of play forms, verbal expressions, actions and intentions. Place and time are part of the context through which different expressions of play-culture emerge, are shaped and represented (Factor, 1988: xii). We can speak of a common subculture of childhood and play only if we simultaneously recognize the distinctiveness of, for instance, Santal childhood, a girl's Santal childhood versus a boy's, a girl's Santal childhood in a remote village versus in a busy town, a wealthy urban childhood and so on. Each variation assures a different possible cultural formation and manifestation of play (1988: xiii). This
thesis is about rural children’s play in Jamda, a Santal dominated block in Mayurbhanj District, Odisha, in 2008.

The main thesis question is, ‘what is the relationship between rural Odishan children’s peer play and the socio-cultural contexts within which they play’? In response I explore some of the popular manifestations of school aged children’s play and the ways that their play-performances shape and are shaped by Odishan village socio-cultural and economic life. This includes how play interfaces with village sociality, with spatiality, with agricultural economy and children’s work obligations, with local gender norms, with sacred paradigms and with schooling and other public institutions of childhood.

At a time when Odisha undergoes significant economic transformation related to various privatized mega projects (mining, port development, dam and hydro schemes, IT development and education) rural tribal areas, such as Mayurbhanj District, remain largely economically self reliant but with high levels of poverty and low levels of state services and navigate their own challenges as local social, cultural, economic and political processes interact with state and global development programs. Children are at the centre of rural development agendas through recently invigorated state targets of compulsory schooling and early childhood welfare centres. Mayurbhanj children actively negotiate the balance between their schooling and state ‘modernizing agendas’ while simultaneously participating in village communities that nurture their cultural identities in which land/forest, community and the sacred realm are central. Many children play key economic roles within family agro-forestry production units, which forms a central part of their social identity as much as their identity as students. What happens with their peer play in this context?

Two streams of literature have informed the way that I have engaged with the questions posed by this thesis: anthropology of childhood and anthropology of play. Both these sub-disciplines have passed through a shift in conceptualizing childhood and children’s play. Earlier anthropological interest in children and their play could be summed up in the word, ‘socialization’. Socialization generally implied a view of children as ‘empty vessels’ who passively receive adult culture, mimic it through socio-dramatic play as a form of pre-practice of cultural routines and then mature into successfully socialized and enculturated adults themselves.
Later childhood studies may be summed up in the word 'agency' and later play studies in the word 'transformation'. This new model views social structures and cultural paradigms as ever-changing and children as active participants in social and cultural transformation. Their play is considered to be a primary site where socio-cultural possibilities are tested and 'played with'.

These shifts in approach to childhood and play, from an emphasis on children's passive socialization to active transformation, influence how this thesis tackles the central research question. Therefore I begin with a brief overview of literature on childhood and then play. This situates the next section, which lays out the research problem/question. Following this is a section on research methodologies and finally the thesis chapter outline.

**Children and Childhood**

To the extent that it is a social construction, childhood is an idea that carries any number of assumptions and associations. Even as an objective biological developmental period, childhood is interpreted in wildly different ways in diverse historical periods and geographic, socio-cultural and economic contexts. Philip Ariès (1962) was one of the first to suggest that even though children are undoubtedly biologically immature, childhood is a cultural institution that exists in a variety of forms in different geographic and historical contexts. Hendrick (1990), following Ariès, provided an historical illustration of a plethora of constructions and reconstructions of British childhood including: the romantic child, the factory child, the schooled child, the family child, the welfare child, the psychological child. Each construction served the society for a particular historical phase.

Constructions of childhood influence social and policy expectations of children, children's lived experiences and scholarly studies of children. Following is an overview of some of the main interpretive influences (of constructions of childhood) in anthropological studies of childhood and children and how these were part of key ideas in anthropology at those periods.

Sapir, Mead and Benedict led the early U.S. anthropological studies of children under the rubrics of the culture and personality school. Ethnographers of this school were largely motivated by two interrelated projects: testing and contesting current psychological theories and exploring socialization/enculturation practices.
For example, Mead employed her study on growing up in Samoa to contest the idea that adolescence is a natural period of turbulence in all human societies. Malinowski (from his Trobriand study) contested Freud’s theory of Oedipus complex (LeVine, 2007: 249). Whiting and Whiting carried out the six-culture comparative study of child-rearing. The majority of anthropologists argued that enculturation and socialization are the determining forces that overlie, transform and trump humans’ biological or universal psychological impulses. To this end, how, in diverse cultural contexts, children are socialized, how the personalities of ‘immature and irrational children’ develop as they mature into ‘rational adults, fully functioning social members’ have featured as primary, secondary or minor theoretical concerns of numerous ethnographies since the earliest days of professional anthropology (LeVine, 2007: 251-253).

Despite this early anthropological interest in childhood and childrearing, sections of the discipline initiated an increasingly critical awareness of anthropology’s characterization of and attention to children. Hirschfeld (2002) and Schwartzman (2001) argued that the discipline generally holds an impoverished view of the child that overestimates the roles adults play, underestimates children’s contribution to cultural reproduction and lacks an appreciation of the agentive force of children’s peer culture and how it shapes adult-dominated culture. These critiques prompted a general shift away from the classical paradigm of child socialization where children are conceived as empty vessels into whom culture is poured. Newer models conceive of children as active in ordering and reordering their lives. In the new model, cultural knowledge is not only transferred from adults of one generation to the children of the next, it is also generated among children, giving rise to a children’s culture, which forms a powerful part of their knowledge base. Children’s culture also stimulates and transforms adults around them. Thus socialization is re-modeled as a multi-directional process between generations.

Hardman (1973) asked whether there could be an anthropology of children, arguing that children, like women, occupied a “muted” position in society. Her proposition, based on her research on children and play, prompted study of children as interesting in their own right, rather than in terms of what their childhood may implicate for their future adulthood. This sparked interest in
bringing ‘children’s voices’ into research and the beginnings of an anthropology of children in which children would be accepted as competent spokespeople about the experiences and perspectives of those who inhabit the socially circumscribed and in some respects marginalized space of childhood. These transformations in approach to the anthropology of children were thus part of a broader shift in anthropology with emerging ideas of agency over the previously more ‘passive’ subject and ideas of ‘voice’, which resonated through a number of domains (e.g., gender theory) including child scholarship.

Jens Qvortrup (1987) was one of the first to break with sociological studies that looked from a parent’s perspectives at the problems of children. He sought to ground research in children’s everyday life experiences and the implications of macro-social and economic structures for children’s experiences. James and Prout (1990) then set the foundation for a new wave of research based on acknowledgement of children’s agency, emphasizing not what children will become but what children experience and how they participate in the structures and processes around them. This shifted the narrow focus of socialization, to take children seriously as they live their lives in the here and now. Here the child is not a future social member but a person with a status, a course of action, needs, rights and particular differences based on their membership of the social institution of childhood, in sum –a social actor (a human being rather than human becoming). This proclamation of a new paradigm of childhood engages with and responds to a process of reconstructing childhood in contemporary society (James and Prout, 1990).

James and Prout (1990) suggested that the emerging paradigm of childhood has certain key features: childhood is accepted as a cultural construction and interpretive framework for understanding the early years of human life that is distinct from biological immaturity of children (which is undeniably relevant but diversely interpreted). ‘Childhood’ is neither natural nor universal but appears in various forms as a component of most societies; childhood is a variable of social analysis that can never be divorced from other variables such as ethnicity, class or gender, giving way to a variety of childhoods; children’s social relationships and cultures are intrinsically worthy of study, independent of the concerns and perspectives of adults; children are not merely passive in social structures and
processes. They are active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live (James and Prout, 1990: 8-9).

James (2007) later amended her earlier emphasis on children’s agency and suggested that now that anthropological childhood studies have come of age and the ‘voices of children’ are making a sizable contribution to the research agenda, it is time to consider the sub-discipline’s further potential. Rather than merely using children's voices as powerful, disembodied rhetorical devices in research texts, she suggested setting children’s perspectives/voices alongside work that explores the structural conditions that shape childhood as a generational space. This is a recommendation that has influenced my own approach within this thesis. I seek to integrate qualitative ethnography (that engages seriously with what children do and say about their own lives) and structural analysis of processes affecting children’s lives. As James reminds us, childhood is a social space that is structurally determined by a range of social institutions and because of this, children as social actors have specified roles to play as children and generally have delimited access to information and rights of participation, which significantly constitutes their standpoint. Yet children, both as individuals and as a collectivity also shape those roles and create new ones that alter the space of childhood (James, 2007: 269).

This thesis explores some of the ways this is played out in children's every day lives in the setting of village life in Mayurbhanj. It both recognizes children’s roles as social actors and notes the ways that their lives are structurally constrained and culturally determined.

In the 1980s and 1990s the anthropology of childhood was influenced by a growing international focus on issues related to child rights and questions of children’s civic participation as citizens (Ennew, 2000). In 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was inaugurated with important consequences for children, childhood practitioners and scholarship. The 1989 CRC moved from the traditional two-fold UN agenda of guaranteeing child rights to i) protection (i.e., safety and security) and ii) provision (of basic needs such as food, clothing, medicine, shelter, family, education), to include a third “P”, participation (in all matters which concern them). The UN move to emphasize child participation reflects a trend within wider development approaches and is much discussed in the anthropology of development, particularly through engagement with the work
of Sen (Sen, 1987, Sen, 1997, Sen, 2002a, Sen and Dreze, 2002, Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). This reflected the recognition of children as social members and actors. The CRC, with its globalized definitions of childhood (all persons under 18 years) and specified expectations of what being a child should entail, is proving to be a pivot for child-focused anthropologists, who are interested in the effects of this contemporary construction of appropriate universal childhood and to test how this construction of ‘appropriate childhood’ fits in with empirical reality in diverse settings.

In the Indian context, a number of childhood-studies theorists grapple with the tensions between the singularizing construction of children and childhood generated by the normative index of the CRC and the anthropological concept of *multiple childhoods*. While no-one rejects the CRC per se, South Asian childhood theorists and child-focused ethnographers negotiate open-ended academic interrogations and determinate policy concerns. They straddle the line between recognizing the importance of child rights charters such as the CRC on the one hand and critiquing singularizing models (of normative indexes) wherever such models fail to engage meaningfully with post-colonial politico-historic and economic circumstances that shape disadvantage and with cultural paradigms (Balagopalan, 2011, Behera, 2007). Balagopalan argues that Chatterjee’s idea -- that *India’s failure to faithfully mirror the west suggests multiple modernities rather than a lack* -- is relevant to a notion of ‘multiple childhoods’ (Balagopalan, 2011: 293). Rather than faithfully mirroring a western dominated model of a singular ideal modern childhood, the notion of multiple childhoods suggests that diverse contexts and histories bring their own problems, solutions, practices and experience to the meanings of childhood and the lived worlds of children, which must be part of the dialogue of understanding childhood.

In this context Balagopalan suggests that child-focused ethnographies may disentangle the authorititative web of truth effects in policy discourses (such as the singularizing CRC) and historicize categories used to understand children’s lives. This means neither naively willing away problems such as child labor and exploitation, or lack of schooling in the guise of culture, nor berating local practices in the politics of child-saving, but researching the interactions between these two discourses (Balagopalan, 2011). In this connection, following Balagopalan, Behera
and other South Asian childhood theorists, the present ethnography of Mayurbhanj children has a greater role than breathing life into 'otherness' through descriptions of the designs of culture, that risk rendering the children I write about even more isolated. Rather it seeks to contribute to a conceptualization of the lives of Mayurbhanj children as diverse, contested and embedded in the local and global politics of identity, geo-social and economic status, gender, post-colonial history, state modernization projects and global consumption modes. It also seeks to engage with children’s perspectives as a normative part of social discourse and analysis, rather than as an exotic or emotionally appealing device in adult-centric discourse.

An issue connected with the CRC steered this child-focused ethnography in the direction of play. During a pilot visit to Odisha in early 2007 I visited Sambalpur University and met Professor Deepak Kumar Behera, the director of the IUAES International Commission on the Anthropology of Childhood, who fuelled my interest in South Asian childhood studies with much scholarly advice and guidance. I also met Rashmii Pramanik who was writing her PhD dissertation on overburdened school going children. Her thesis is that due to heavy demands of schoolwork, tuition classes and domestic duties, school students in North Indian towns have almost no time or opportunity for peer play. Pramanik backed up the problem of lack of opportunity to play by referring to the CRC (which India is a signatory to). The CRC, drawing on international child development literature that links childhood play with optimal child development, includes the right to play as one of the universal rights of the child. I decided to compare Pramanik's town based findings with an ethnography of children’s play in rural villages. However, I did not want to solely focus on whether rural children have time/opportunities for play, but what play means for them and how it correlates with other aspects of local culture. My aim was to avoid the ‘empty vessel’ focus of socialization studies, by engaging with children’s own perspectives and experiences, while taking up the challenges of those who emphasize the impacts of structural conditions and constraints on children's agency.

I will now describe the play literature that provides the second theoretical influence within this thesis.
Play

Although play has probably been part of human expression since our earliest days on this planet (as it is with a number of animal species) and although even babies recognize play acts (i.e., most can distinguish playfully feigned tears or mock anger from non-playful expressions in their carers), in spite of hundreds of definitions, exactly what it is remains theoretically elusive. Spariosu (1989) argues that the concept of play in any given time-place reveals the power, or dominant ideologies of that context. Thus he suggests we may better define play not by what it is, but by what it does, by the ways it reveals and supports dominant paradigms of belief and practice. Play-concepts and the paradigms of belief and practice that they relate to are, Spariosu asserts, in a perpetual contest with each other for cultural authority. Following are a few examples.

Pre-Enlightenment Concepts of Play

In early western philosophical discourse the ancient Greeks explored play as part of their frameworks for understanding human expressions and over time, three types of play were identified: agon, alea and mimesis (Spariosu, 1989, Frost et al., 2008). Agon refers to competitions and contests, which creates surrogate forms of conflict by which the winner appeared gifted with divine power or blessed by the gods. Alea refers to games of luck or chance, which were often part of divination and other efforts to relate to an apparent randomness. The belief that divine order can emerge from randomness inspired interactions with processes of chance such as tossing bones, rolling dice, drawing cards (images) or lots, which could signify ways that a player is selected by the gods. Games of chance, with or without divine association continue today in coin tossing, gambling and so on. Mimesis included a variety of make-believe/representational/socio-dramatic forms such as mimicking the gods as a form of devotion, plays, rituals, dance, fictional narratives including myths, comedy, satire, puppetry and other imaginative expressions. All aimed to bring humans in proximity with the gods and seek divine favour; thus play had sacred connotations. The ancient forms of play applied to people of all ages and there are few early historical records of distinctly childhood play (Frost et al., 2008).
Enlightenment and Romantic Concepts of Play

During the enlightenment the major concerns of philosophers were notions of 'rational thought' that centered on finding objective material evidence for truth rather than reliance on faith in religious beliefs and supplication to gods. In this context the play-concept varied between being considered as the root of irrationality and religiosity and as the foundation of rationality. These two poles led to diverse articulations regarding the value of children's play (Frost et al., 2008: 8).

Locke speculated that each human is born as an intellectual tabula rasa (blank slate) onto which sense impressions are inscribed. He suggested that thought is the result of worldly experiences rather than internal spiritual processes. He considered play as a necessary part of childhood that contributes to health and spirit (Frost et al., 2008: 8).

Kant was interested in how we know things. He believed that the free play of the mind, the imagination, is the context within which reason and knowledge operate. He also attributed to play the bases of art and morality. However his view of play was more cognitive and largely pertained to adults (Frost et al., 2008: 9, Spariosu, 1989).

Schiller attributed to play the roots of human creativity. For him, humans work to meet the material needs of survival. Surplus energy is dedicated to play, particularly symbolic play -- aesthetic or pleasing activities that allow us to think on a higher level. For Schiller play is a source of hope and pertains to creativity and emancipation. Much contemporary play theory about a connection between play and the imagination may be traced to Schiller (Spariosu, 1989: 9, Frost et al., 2008).

The romantic thinker Froebel was amongst the early theorists who specifically theorized about children and play. He formulated educational ideas of the kindergarten, the children's garden, where play activities in natural settings allow children to encounter forms of nature, knowledge and beauty that would reveal divine unity in the world and our place in that unity. He proposed the idea that play is educationally natural. In other words, through play-processes, such as with balls, games, building blocks etc, children would naturally simulate structures,
relationships of objects to one another and processes and naturally gain practical knowledge (Frost et al., 2008: 10).

**Scientific and Social Science Concepts of Play**

Darwin's writings on natural selection and species survival shifted the paradigm on concepts of play to a range of Darwinian inspired evolutionary models. Amongst social scientists these evolutionary models generated four classical paradigms of play: surplus energy; recapitulation; pre-practice; and relaxation. Spencer reinterpreted Schiller's surplus energy model into one where surplus energy fuels play-instincts for natural selection: i.e., play-fighting is associated with physical dominance and aesthetic play enhances dominance in symbolic skills.

Hall offered recapitulation theory. He suggested that in utero and after birth the biological and cultural evolution of the entire species unfurls as the individual organism grows. He suggested that the fetus recapitulates the evolution of living organisms from a single-cell organism through the fish, amphibian, reptilian, mammalian and finally human structure. These ideas have been discredited in light of genetic knowledge that reveals that the complete complement of human phenotype is present in the DNA of a fetus. Hall proposed that after birth, children must first recapitulate the evolution of human culture through play, to 'get the past out of the way' so to speak, allowing them to focus on higher level mental and social skills expected of mature, civilized human beings (Frost et al., 2008: 14-15). For Hall play did not build towards a future but allowed the child to get rid of the past. Although his specific notions of the progressive stages that children must pass through are no longer generally accepted, they are significant in terms of the continuing impact that they have on child development theories and educational theories. In the digital gaming world too, his influence persists. For example in a recent book on creating emotions in digital games, Wright (Wright, 2004) argues that early digital games appealed to primitive instincts and that players tend to familiarize themselves with new gaming technology by initially recapitulating to brain stem (reptilian)survival and aggression instincts in games. Getting over this phase, the author proposes it is time to move digital gaming on to higher levels (i.e., emotional empathetic) expressions of possible and meaningful gaming experience, broadening the emotional palette, in keeping with books, films and music.
Karl Groos, cited in Frost, Wortham et al (2008) offered a more faithful interpretation of Darwin’s evolutionary theory and provided an important rationale for valuing play. He suggested that play serves a functional, adaptive purpose as pre-exercise or practice by the young of skills important in adult life. In his two books, The Play of Animals and The Play of Man, he argued that the sorts of things that juvenile players practice varies from species to species. A kitten chasing and pouncing on a leaf for example relates to feline predatory skills. He identified two types of human play: experimental play which provides sensory and motor practice (object manipulation, construction and games with rules which pre-exercise self-control) and socionomic play which provides practice of interpersonal skills (chasey, rough and tumble play, socio-dramatic role-play and other imitations (Groos, 1901, Groos, 1898, Frost et al., 2008).

The final evolutionary play theory is relaxation theory (an opposite of surplus energy theory where play is engendered by a deficit, not surplus of energy). Relaxation theory suggests that play provides recuperation from work and tiring activity which regenerates the organism for future work activity.

Along with the evolutionary play theories a parallel school approached play under the influence of Boas’ historical particularism and emphasized the need for detailed collections of game texts. These studies were often motivated by the desire to preserve childhood customs which many thought would soon vanish and games were treated like archaeological relics. Collected games also served to illustrate theories of diffusion and the conservatism of children.

Functionalist anthropologists reacted against what they considered comparatively a-theoretical and overly inductive approaches of particularists and diffusionists. Functional investigations of play tended to emphasize its imitative and pre-practice function (following Groos) to provide children with intrinsically rewarding opportunities to learn and practice appropriate adult roles.

Anthropological approaches to play diversified in the second half of the 20th century. Bateson brought play into the heart of communication studies with the view that play could only occur among organisms able to meta-communicate and therefore to distinguish simultaneous messages of differing logical types. He suggested that play’s meta-communication messages act as frames that tell how
another message should be read. He exemplified the framing of a playful act with the meta-message, 'This nip is not a bite' (Bateson, 1972). Geertz spoke of 'deep play' in his discourses on cultural interpretation (Geertz, 1973). Deep play alludes to the shared cultural meanings embedded in play acts that are like an extracerebral collective psychology of the culturally linked players, revealing hidden or sublimated shared sensitivities, conceptual paradigms and social organization, that cultural interpreters seek to understand and make understood. Turner (1982), following van Gennep, described play as ritual liminal activity associated with facilitating transformations in agricultural seasonal cycles and initiation cycles. The work of Geertz and Turner in particular, was not specifically related to children's play.

The evolutionary approach to play was thoroughly embraced by psychology, particularly by cognitive development theorists. This fuelled the ongoing nature versus nurture debate between the disciplines of psychology and anthropology. Psychological play theories look for universal laws regarding the relation between children’s play and ‘the mind of the player’ (expressed in cognitive development and in psycho-analytic theories) and anthropology acts as skeptic regarding universalizing propositions, especially when many such propositions are only tested in Western, middle class, play laboratory settings such as kindergartens and university psychology departments. Anthropological play theories generally seek to remind play theorists about the variability of the human psyche in diverse contexts. Thus most anthropological play studies are guided not by questions about play texts and the mind, but by questions of a social nature. These include how socialization and enculturation in diverse cross-cultural settings may bring diversity into the core cognitive and psychological processes and how children’s everyday living circumstances shapes play. They therefore combine a study of play texts and social contexts. While contributing to a culturally informed psychology, they do however necessitate a cognitively informed anthropology. This interchange between the disciplines is like a symbiotic relationship. Therefore it is important for play anthropologists to keep abreast of the important cognitive and psychoanalytic concepts of play. In this regard, we will now turn to some of the most influential psychological approaches to children’s play.
Cognitive Development Concepts of Play

Piaget (1951) and Vygotsky (1966) are the two most influential cognitive development theorists concerned with potentialities of play. Piaget proposed that play is directly related to the intellectual and moral development of the child. He proposed the following developmental model of play: 0-2 years, mastery of motor-sensory skills; 2-7 years, symbolic play where schemata generally applied to one object are used on a substitute, which corresponds with the representational or preoperational phase of development; 7-11 years, make believe or socio-dramatic plays, which are more advanced forms of symbolic games and which correspond with a concrete operational phase of development. Games with rules, which correspond most closely to reality (non-play), prepare children for participation in formal operation (which is the final stage of child development and occurs from 11 years onward). Piaget suggests that these four cognitive development phases are part of the transition that a child makes between assimilation (where a child bends reality to fit his/her current mental schema) and accommodation (where a child learns to bend his/her own mental schema to accommodate objective reality. One of the criticisms of Piaget’s theory is that it is extracted from a play-study of his own privileged children and thereby, while purporting to be a universal profile of juvenile psychological development, is not adequately tested in diverse cultural contexts.

Vygotsky, who is arguably more influential than Piaget in contemporary cognitive approaches to play, does suggest that the smallest unit of analysis is always the child-at-play-in-context. For Vygotsky the culture and language of the society that the child inhabits is the context. One of Vygotsky’s central propositions was that play is a transitional stage through which the child learns to sever the meaning of a word from an object. In play a child deals with things as having meaning. Word meanings replace objects, and thus an emancipation of meaning from object occurs (Vygotsky, 1966). For example, play allows a child to sever the word ‘horse’ from an actual horse and apply it to a stick which the child stand’s astride and pretends he is riding as a horse. In this case the stick is a transitional object which alters the child’s relationship to reality. As children develop, Vygotsky suggests, the transitional objects (sticks, dolls and toys) become increasingly sublimated or internalized until no external pivot is required for imaginary actions to occur (Vygotsky, 1966). For the child in play the idea is the central point and ‘things’
move from a dominant to a subordinate position (Hardman, 1973). Vygotsky also proposed the notion of play as a zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he suggests means that by means of their play the child is able to leap one stage ahead of his or her current cognitive status. This suggests the special status of play.

Cognitivists suggest that pretend play: crystallizes de-centration –the progressive shift from subjective ego-centrism to a coordinated viewpoint with self-other references; it consolidates reversibility/conservation conceptualizations –being able to move in and out of self and others’ identities and roles; and crystallizes decontextualization, which allows for decreasing reliance on proto-type objects and allows the child to combine and coordinate objects in ever more complex schemes. It also offers the following competencies: perspective taking, hypothesis testing, causal reasoning, combinatorial flexibility, divergent thinking, associative fluency, problem solving, capacity to discriminate appearance from reality (Goldman, 1998).

Cognitive development theories are just one aspect of a psychological approach to play. Another aspect is manifest in psychoanalytic theories such as those of Freud, Erikson and Winnicott.

Psycho-analytic Concepts of Play

Freud argued that fantasy thought originates under conditions when the deprivation of a child’s immediate gratification is so great that s/he hallucinates the image of the satisfying object and that this hallucination becomes a source of partial drive satisfaction. Thus for Freud, play involved unconscious symbolism that is an index of sublimated desire, wish fulfillment, conflicts and traumas. Freud also felt that play represented a cathartic attempt to master or cope with anxiety provoking situations. He saw it as a medium to master, manage and manipulate one’s own impotence in the face of real situations (Singer, 1973: 13).

After Freud, Erikson broadened the psycho-analytic view of the role of play beyond the pathological model to include the player’s creation of model situations so as to master reality. Thus fantasy is seen as an autonomous ego function that develops without a conflict or trauma having occurred. While his view sabotaged Freud’s original emphasis on conflict, Erikson opened the way for a more general and cognitive-development-oriented theory of play (Singer, 1973: 13).
Winnicott (1971) is most famed for his notion of the transitional object (which is quite distinct from Vygotsky's notion of play as a linguistic transitional process). His is an emotional development theory that suggests that all play originates in the space between the baby and the mother's breast. He posited that all babies have a subjective experience of deep comfort and satisfaction in an original illusion that the breast is part of them and that they somehow control it (when they cry, the breast appears). With weaning and the gradual distancing of the mother over time the baby attaches to transitional objects (a teddy, blanket, thumb etc) in the process of natural disillusionment of subjective oneness with the mother's breast. The baby begins to realize that there are external objects that are separate, external and not part of their subjective self. As the baby emotionally matures, transitional objects are gradually replaced with different play acts that are transitional experiences. Winnicott argues that all play occurs in a space between inner subjective reality (feelings and imagination) and outer objective reality and that play is a process of negotiating inner and outer. For Winnicott, play also provides a resting place in the constant endeavour to negotiate what is inside and what is outside (Winnicott, 1971: 1-6).

Csikszentmihalyi, Garvey and Lieberman are three theorists who draw attention to an often over-looked aspect of play: manifest joy, positive affect, flow, optimal experience, sense of humour and spontaneity. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as an important optimal experience that may be attained in play states, where the player becomes delightfully absorbed in an activity and loses ordinary sense of time and self-consciousness. Flow occurs when the activity is challenging (not boring), yet not so challenging that it is beyond the capacity of the player, as evident in much 'serious' sport (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, Csikszentmihalyi, 1970). Garvey (1990) defines play as pleasurable, spontaneous, voluntary, a mode of activity rather than a class of activity, and sees it more as an enjoyment of means than an end. Lieberman (1977) argues that playfulness, light-heartedness or joie de vivre are essential qualities in the play of young children which lay the foundation for human experiences beyond the childhood years. In similar vein, Dewey (1938) wrote about the inseparability of means and ends: to practice freedom, one must experience freedom. He suggested that play amongst children provides an intrinsically interesting free exploration of society and nature.
Shift in Anthropological and Psychological Conceptualizations of Children’s Play

While psychology views play as a phenomenon of mind and anthropology explores play as a social phenomenon, both approaches meaningfully interact with each other and both underwent a similar shift after the 1970s. The new emphasis, which may be linked to ideas of agency in children, was on play as transformation (cognitive and cultural). Sutton Smith asserted that perhaps the key function of children’s play is that it retards calcification of mental and cultural processes by maintaining neural and psychological adaptive flexibility, which also links play with transformation. Schwartzman highlighted the ways that children at play are not mere replicators of culture but are active transformers of culture and technologies.

A few play ethnographies reflect this shift. While Lancy’s (1996) ethnography of play in rural Liberia reflects on play as cultural routines that prepare for future social and economic roles (socialization model), Goldman (1998) reflects on the link between Huli children’s play and conventions expressed in myth-making, thereby elevating their play to a formative and transformative cultural expression akin to poetry (transformational model). A growing number of ethnographies of children’s play explore the linguistic expressions and dynamics of peer relations in the play context (Adler and Adler, 1998, Corsaro, 2003, Eder and Corsaro, 1999, Goodwin, 1990, Ahn, 2011).

As the preceding pages indicate, diverse concepts of play are bound up with diverse paradigms of belief and practice that are in perpetual flux, interacting and contesting with each other. Within this mix is the Western pre-enlightenment focus on the sacredness of play, the enlightenment emphasis of play’s role in development of the rational mind, romantic/aesthetic notions of imagination, nature and freedom, evolutionary and functionalist models, psychological models from conflict to happiness and shifts in emphasis on children’s play from passive and somewhat static socialization models to transformation models.

South Asia has its own long history of play that intertwines diverse philosophical concepts (i.e., Lila, or cosmic play as the perpetual creation, preservation and destruction of the cosmos and as the game of hide and seek between human and the Divine), mythological ideas (i.e., Shiva and Parvati’s dice games; the dice game
that is the causative precursor of the entire Mahabharata epic) and contemporary embodied social performances of play, with and without sacred connotations, that involve children and whole families and communities. As Spariosu points out, historical time and place influence theoretical conceptualization about play and South Asia is part of a global interchange and circulation of play discourses and practices.

The rest of this thesis is concerned with play expressions, concepts and related beliefs and practices in contemporary rural Odisha in 2008. The specific focus is on school-aged children's peer play in rural villages of Mayurbhanj district and their own senses of the meaningfulness of their play. Following is a snapshot of some aspects of Mayurbhanj.

**Mayurbhanj, Odisha**

Mayurbhanj is one of Odisha state's 30 districts. Each district is administratively divided into several sub-divisions which are again subdivided into blocks, which are subdivided into panchayats. Each panchayat is a conglomerate of villages and most villages are divided into sahis (hamlets).

Mayurbhanj is a land-locked district on Odisha's northern border. It is surrounded by West Bengal and Jharkhand states in the north and north-west respectively. The district has three natural geographical divisions. In the centre the forests of the Similipal Ranges run due north-south and divide the undulating plains of the district into two areas: the drier west and the lusher east through which rivers from Similipal drain towards the Bay of Bengal. Forest and hills are an important aspect of the geographical, cultural and natural history of Mayurbhanj. Similipal is one of India's largest tiger reserves and is also home to elephants, deer, bears and many other species of fauna. The presence of these species of wildlife is a formative part of the culture of the district (as social communities develop practices over time for managing their relationships with these animals). The economy of the district is driven by agriculture, overwhelmingly paddy cultivation. Throughout most of the district, one annual rain dependent paddy crop is cultivated per year by traditional-method family plot farming. Fuel-wood collection and other forestry activities are a secondary occupation for many of
those who live near the forested hills, resulting in their becoming increasingly denuded.

Mayurbhanj was a princely state ruled by the Bhanja dynasty for many centuries. "Mayur" -the peacock- was the royal seal. Initially the princely capital was in the west of the district in Khijjinga or Khijjinga-kota. The ruins of this ancient capital extend beyond the limits of the present village from the bank of the Khairabandhan river in the north to that of the Kantakhair river in the south. The Bhanjas ultimately abandoned Khijjinga and built a new capital in Baripada on the eastern slopes of Similipal, which is the present day district headquarters and administrative hub. In 1949 Mayurbhanj was included in the newly formed state of Odisha (formerly, and still commonly, Orissa). Although Mayurbhanj has long cultural and political links with other parts of present day Odisha, it also retains ancient socio-cultural links with Singhbhum district of Jharkhand and with western West Bengal. Cross border marriages for example are still common in the rural villages of Mayurbhanj. Several important cultural forms such as Chau dance are exclusively common to Singhbhum, Purulia (West Bengal) and Mayurbhanj, which is another signal of the continuities across this region, which was originally known as Rarh, which means red, referring to the laterite soil of the area.

The population of Mayurbhanj as per the 2011 census was 2,513,895, roughly equal to the nation of Kuwait, or the political equivalent of an Australian state. The 2011 average literacy rate was 63.98% compared to 51% in 2001. 2011 male and female literacy rates were 74.92% and 53.18% respectively. In 2001, the same figures stood at 65.76% and 37.84%. Most of the population resides in rural rather than urban areas. Almost 60% of the population is administratively classified as scheduled tribals (STs). The main ST communities living in Mayurbhanj are 'Munda' Austro-Asiatic linguistic communities, including: the Santal as the overwhelming majority, the Ho (Kolho) and the Kharia. The Dudh Kharia community of Similipal Ranges are widely considered to be autochthonous to Mayurbhanj and the Bhanja royal family were said to have descended from them. In Jamda Block, western Mayurbhanj (Rairangpur subdivision), where this study was situated, the Santal and Ho communities formed over 75% of the population and in some villages close to 100% of the population. Connection with land and
forest is part of the sacred complex and social organization of Jamda’s Santal and Ho villagers.

While rural residents are largely economically self reliant, malnutrition (technical poverty), malaria and poor access to services and infra-structure were rife in Jamda in 2008. Odisha and Mayurbhanj is currently the site of unprecedented state and international economic development and ‘child welfare’ is the centrepiece of rural development in the form of invigorated attention to schools and anganwadi (preschool-children’s welfare) centres. For scheduled tribals in particular, ‘development’ is not uncontroversial. It is a complex socio-economic phenomenon met with complex ranges of responses by local residents in rural villages of Jamda.

The Research Intentions, Problem and Question

This thesis is an ethnographic and conceptual examination of peer play among elementary school aged children (5-14 year olds) in rural Mayurbhanj in 2008. The play literature described above reveals that anthropologists of children’s play swayed between a 'play as socialization' axis and a 'play as transformation' axis. The former focused on the ways that play facilitates pre-practice of necessary adult skills and capabilities and mimicry of adult customs and social roles. The latter suggests that through play children actualize cultural change, or maintain the flexibility of adaptive cultural adaptive potential by experimenting or ‘playing with’ a variety of possibilities. As Factor (1988) says, ‘children play with one eye on what is and the other on what if?’

Both models continue to yield abundant insights into the social and cognitive significance of children’s play. However when I began to interpret my data drawn from ethnographic observations and playing with children in rural Mayurbhanj, I found that notwithstanding the irrefutable strength of scholarship that explores the role of play in children’s integration into the habits and values of their given social group, the socialization model has a tendency to project the child as too passive. On the other hand the transformation model arguably over-rates the transformative potential of children and their play, under-rating the influence of micro and macro level economic, social and cultural structures and forces that shape children and their play. For the ways that children learn to play are, like learning language, dependent on the ways in which communities structure their
families, conceptualize childhood and additionally, how they conceptualize sacred activity (Brice Heath, 1983) A problem for this thesis then became to find an appropriate model through which to interpret Mayurbhanj children’s play that integrated the insights of play as socialization approaches (Brice Heath, 1983, Lancy, 1996) and play as transformation approaches (Goldman, 1998, Schwartzman, 1998)

The central thesis question was, ‘what is the relationship between rural Mayurbhanj children’s play and the socio-cultural contexts within which they play?’ To answer this question I needed to pose a host of subsidiary questions such as: what constitutes play and children’s play in Mayurbhanj? What are the various shapes and forms that play might take? How do different children approach/feel about their play? What is its importance to them vis à vis their other activities? What are the contours of the social and cultural landscape? What is the gender landscape for instance? What is the economic landscape? How are children and children’s play situated within the social and cultural landscape?

These ethnographic questions (answers to which form the bedrock of this thesis) were complemented with an underlying conceptual question: if socialization and transformation approaches are inadequate (when taken solely as an ‘either-or’) to describe the relationship between children’s play and the social context, then what is the alternative? As the following pages describe, the thesis problem led me to a model of play that may be summed up in the word ‘interaction’. Play as interaction represents a synthesis of socialization and transformation models. Seeing play as dynamic exchanges between players and their contexts pays attention to the ways that children have sensory-motor exchanges with their natural and social environment, act within and experience their world, seek to make sense of it, are constrained and socialized by it and inscribe their own novelty upon it and transform it. The play as interaction model particularly draws on insights from enactivism and from Sutton Smith’s play as performance theory both of which also seek a synthesis of notions of play as a cognitive phenomenon versus as a social phenomenon.
The Fieldwork

Entering The Field

I describe the location of this study (Jamda Block) at some length in chapter two but will briefly describe my own entrance into the village and local area. In keeping with my university ethics protocol agreement concerning research with children I neither use actual names of the children or their parents at any time within this thesis. Nor do I specify actual village names.

On a winter’s night during the 2008 January Makar Sankrant (winter solstice) festival I arrived in Mayurbhanj at about 3am after a bumpy bus ride from Sambalpur. An anthropology Master’s student from Sambalpur University was going home for a brief holiday and he agreed to bring me to his local area and try to find a place for me to stay and a person who could work with me as an interpreter. I’d been drowsing and waking when suddenly my companion told me to get down off the bus in what seemed like the middle of nowhere. We stood by the side of the highway with a small group of people, shivering with cold. I had a jacket on but some of the children were just wearing thin shirts and shorts. Someone gathered rubbish and kindling and lit a small fire, which everyone huddled around. Just before dawn another bus came and took us all to Rairangpur. At the bus station my student friend bargained with auto-rickshaw drivers to take us to the village and soon we were off, bumping over corrugated dusty red tracks as the winter sun lazily rose. The first village we passed through it seemed everyone was still soundly sleeping. Only stubborn cocks sauntered across the road. Passing many hamlets and villages, hillocks, fields and streams, we came at last to the small village and village home where I was to eventually stay throughout my time in Mayurbhanj. I was ultimately adopted as the elder sister of the Master’s student, which established my kin relations with everyone in the village (kin auntie to some children, sister or cousin sister to some adults, adopted daughter to his parents etc). My adopted father was a primary school principal in a nearby village school which resonated well with my children’s play interest.

1 My protection of privacy agreement: I will use pseudonyms for individuals and groups in the thesis and any subsequent papers that emerge from this research and will make the suppression of identity clear to participants at the outset of the research.
Later, my adopted kin younger brother took me to the block headquarters to meet Shri Gurucharan Hansda. Gurucharan is the English teacher and tutor for Jamda college students. When we met he listened to my plans for learning and writing about children and their play and agreed to work with me as an interpreter. Thus began an important collaboration. Gurucharan was not only my interpreter, he taught me many things about the local area and Santal culture, social practices, and socio-political situation. As a Santal, he is fluent in Santali and Ho languages as well as Odiya, Hindi and English. I speak passable Hindi and Ba’ngla’ (Bengali) but not Odiya, Santali or Ho. My general communication with people was in Hindi. Some parents who never went to school don’t speak Hindi and we communicated with a blend of my faltering Odiya, some Ba’ngla’ and some Hindi. Most school children speak Hindi, as it is a compulsory school subject (the national language), even though all classes are taught in Odiya and so communication with them was comparatively easy.

After meeting Gurucharan, when we returned to the village I took a rest on the wooden plank bed in the room where I’d kept my bags. Suddenly the room was filled with a small crowd of children who told me that there were people waiting to meet me in the courtyard outside. Outside were about twenty children and mothers from the village who wanted to know my name, where I came from, my work, what I was doing in their village, how long I intended to stay and so on. I answered all of their questions and explained that I wanted to write about children and their play in the Mayurbhanj rural village context. Fortunately my adopted brother was at the same time undertaking ethnographic fieldwork (in another district) as part of his Masters in anthropology (on the subject of local experiences of out-migration from tribal villages for employment) and so the concept of being an ethnographer was not completely unknown to his extended family within the village. The villagers in the courtyard talked among themselves in Odiya for a while and I sat, understanding little.

Then a group of children asked if I would like them to take me for a walk and show them their village. I agreed and we set out in the mild winter afternoon towards the granite mountain and then around rice fields to the village pond. Along the way one small child came and caught my hand as if I was a child, scolding me to take care not to fall as we clambered over granite rocks. Another young child chatted
with me the whole way, pointing out important land-marks around the village. We all sat for a while by the long rectangular village pond and asked each other many more questions and thus began our friendship, our kinship and my introduction to their village home. This thesis rests on collaboration primarily with these children, their families and with Gurucharan. It also rests on the many other families, school principals, teachers and students in the Jamda area who taught me, through thick and thin, about life in rural Mayurbhanj and play in rural Mayurbhanj. I humbly hope that whatever is written here reflects due respect for the generosity they showed to me.

**Research Methodology**

The central research question examines the relationship between school-aged children's performances of play and the socio-cultural context of play. Therefore I employed different methodologies to become a) familiar with the local social and cultural environment and b) familiar with children's performances of play. Due to my own barriers of language, this research does not rest on a conversational or linguistic analysis of children at play with peers. Rather I aimed simply to sketch broad contours of relationships between several types of play and the context.

**Methodologies Pertaining to Gathering Contextual Data**

My primary methodology to become familiar with the local context was classical participant observation, achieved by living with a family in the village over an extended period through most of an annual cycle and maintaining a daily journal of life in the village and home where I lived. Gradually I became a part of the household, with all of the dramas of life that families everywhere go through in one form or another (health, sickness, bitter sorrow and joy, arguments and concern for family prestige etc). Everyday conversations, interactions and daily chores with women, cooking in small lean-to chimney-less kitchens, washing laundry by the well, maintaining household water and fuel stocks and seasonal chores (rice farming) form the bedrock of my understanding about rural lives of families and communities in the local area. Observations of adult-child interactions and participation in a number of local community festivals also rounded my experience of local life.
Early on in my stay, I undertook a household survey across three villages: a least developed, medium developed and most developed village of the Block (about ten households in each village). Through this exercise the economic and services discrepancies between the least and most developed village became starkly apparent and the diversity of experiences of children within a single remote rural block were also highlighted. Gurucharan played a prominent role in these surveys because almost all of the interviews were conducted in Santali or Ho. Gurucharan translated my questions into Santali and Ho and respondents’ replies into English. Each interview took an hour or so. Some male respondents ignored me completely and would only address Gurucharan. In these situations I found that I got a lot out of simply sitting on the string cot in the courtyard of various homes amidst the goings on of the family, with children playing around or coming and going from school or the fields where they had been working. Some of the informal conversations with family members during these household visits enlightened me about various issues that people deal with as much as the questionnaire could.

After the household survey I began to engage with local public institutions of childhood: primarily schools and also anganwadi centers (preschool child welfare centres). My time in various schools (both public and private schools) was divided between activities and conversations with students and with school principal/teacher interviews. The main school that I spent time in was the school in the village where I lived. At this school I was able to come and go on foot from where I lived and attend key events such as festivals and the annual sports carnival.

I was also permitted to enter the classrooms to discuss this research and to enlist students who volunteered to participate to write short open essays on subjects such as “Me, My Family and My Village”; “Work that I do”; “What I Like to Do in My Free Time”; “My Play” etc. I also enlisted 60 students to maintain a 24 hour/7 day journal of their activities. 58 students returned completed or partially completed diaries to me. Importantly, it was made clear to student that participation was purely voluntary and, indeed, there was a mixed response amongst students. Students wrote their diaries and essays in Odiya, which meant that I had to have them transcribed and translated into English for use as qualitative data within this
thesis. The translations were done mainly by Gurucharan Hansda with the assistance of some of his college-level English tutorial students.

Another important methodology was key informant interviews. Some of the more formal of these, Gurucharan set up for me. These interviews/meetings were with such people as tribal chiefs, priests, community leaders, the District Administrator, the elected Block Chairman and the Block Development Officer, the Integrated Child Development Officer, Anganwadi centre Didis, traditional midwives (Dais) and as mentioned above, school principals and teachers. Other key informants with whom I held important informal conversations included mothers and fathers of children in the village where I lived, school students and a number of non-school-going children (laborers, caste-professionals and agricultural workers).

In the village where I stayed the children and I carried out a village mapping exercise in which we drew every house (and wrote down who lived there) and public utility or socially significant natural feature of the village onto a large chart. The map was drawn by the children as we moved through the village over several afternoons. Through this exercise the participating children made me aware of many of the social dynamics of families in the village and places that were significant in one way or another to them. Gurucharan and I carried out less detailed mapping exercises in the three villages where we conducted household surveys.

**Methodologies Pertaining to Gathering Data on Children’s Play Performances**

The main method for gathering data on children’s play was participation in the every-day, after school village play of school-going children in the village where I stayed. As often as I could, I would be out in the fields or on the village road between 4-6pm, which was school children’s main peer play period. Of course there would often be multiple sites of simultaneous recreation activity of different groups of children, which could be confusing and overwhelming. Over time, I became accustomed to homing in on one play activity while keeping an antenna up for other interesting play-things happening in the vicinity. In this after school period children played in various ways including a wide variety of team games, mucking around, sitting in the field and joking and gossiping, going for walks to the jungle and mountain or river, impromptu dramas, singing Bollywood or local songs with self-choreographed dances, making play props, sitting down games.
While much play observation took place in the village where I lived, I also observed play in other villages. During the period of the three-village survey, Gurucharan and I would regularly stop by the wayside and document games that children were playing.

Over time, I began a collection of formal traditional village games that included diagrams and game rules and some photo and video material. Several children of the village where I lived were keen to help me with this project and would come over every few days specifically to teach me a new game for the game collection. I think they expect that this work will result in a book solely on their games, which I do hope to complete at some stage.

Two methodologies that I experimented with during this research were photo-voice and video-voice. I introduced these participatory exercises with the children in the village where I stayed after I had been in the village for several months. For this purpose I had brought four simple digital still cameras and one second hand video camera with me to Mayurbhanj. My approach was to ask the children to help me in this project of research on play in the local village context by documenting their own village home and some of their games via the cameras. This experiment took place on a number of occasions over the period of about one month. Some of the upcoming chapters rely on some of the images that were created by various children in the context of these photo voice and video voice experiments. I was inspired to make use of this methodology after participating in the 2007 Visualizing Childhood symposium at ANU convened by Professor David MacDougall. I am compelled by the argument that ethnographic visual material is more than a hand-maiden to literary texts. In the hands of visual scholars/ethnographic film-makers, it represents a form of scholarly argument with its own conventions and evolving discourses surrounding ways of knowing. As an enthusiastic novice visual ethnographer, I incorporate some visual elements into this thesis based on the video voice/photo voice experiments with children and my own limited use of cameras in the field. The visual material is not intended merely as supporting 'evidence' for the text of the thesis, it offers an different kind of experiential understanding of some of the subjects that are the focus of the thesis discussion.
The Chapter Outline

The thesis chapters are structured to give the reader a taste of three different types of children's play: mimesis, socio-dramatic play (chapters one and five); agon and alea, games of contest and chance (chapter three); and ilinx, dizzy making play (chapter six). It is also structured to show ways that children’s performances of play interact with various aspects of the local ethnographic setting such as the spatiality of village landscapes; inclusions and exclusions within village sociality; sorcery; gender; schooling; sacred paradigms; and children's work.

Chapter one is based on a video drama written and enacted by a group of children. It explores ways that the children's make believe/mimetic drama interact with issues of inclusion and exclusion in village social relations and with an overwhelming factor of Mayurbhanj village life: sorcery.

Chapter two provides a profile of the ethnographic setting in four sections: growing up in Mayurbhanj; Jamda block -a “tribal” area; the interface between scheduled tribes and scheduled castes in Mayurbhanj; interfaces between village and state.

Chapter three is about the popular games that children in villages were playing in 2008. It offers descriptions of some games and a discussion on the relationship between games and village spatiality and temporality.

Chapter four is concerned with how to conceptualize play theoretically throughout this thesis. To this end, it engages with Sutton Smith’s theory of play as performance and insights from enactivism to build a framework through which to apprehend Mayurbhanj children’s play as a social phenomenon with cognitive and experiential significance.

Chapter five explores the interface between play and gender. This includes both how Mayurbhanj children conceptualize gender within their socio-dramatic play and also how gendered children play: the differences in social roles of boys and girls and how this influences their play.

Chapter six is about a particular class of children's play and a related class of sacred performance that Caillois calls 'ilinx'. Greek for whirlpool, ilinx refers to the intentional pursuit of vertigo to disrupt everyday perceptions of reality. This
chapter explores diverse significances of ilinx as a social performance and the ways that childhood experiences may correlate with wider phenomena of swinging and altered consciousness in the sacred sphere.

Chapter seven asks what sort of performance and resource is children’s play in the rural school context? It looks at how play is shaped by schooling and how time is reconfigured for school-going children. This chapter begins with an overview of education and schooling issues, particularly as they relate to rural tribal areas such as Mayurbhanj. It then offers a description of several government and private schools in Jamda. Then it explores student’s experiences and perspectives based on diaries that 58 school students wrote as part of this research. Finally it discusses play in the school context: how it differs from out-of-school-play and how the routines of schooling do and/or do not incorporate notions of play into modes of pedagogic practice.

Not all school-aged children in rural Mayurbhanj attend school. Chapter eight is about children, work and play. It has two purposes: to explore play in the lives of non-school-going working children and to explore the social and socio-economic values of play in Mayurbhanj. Play is often regarded as the antithesis to work and therefore as of little economic significance. This chapter is a preliminary exploration of local perceptions of the socio-economic value of play in Mayurbhanj.

**The DVD Visual Component**

The accompanying DVD incorporates i) some of the images and footage created by the children who participated in the video-voice and photo-voice exercises and ii) photographic and video data generated by Gurucharan Hansda in the course of the fieldwork and iii) photographic and video data that I generated during 2008. The DVD menu is broken into chapters that correspond with the chapters of the written thesis. Each chapter of the thesis is intended to be read in conjunction with viewing the corresponding chapters of the DVD. There is no visual media for chapter seven as the primary data from the schools included the participating students essays and 7-day-diaries.
Chapter 1  Children's Make-believe Play

This chapter examines how children's make-believe play alludes to the contexts within which it is performed. Here, particular focus is on a locally perceived hazard of Mayurbhanj rural village life: Avidya Tantrik/witchcraft attacks. The chapter explores how a group of children negotiate this risk through personal practices, prescribed dealings with their village terrain, social behavior with their peers and elders. Most importantly, it shows how this phenomenon finds expression in their play. First I describe a fictional drama authored and then simultaneously rehearsed, enacted and filmed by some village children. Then I relate a non-fictional village incident that mirrors in some respects the drama that preceded it. Both the children's video drama and the later incident revolve around a fight between a benevolent Tantrik Goddesses and malevolent Avidya Tantriks and witches. I then discuss the ways in which the phenomenon of Tantra (benevolent Vidya and malevolent Avidya Tantra) preoccupies Mayurbhanj village communities as part of their conceptual paradigm and embodied experiences. This is of particular concern for children who are the primary targets of Avidya Tantrik and witchcraft attacks. Then I place this conceptual paradigm within its ethnographic setting and discuss the resultant social exclusions and inclusions in play and non-play enactments. Finally I contrast and discuss two analytical paradigms, structural-functionalist and creativity-transformational, as ways of understanding the central concern of this chapter: what can children's mimetic play tell us about children's engagements with the social world of their village?

1.1  A Make-believe Play: The Goddess and The Tantrik

After several months of living in a village in Mayurbhanj District, a group of children who had been teaching me about their games participated in a video-voice exercise. My intention with the exercise, which I communicated to them, was that they would document their own games and their village environment. However almost as soon as they had learned the basics of video camera operations they began to use the camera to shoot impromptu mini dramas, perhaps because drama, "nathak", is popular in the villages and cinema is also increasingly popular. On day one they created a couple of 1-2 minute dramas: i) a kidnap drama and ii) a drama about an escape from wild elephants that were coming out of the nearby forest. By the second day of their use of the video camera, about a dozen children
jointly created a slightly longer and more elaborate dramatic story and arranged props, costumes and make-up to enact and film their drama.

The story, which actually changed a couple of times as they produced several takes of it, went something like this. A boy and a girl became intimate friends and were consequently ostracized by family members within their village. Being outcast, they were on their way to perform a puja (devotional offering) to Yoginii Buri, the Tantrik Goddess who dwells at the top of the mountain that overlooks their village. They prostrated themselves in front of her image and began their puja, seeking her blessing and protection when they were disrupted by an Avidya Tantrik - a person who uses Tantrik practices to accumulate occult powers for generally selfish and frequently malevolent ends. The Avidya Tantrik moved towards them menacingly with his apprentice by his side. He pointed his trident at the young boy and girl and commanded them to become his “chelas” (apprentices) or else he would kill them. They refused and he came forward to kill them. They cried out to the Goddess Yoginii to save them and lo! she manifested herself in embodied human form and overpowered the Tantrik who fell at her feet. Ultimately she placed one foot on the prone body of the Tantrik and plunged her trident into his body and killed him.

The children created, acted out and filmed the drama on the outskirts of their village, in a field at the foot of Yogini Buri mountain. There is a natural rock formation near the peak of that granite mountain that looks very much like a woman in meditation or prayer, whose form is visible from many vantage points in the village. On my first day in the village I was struck by the vision of the silhouette near the top of the hill and said it seemed that someone was sitting up there. The children who were taking me for a walk told me, “Yes there is someone up there, it our Yogini Buri Devi (Yogini is a Tantrik Goddess, Buri/bur means mountain in the local dialect and Devi means Goddess)”. The children and adults of the village feel a strong affinity with her and feel blessed to be living in her shelter. They honor her through periodic pujas and especially in a huge annual Yogini puja festival (on the full moon in August) which is attended by most villagers and visitors from many surrounding villages, but her presence is pervasive within the village all the time. Once, when I was leaving the village for a while, I bought some sweets and ‘muri’ (puffed rice), and called the children for a small picnic at the base of the Yogini mountain. I was just about to distribute the puffed rice and
sweets on plates made of leaves that the children had plucked from nearby trees when some of them told me that we must first make an offering of all the food to Yogini and then distribute whatever was left as Prasad (divine left-overs). One child took some of all of the varieties of sweets and puffed rice and made the offering and only when the offering was performed could all of the now sanctified food be shared out by the children.

Prior to the enactment of the video drama, a nine year old girl was chosen to play the role of Goddess Yogini. A young boy prepared a leaf headdress for her and crafted her trident out of a branch while he sat in a circle with a group of other children discussing the story outline and how they would enact and film it. A small girls’ make-up department formed to make up the girl who was playing Yogini with lipstick and kajal. A teenage girl came along and began to artfully paint small red and white ‘tilaks’, (dots), above the arcs of her eyebrows with the tip of a blade of grass as a brush in the typical Odiya make-up style of a dancer or a bride. A boy took charge as both drama director and camera man. He called to a teenage cow-herder, Bishnu, who had been watching us from a nearby forested hill and when he came over, he agreed to play the role of the Avidya Tantrik. His face was blackened with earth and his eyes reddened with lipstick for his role.
1.1 The Drama Within the Play

Bishnu was admired by some of the youngest boys and two of them argued with each other to play the role of the Tantrik’s “chela” (apprentice). This turned into a heated fist fight between six year old Sanjay and five year old Manoj, who is a nephew of mine due to my being adopted into his extended family within the village. Manoj’s elder cousins immediately intervened and harshly scolded Sanjay and shouted at him to go home. My instinct for fairness came to the fore and I said that if Sanjay would promise not to fight with Manoj, then they should let him stay. Sanjay stayed but my other nieces and nephews silently expressed their displeasure at my words. Manoj took on the drama role of the evil Tantrik’s, (Bishnu’s) apprentice and Sanjay was at last given a minor role as a roadside seller of flowers and Prasad sweets for pujas. It came to my mind that during the regular play and games that takes place after school and on holidays, Sanjay had frequently been ostracised by those children who have an adopted kinship relationship with me. I wondered what prompted their dislike for him and noticeable efforts to alienate him.

1.2 The Drama Beyond the Play: Goddesses and Tantriks Again

A few days after this video drama enactment, I heard that Manoj’s mother, Phulmani, (in adopted village kinship, my younger cousin sister) was sick – not with an ordinary sickness but with sickness caused by Avidya Tantra. Another person in the village was said to have possessed her through Avidya Tantrik practices. She left her house to stay at the nearby home of a related family whose daughter, Rita, (another adopted cousin of mine) was said to possess benevolent spiritual power due to her extraordinary relationship with Lord Jaganath, (the God of the Odisha’s Jaganath Chariot festival): she is married to Him. Rita lives in her paternal home but wears the red sari and bindi and bangles of a married woman, signifying her unusual marital status to Lord Jaganath. She enters trance states during certain pujas and frequently becomes a medium for Tarini Devi, another popularly worshipped Tantrik Goddess of Odisha.

I went to visit Phulmani and when I reached Rita’s father’s house, Phulmani was sitting on the earthen kitchen floor finishing her lunch but her face was exceptionally dark and somber. She soon came out of the kitchen to sit with a few people under a tree. At first she just said to me that she felt bad but spoke normally
and asked after my health and so on. Then suddenly her face began to contort and she repeatedly stuck out her tongue and smacked her lips as if she was devouring something. Rita’s father said, “It’s happening again”, meaning that Phulmani was being possessed. He asked me to question her to find out who was possessing her. I asked her, “Who are you”? and she gave the name of Sanjay’s mother. She said in a growling unfamiliar voice, “I will eat Phulmani”. Rita took a long stick and threatened Phulmani, ordering her to go and salute the Divine Deities. Phulmani rose like a sleepwalker but instead of going towards the household shrine she walked to the gate as if she was going to leave. Rita whacked the stick on the ground loudly to frighten Phulmani and shepherd her back towards the shrine. Phulmani walked with a sour look on her face, as if puja was the last thing she now wanted to do. Phulmani’s little son Manoj stood by, attentively watching his mother’s act as if he was watching a pantomime. This was not the first time that his mother had experienced this type of possession. The last time, (two years earlier) she had been eventually taken by force to a powerful spiritual medium who exorcised her and restored her balance after a month of intermittent possession. Phulmani said in her now frightening, possessed voice “If I can’t eat Phulmani I will eat Manoj”. Little Manoj listened and watched. At last a young man entered the compound and began to twist Phulmani’s fingers until she screamed with pain, while he ordered Phulmani to behave herself. At last she screamed so much and cried that he released the twisted finger and she lay in pain for a while and then came back to normal.

Over the next few days Phulmani went in and out of the possessed state. One day she said that she would kill and eat either Manoj or another cousin of Manoj, Sujita, a ten year old girl (Phulmani’s niece). When Phulmani was ‘herself’ she told me that Sanjay’s mother was repeatedly telling her to come and join her in learning and practicing witchcraft and if she didn’t then she (Sanjay’s mother inside Phulmani’s body/mind) would ‘eat’ either her (Phulmani) or her son, Manoj or niece, Sujita. ‘Eat’ in this context means to devour the life force of another.

Later, Sujita and her sister and mother told me that Sanjay’s mother had eaten her own child. She said that Sanjay’s late brother, a 4-5 year old boy had become sick and died two years earlier and that the mother had caused her own son’s sickness and later eaten his ‘Pra’n’, heart/essence or vital force. When I asked Sujita’s
mother how she knew this, she said that she was informed by a reliable source, a Tantrik practitioner from another part of the village. They then explained that this is the reason why the children had asked me not to play on the field outside certain huts. In fact, according to them, in all of the houses of the village along their side of the road from their house to the corner, there are practitioners of witchcraft/Avidya Tantra, otherwise known as Dhaniis (witches) who must be avoided as far as possible. They then explained that contact with Sanjay is a potential source of conveying curses to other children. That is why they shun him.

Phulmani had grown weak and sick during her days of possession and was taken to the primary health centre in the Block headquarters where her blood test was found positive for malaria. She was given medication and gradually her physical and emotional balance returned. Her return to health, the family believed, was a combination of the malaria medication, iron tonics and the spiritual healings effected by spiritual mediums. Just as she recovered however, her son Manoj grew sick. He stopped eating and had fevers. He too was taken to the Primary Health Centre but none of his blood or stool tests were positive for malaria or gastrointestinal parasites. Over the next ten days he grew sicker until this usually chubby and active little boy was extremely thin and had to be carried as he could no longer walk alone. His parents and extended family were grim and seriously concerned that he would die. In fact it was clear that his life was hanging in the balance. They took him to a certain Tantrik in the Block headquarters who performed a series of rituals to purify him, gave him amulets and told his parents to perform certain rituals. Gradually Manoj’s health returned and a changed, more serious boy came back out to play.

1.3 Play as an Expression of a Local Conceptual Paradigm and Associated Affect

The family drama with the possession of Phulmani and the near death of Manoj, highlighted some of the risks that children of the village sense that they face in their daily interactions. These find expression within their plays and dramas. The drama that the children had enacted and filmed, I’d first thought to be a straight copy from old fashioned Bollywood “Dharmik” Goddess films. But subsequent events indicated that the children in the village were perhaps inspired less by film stories and more by the dramatic environment of their own villages where
encounters with witches and tantriks and divine embodiments into human mediums are a part of everyday rural village life.

From the most educated persons of the village, (a school headmaster and his son with a Masters degree) to the least educated children, people live with the conviction that potentially lethal witchcraft and Avidya Tantra attacks are a fact of village life and that that the sole remedy for these attacks is taking refuge in the benevolent power of divine deities who may manifest themselves in humans. The headmaster indicated how pervasive locals perceive this phenomenon is when he told me that there are Avidya Tantra practitioners in almost every extended family of rural India and in every village of rural India. He said to me, "You may feel that the families of this village are very devotional, however the main reason for their devotion is seeking protection against Avidya Tantra as it is so prevalent in this area". Local and state newspapers frequently report cases of Avidya Tantra related deaths or suspected deaths, which suggests that the phenomenon is accepted as regular, 'normal' news by newspaper journalists and editors. Local child and family health and welfare workers (Anganwadi Didis) regularly resort to Tantriks in cases that appear to them to carry the symptoms that are locally identified as marking a disease as one caused by witchcraft or Avidya Tantra.

Young children also educated me about their decisions regarding where to play and where not to play. I found these choices had to do with proximity to particular huts that children are convinced are the homes of practitioners of witchcraft ('Dhanis'/witches). In the early days of being in the village, no-one spoke with me about this dimension of village life. But even then, children and adults guided me in ways that I later realized were subject to their concerns with Dhaniis and Avidya Tantra. For example, during an early social mapping of the village that I carried out with a group of children, we started at one end of the village and stopped at each home, plotting the house onto the map that the children were drawing of their village and asking whoever was home about who was currently living there, their ages, occupations, relationship etc. When we reached the home of Sujita, her elder brother Gautama, who was the most dedicated mapper, invited me to their verandah and after they had brought me a glass of water they suggested, politely but decisively, that they would dictate the details of the household residents who lived beyond their house up to the end of the main street. I wondered, were they
tired? Did they want us to spend the rest of the afternoon at their house? Did they not want to visit the remaining homes? Only months later did I learn that according to them, many of those homes are inhabited by Dhaniis.

Children are the most common target of witchcraft/Avidya Tantra attacks and their own awareness of these dangers develops from a very young age when their elders apply kajal around their eyes and paint small black spots on their face every day, not for mere cosmetic purposes but to avert ‘Nazar’, the evil eye, casting a curse on a person (usually a child) through a gaze. Most children of the village wear amulets with herbs and Mantras inside, tied with red holy string on their wrists, upper arms or around their necks or waists for divine protection and abide by instructions from their elders to avoid the dangers of tantric practitioners. They also become aware of sorcery through seeing other family or friends become sick and later diagnosed and treated by Tantriks, just as Manoj interestingly observed his own mother in her ranting possessed state.

However, much of children’s knowledge about the potential dangers of living amidst Dhaniis comes from bodily experiences that children and their families associate with witchcraft or Avidya Tantra attack. Several children explained to me that they had themselves suffered attacks from Avidya Tantra and almost died as a result. Manoj’s story has been described above. Sujita, too, told me that two years earlier in 2006, when she was eight years old, she was supernaturally attacked. She lost all desire to eat or drink and told me she felt her life force leaving her. She and most of the villagers from the area believe that the symptoms of Tantrik attacks are distinguishably different to ordinary diseases such as gastro disorders, colds and malaria. They feel confirmed in their own diagnosis when Primary Health Centre diagnostic tests are negative or prescribed drugs fail to cure them. In these situations only benevolent Tantrik priests, or those persons who are media of the Deities, will save them, they feel, and there are multiple such Tantrik mediums in most villages. There are also locally renowned mediums who people may walk or cycle many kilometers to consult with. Sujita said that only the intervention of a powerful Vidya Tantrik from the Block headquarters saved her life.

The body-minds of very young children are considered to be weaker, more vulnerable to attack and easier to kill. One day in 2008 Sudhir, an eighteen month old neighbor had a fever of 39 degrees that lasted all day. His family and other
neighbours said that going to the Primary Health Centre would be useless because his sickness was not a ‘sadharana bimar’, ordinary illness, it was caused by Tantra. Sudhir’s mother said that the previous afternoon, an elderly widow of the village (who this family are convinced is a Dhani) had come to their home compound, stood and stared fixedly at Sudhir for a minute and then walked away. That night his fever started and continued all of the next day. The following evening a Tantrik healer was consulted, who performed various rituals and by the next day Sudhir’s temperature was down and his health was returning to normal.

The story of Sudhir exemplifies how locals conceive of Nazar as an intentional application of witchcraft. However, the curse of Nazar, the evil eye, is also believed to potentially take effect when any person looks at, points their index finger at, or praises another person (or their off-spring or property) with admiration tinged with jealousy or envy. —The index finger is believed to express the ‘ahamkara’ or sense of ‘doer-ship’ of a person, so both the fixed gaze of eyes and the pointing of the index finger convey a person’s will-force. Therefore it is considered inauspicious and troubling if anyone praises or points at another person or their children, animals, crops or other property. Praise, looks and finger-pointing may carry the curse of jealousy or envy that can cause real harm to the one being praised. For example if a neighbor or friend praises a farmer’s cow for her beauty, health and productivity, the farmer will worry that the cow will now lose these qualities and will feel angered and vigilant because of the praise. Parents are particularly worried by people who watch their children admiringly or praise them. Thus there are degrees of severity of Nazar. At one end of the spectrum is the Nazar which may come from any person’s praising another with an uncontrolled hint of jealousy. At the other is overt jealousy that inspires a Dhani to perform witchcraft practices to willfully cause harm or the destruction of the object of jealousy.

A local university student, who currently lives in a town in a different district, suggested to me that there is an inverse link between development and the prevalence of cases of witchcraft. The more remote and undeveloped a village is in terms of electricity, roads, clean water, primary health care and schools, the higher the prevalence of the phenomenon of witchcraft and Avidya Tantra. He reported that in Odisha’s cities and towns the incidence of witchcraft is far less, except in
some of the slums. His statements echo 'rationalist approaches' that advocate development as the necessary antidote to the widespread rural preoccupation with witchcraft. Indeed local NGOs in Mayurbhanj whose focus is on primary health care insist that the phenomenon of witchcraft and Tantrik healers will diminish greatly if primary health care and health education are improved. Most accusations of witchcraft-caused illness, they suggest, would be proven false if there is a greater access to quality diagnosis and health care treatment. However some primary health centre workers reported that they are well aware of certain cases (including within their own family) where the only solution is to turn to ritual healing -- when the ailment and its potential treatment seem inexplicable and irreducible to terms of the health centre medical paradigm.

In general it is women who are accused of being Dhaniis. Various local informants mentioned that accusations of witchcraft account for a large proportion of the murders of women in Mayurbhanj District. The tantriks who cure the victims of sorcery are frequently male. However, the Tantrik mediums of Gods and Goddesses (who also cure victims of Avidya Tantra) are frequently women. Children are overwhelmingly the most common targets.

The core conceptual paradigm expressed in the children's video drama described above is the play of the opposites, Vidya and Avidya Tantra, in the embodied forms of Goddesses and witches. This universal theme of 'good versus evil' had a specific local cultural expression. Children are central characters of these dramas (make-believe and in every-day life). The video drama also poetically represented associated affective states: the moods and emotions of a devotional pilgrim to Yogini; of being threatened and terrified by an Avidya Tantrik; of being a fearsome Tantrik who demands servitude or death from children; of children who boldly defy the threats of the Tantrik and who cry out their appeal to and trust in the greater power of their beloved deity; and, finally, the mood and disposition of the Goddess. The little girl who took on the Goddess role was berated by her peers for not displaying the appropriate disposition of Yogini. Others temporarily took her trident to show her how to convey the supreme power and confidence of a Tantrik Goddess. At the end of the shooting most children lamented that the girl was not powerful enough for the part. The children had jointly entered a zone where there was general agreement regarding the unfolding story, the anticipated nature of
Goddesses and Avidya Tantriks, and an agreed conclusion, defeat of the Avidya Tantrik by the Goddess.

Children's engagement with the conceptual paradigm through which they relate to their world evokes a range of emotions. They experience high levels of fear of Dhanis and Avidya Tantriks. This was evident to me when I observed Sujita's face perceptibly change after she heard the words from Phulmani (when, as they believe, she was possessed by Sanjay's mother) that she (Sujita) was to be eaten. But their fear is contained by devotional faith in Gods and Goddesses such as Yoginii, who for them are real entities. Through the cultivation of devotional personal relationships with Deities, children and adults of the village feel empowered and protected from potential attacks. Devotional relationships involve on their part, behaving in prescribed religious ways that will please Yogini (or other deities) and not anger her. I saw an illustration of this when one day I asked the children if we could climb up Yoginii Buri mountain. We arranged a day for the expedition and I was informed that on that day we must fast (without even water) until we have reached the top of the mountain and made offerings to Yoginii in order to honor and please her. Because they were fasting, (sacrificing something of themselves –their food), the children skipped playfully up sheer granite rock faces, a fall from which would easily end in death or permanent injury. When I expressed my extreme fear at some points during the dangerous ascent, the children told me joyfully and in a carefree way that nothing would happen to us because Yogini would protect us. On the other hand, twelve year old Gautama once told me that a few years earlier a party had climbed Yoginii Buri and a teenage boy amongst the party misbehaved with a girl and then slipped and fell and his skull cracked open. Thus the children negotiate the risks that they face by behaving in ways that they consider will afford them protection through the grace of their chosen Deity. By identifying themselves with their chosen Deities through pujas and making sacrifices for Her/Him, they feel empowered, carefree, bold and devotional. They also feel some excitement at the challenge of their “supernatural” environment.

"Have you ever encountered these things in your home area"? Sujita and her sister asked me after a chat about the latest in the unfolding drama of Phulmani’s possession. When I replied that I hadn’t, they said, semi-dramatically, “This place is very dangerous!” But this was said with humor, smiles and a wink of pride at their own negotiations of their unpredictable environment. Just as a fisherman, who
goes out on the ocean on a small boat and is proud of his skills of marine
negotiation, yet mindful of the ocean’s unpredictable forces, might say.

1.4 Play as an Expression of Social Systems: Ethnographic Setting

The fight between Sanjay and Manoj (during the video drama rehearsals) gave
expression to social inclusions and exclusions that play out within the village and
in children’s play. With the ensuing drama of Phulmani’s possession, a serious rift
between the families of Sanjay and Manoj became apparent. Sanjay’s mother is
seen as a dangerous witch and Manoj and his mother are perceived as victims of
her jealousy-inspired Avidya Tantrik attacks. This accounted for why child
members of the dominant extended family tended to exclude Sanjay from village
games. It also accounted for why certain places were selected for play and other
places are avoided. Sanjay is not the only child of families who are believed by the
children of my extended family to be Avidya Tantriks (or offspring of Avidya
Tantriks). Other such families are similarly avoided and children of these families
frequently face exclusion.

However neither Sanjay nor other such children are permanently or totally
alienated from play. Children’s play also serves as one of the kinds of village
activity that transcends or defies the codes of separation that exist between
families and reinforces unity and solidarity. So while Sanjay and other children like
him are frequently insulted, ostracised or given a hard time – such as being made
outfielder during daily village games – they still appear as regular players in the
daily games of village children and exuberantly join in the collective mirth that is
characteristic of much village play.

There is a limit to alienation and exclusion, both in the play of children and in the
rifts of adults, due to the fact that the children and adults are members of the same
village, which virtually exists as an extended home. All families jointly access two
village hand-pumps for cooking and drinking water. All families bathe and wash
clothes and pots in the same pond and all families use the same designated fields
for latrine. All families share the common concrete road strip outside their huts to
dry rice and other grain and to tether their goats. Homes are nestled close
together, almost touching each other. All families have to move in groups to the
forest for wood collection as it is too risky to go alone and during the rice farming
seasons, people work in teams on each others’ plots for weeding, transplanting etc. A common calendar of seasonal festivals involves everyone in local village celebration. Village meetings involve representatives from every household. Moreover all residents acknowledge the presence of a village Devata (minor God), or bonga as the Santals say, with which everyone shares common bonds. Children who attend school have an additional binding experience of participating in the daily and annual routines established by school attendance. The play and games of children in the village are therefore a blend of exclusiveness and exclusions regarding who plays and where play will take place (linked to such things as suspicion of witchcraft), and inclusiveness of any potential village players by the dominant players. Inclusiveness involves diverse interactions between both boys and girls of various ages between five and fourteen years old, with quite high levels of acceptance of varying skills.

The village described here is populated by a combination of Scheduled Caste Hindu families (SCs) who are mainly from the weaving caste, (although none of them still rely on their caste trade for their livelihood); Other Backward Castes (OBCs) such as blacksmiths and potters; and Scheduled Tribals (STs) who belong to two different social communities: Santhals and Hos. All families of the village are rice cultivators. Some cultivate on their own land and others cultivate on others’ land, either as laborers in exchange for rice, or in a share-cropping arrangement. The secondary economic activity of this and surrounding villages is timber and non-timber product forest harvesting in nearby and distant forests. In this particular village there are about seventy five households. Caste Hindus, including SCs, frequently attribute the widespread practice of witchcraft and Avidya Tantra to the ST members of their village and surrounding villages. However, witchcraft is also attributed to members of their own SC community. Sanjay’s mother for example, (accused of attacking Phulmani), is an SC member with the same family title as Phulmani’s paternal family. Several other families named (by the family who adopted me) as Dhanis or Avidya Tantriks, and who I was asked to avoid, were similarly SCs and others were OBCs. Thus the widespread concern with dangers of witchcraft was not confined as a practice only of any one particular community.
1.5 The Interplay of Theoretical Paradigms: Analytical Discussion

Witchcraft and sorcery are favorite themes in children’s play children across cultures, in books written for children, and in literature about child’s play. Think of the pan-global literary, filmic and play phenomenon of Harry Potter. However, sorcery/avidya tantra in Mayurbhanj is not merely a fairy-tale subject: it pervades the lived social and cultural spheres. David Pocock (2000: 206), following Evans Pritchard, argues that witchcraft, as a social phenomenon, can be viewed as a contradiction of a society’s dominant notions of a moral universe and an inversion of its conceptual paradigms and symbols. In this structural-functionalist theoretical paradigm, accusations of witchcraft are usually made by a dominant group within a community to maintain the institutions that protect their position from enemies within the community rather than external foes. Outsiders/strangers are automatically different but insiders are expected to adhere to the dominant norms (2000: 206). Hence, minorities, the poor, elderly women and often widows are most frequently accused of witchcraft as these are the social categories who feel most ‘different’ and disadvantaged by the status quo of the institutions within their community and by their own position within the institutionalized hierarchies. In the case of this village, my adopted family was the dominant and comparatively well-off extended family within the village. They believe that they (and particularly the children of the family) are a primary target for witchcraft and Avidya Tantrik attack because their village status, and comparative wealth inspires jealousy. In Pocock’s structuralist terms, their accusations of witchcraft and cursings might be seen as an attempt to maintain a dominant social position. Whether or not subordinate members of the village indeed harness and wield particular kinds of psychic power over those who are dominant, in ways that subvert a dominant moral paradigm, the fact remains that rural children and adults negotiate perceived risks and hazards that are peculiarly prevalent in Mayurbhanj rural villages and that shape their social relations and expressions of play.

It is not within the scope of this chapter to critically analyse Pocock’s paradigm in relation to the wider phenomenon of witchcraft and Avidya Tantra in the villages of this study. My main focus is on children’s play and its significance in
understanding children's engagements with their village society. It is to the structural-functionalist analysis of the children's play that we now turn.

In structural-functionalist terms, the make-believe or dramatic play activities of children are usually viewed from the positive perspective of socialization: children's playful mimicry of adult activities (with fun and joy as 'built-in' reward) are a means of faithfully perpetuating a community's concepts and social structures. A structural-functionalist view of both the narrative of the above children's drama and the every-day playground exclusions that children from dominant families act out towards children such as Sanjay may posit that through their dramas and other forms of play the children are becoming enculturated into the local moral thinking, and socialized into the village structures of dominant and less dominant families. However there are limits to the utility of this theoretical paradigm for understanding the historical, social and cultural environment of Tantra and witchcraft in rural Odisha and its impact on children and communities, and for understanding the specific focus of this chapter, the significance of children's play as an aspect of children's engagements with their world.

The literature on play within anthropology has moved on from a long (and productive) preoccupation with structural-functionalist socialization theories. Recent anthropology of play literature (Schwartzman, 1998, Goldman, 1998) redirects ethnographic focus towards how children at play innovate, satirise and transform their socio-cultural contexts. In brief, recent ethnographies explore children's participatory role in the processes of transformation of culture. Goldman, for example (1998), examines the relationship between mimesis in Huli children's pretend play and Huli myths and myth-making. He suggests that the study of pretence can inform three areas of investigation: the role of the imagination in human existence; the ontological status of representations; and the aesthetic constitution of imaginal products. He points out that children's pretend or make-believe play (mimesis) is not merely the reproduction of an inferior copy of the original that is being imitated. Like poetry, mimesis reveals reality through irreality and as an imaginative act, it has both cognitive and artistic components. It is the mimesis, not the original (person, object, act) that is responsible for the creation of myths, which are more lasting in the cultural memory than the original. In this sense, Goldman points to the philosophical idea that children involved in
pretend behavior are involved in complex activities that involve artistic/poetic
capabilities that are transformative of the original. Poetry, drama and myth have
oblique relations to objectivity and reveal different truths (Goldman, 1998: 20-22).

This view underscores the notion of children's pretend play/dramatic play as a
creative undertaking. Creativity has been broadly defined as human activity that
transforms existing cultural practices in a manner that a community or certain of
its members find of value. For Victor Turner the most creative human spaces were
on the margins, or along interstitial zones, the sites of frolic, play and joking, as
opposed to earnest workaday routines (Lavie et al., 1993: 5). Eruptions of
creativity within cultural performances comment upon and often reformulate the
dilemmas a society faces at a particular historical moment as the subject matter of
the children’s video drama demonstrates. Creative processes emerge from specific
people, set in their social, cultural and historical circumstances (Lavie et al, 1993:
5)

While the structuralist-functionalist would view the children’s drama as evidence
of children becoming enculturated into the dominant, pre-existing (static)
conceptual paradigm and socialized into the kin-based power structures of the
village, the creativity-transformation theoretical paradigm of Turner, Bruner,
Rosaldo and others would interpret the children’s performance as a
transformational and creative play with the meaningful symbols of their society.
Edward Sapir points out that “Creation is a bending of form to one’s will, not the
manufacture of form ex nihilo” (Sapir, 1924: 418). Creativity must admit to contact,
borrowing and conflict with existing cultural motifs and themes. The children’s
drama appropriated themes and symbols of current cultural significance within
their village society. The children took on characters that don’t represent their
own or their families' actual inter-village social roles and creatively enacted the
drama, with small twists along the way, based on the emergent flow of their semi-
spontaneous story and its semi serious, semi-humorous enactment (with a rather
appealing Avidya Tantrik and a timid Goddess, who needed the intervention of
other actors to adequately convey the power and gravity of her role) and their own
first engagement with a video camera.

Creativity and invention take place within a field of culturally available
possibilities, rather than being without precedent and are as much processes of
selection and recombination as of thinking anew. They emerge from past traditions and move beyond them (Lavie et al., 1993: 5-6).

The children, by dint of the fact that they are of a particular age and a particular developmental stage at this time, are cognizant of local conceptual paradigms and social structures of their village world in different ways than are adults of the village and children of past and future generations. Their collective creative expression in this brief dramatic performance is imaginary, symbolic, part mythical and part reality. It makes the observer aware of the nature of children’s imagining. In them, entities and forces of malevolence and benevolence, half human and half comical, vie for allegiance from children who face actual personal and social dilemmas of friendship versus kinship loyalties, and ones arising from local practices of vidya and avidya tantra.

Edward Bruner (1993: 321) sees as both obvious, and subtle, the power of a creative persona, (in this instance, village children at play) to transform, as well as transcend and change a culture. There have always been charismatic prophets, political leaders and intellectual giants who have moved nations or changed scholarly directions. But less attention has been given to the transformative creativity of ordinary men, women and children in their every-day lives. If we conceptualise culture as a heavy burden, a slow moving beast, it may take great effort to move it even a little (Bruner, 1993: 321). However, Bruner exhorts, if we see culture as alive, in constant movement, constituted and reconstituted in every act and in each new context, then one does not have to be Napoleonic to change a culture. The little person has a chance, through everyday actions. The tendency to explain change by reference to the gifted genius, the charismatic prophet, historical forces, unsettled times or the proverbial raiders from the north seems to suggest that the initial condition of humankind is one of no change, with every change demanding an extraordinary explanation (Bruner 1993: 321). The conceptualization of culture as an ongoing process of transformation proves far more amenable to the recent anthropology of children and childhood and contemporary anthropology of play theories, where both children and their playful performances contribute to the ceaseless construction of culture. In practice of course, certain actors (child or adult) will have more or less impact upon
transformation, as a result of power dynamics and other factors at a number of levels.

1.6 Conclusion

Let me return to the theme of this chapter, children's dramatic play in a rural village of Mayurbhanj, in the context of their involvement with a perceived local danger of witchcraft and Avidya Tantra, and summarize. So far we have examined two frameworks for approaching the problem of understanding children's make-believe play about this particular hazardous phenomenon. The structural-functionalist approach would posit that through their play, children are imitating adult domains of belief and practice and practicing for their own future adult roles. The creativity-transformation approach would posit that children at play are co-participants in the continuous 're-creation' of culture, involved in a creative act whereby they manipulate the symbols of local cultural paradigms and social roles (benevolent Goddesses and malevolent Avidya Tantriks), and subtly transform them through a process of active playful engagement.

What are children's own playful expressions telling us about what is going on? I don't think that we can say that the children are merely prepping themselves to assume the mantle of the social structures of their parents. Nor can we say that the children were being consciously subversive or socially transformative in their play, when for example, they play with children of families from whom their own parents are distant. Children's play has its own realm, which is simultaneously interlinked with other social expressions and also distinct. It is a place where imagination is fueled by engagement with the external objective and social world and within which possibilities are played with, without ordinary consequences. Children play with one eye on what is and the other eye on 'what if'? (Factor, 1988). The children 'played' with the themes of Vidya and Avidya Tantra. Manoj had exuberantly played the role of an evil Avidya Tantrik's apprentice, although he comes from a family who believe that they are pious and potential victims of Avidya Tantra within the village. Sanjay, who is believed to be the son of a witch, played the role of an innocent flower seller for worshippers. The boy and girl who played at being friends in the drama come from families whose adults have not spoken with each other for several years due to conflict. Thus pretend play involves a distinct zone within which themes can be played with, without the
consequences that are associated with non-play actions. Children at play in village games often sideline Sanjay. But when the flow of a game demands that Sanjay play and play well, this overrides any other concerns that children may have about him.

What is the phenomenon of play doing for these children? Victor Turner (1982) suggests that ‘communitas’ is generated by play and other liminoid activities. I regularly played with the children in the village and experienced a special bonding with people in place as a result. This social bonding within the active space of profoundly absorbing and enjoyable intersubjective engagement is undoubtedly at the heart of play. However, the extent to which play interactions influence and transform non-play interactions is hard to gauge. I would argue that both socialization and processes of transformation of social structures and their functions are inextricably linked in children’s play. Children are simultaneously assimilating and making sense of existing social structural hierarchies and conceptual paradigms. They are also participating in the gradual transformations of those social and conceptual structures. Brian Sutton Smith asserts that the main function of play is related to a) enjoyment and b) maintenance of behavioral, neural synaptic and conceptual flexibility in the face of changing conceptual and socio-spatial contexts (Sutton Smith, 1997: 229). Notions of who is dominant within the village, and what is the dominant moral paradigm are changing and children are significant actors in the process of change through the sociality of their play and non-play actions. However we should neither set up undue expectations of the radical transformative potential of children and play nor ought we overlook the significance of their roles and the role of play in such processes. Three simultaneous processes are at work here: integration/assimilation of social and cultural patterns and motifs; creative transformation of the same; and the lived joy of the make-believe interaction process itself, which bonds players in communitas.
Chapter 2  Ethnographic Setting

Children's play involves a dynamic interaction between players and their contexts, where children at play simultaneously imbibe, act within and experience their world, seek to make sense of it, are constrained and socialized by it and transform it. This concern with the interactive relationship between children’s play and its context prompts the question, what is the local context of rural Mayurbhanj children's play? What are the contours of rural children's life-worlds? The previous chapter on an incident of children’s make believe play introduced some aspects of the social, natural and 'supernatural' village environment. This chapter more fully engages with the ethnographic setting in four sections: i) childhood in Mayurbhanj; ii) Jamda block—a “tribal” area; iii) the interface between scheduled tribes and scheduled castes in Mayurbhanj; and iv) interfaces between village and state.

There are several reasons that make this description of the ethnographic setting relevant. First, the vast majority of international play research literature is based on the play of children in urban, western, middle class settings. In contrast, research on children in rural, South Asian, lower class settings tends to concentrate on problems surrounding child labour and schooling, that is, children's work-related, rather than play-related themes. While there are development priorities that underlie these themes in the South Asian context, such a research emphasis tends to a) generate a lopsided global understanding of the scope of children's peer play and b) diminish understanding rural, lower class South Asian children's own experiences and spontaneous peer cultural expressions. For play holds a prominent place in the lives of Mayurbhanj children. This thesis aims to contribute to filling this lacuna. Second, better understanding the distinctive features of the local setting (Mayurbhanj, Odisha Odisha) will help to contextualize the theme, 'play as interaction', play as dynamic exchange amongst players and contexts in upcoming and the preceding chapters.
2.1 Childhood in Mayurbhanj

1.6.1 Home: Smells, Tastes, Sights, Touch and Sounds

A baby is about to be born in a Jamda Block village in North West Mayurbhanj District, Odisha. The mother-to-be is in labour and a male relative has set off by bicycle over pot-holed, red earth tracks to bring the Dai (traditional midwife). When the Dai arrives, she alone remains in the room with the woman. She massages the mother a little, determines the stage of labour and position of the baby, supports the woman through the labour, and when the baby is born, attends to the immediate needs of mother and baby. It is also her work to manage ritual pollution, i.e., clean the accumulated birth wastes that have polluted the room and to smear fresh cow-dung plaster (considered to be antiseptic and ritually purifying) on the floor.

A few years ago, the Primary Health Centre provided free birthing kits to pregnant women that included plastic sheets, gloves and antiseptic, for Dai-supported home births. More recently this provision has ceased, as part of their campaign to encourage all women to give births in the Primary Health Centre, although a large percentage of births in fact still take place at home with a Dai. A Dai that I interviewed said that between her and her aunt, they may attend two hundred births in a month in Jamda Block during the busiest birthing season of each year (i.e. around three births a day attended by each Dai).

The mother and baby then lie together on a sheet spread out on a plastic woven mat upon the cow-dung plastered floor of the hut. Beside them is a knife and an oil lamp and in the doorway is a branch of thorns which are all kept in the room as symbols of protection of mother and baby from evil spirits, to which newborns and the very young are felt to be vulnerable. Meanwhile back in the home of the Dai, female relatives perform tantric pujas (sacred rites of offering) to the Mother Goddess for the safe delivery of the baby and to purify the Dai from her ritual ‘pollution’ of contact with the birth fluids. Only when this puja is completed does the Dai re-enter her own home. Later the Dai revisits the mother with concoctions of jungle herbs that she has collected/prepared and massages the woman to help
bring the woman’s uterus and overall health back to normal. The placenta is almost invariably buried beneath the earthen door-step at the threshold of the hut\(^2\).

While Dai-supported home-births and Primary Health Centre births are the two most common ways of birthing in Mayurbhanj rural areas, it is the cultural practice of the Jamda Ho community for the husband, rather than the Dai, to perform the role as sole midwife when his wife/wives give birth. I spoke on this matter with the wife of the Ho head man in the Ho sahi (hamlet) of the village where I lived and she confirmed that her husband alone delivered her children and that no-one else was permitted to enter the birthing place.

2.1.1.1 Earth/Smell

Close relatives of the mother and baby enter the room to greet the mother and newborn baby. For between three to five days the baby will remain almost the whole time beside his mother inside the darkened mud-brick hut with cow-dung and earth plastered floors and walls, with wooden shutters that, even when open, let in very little light and with exposed wooden beams beneath the thatched roof. In the dim light of the hut one can see folded blankets and faded printed cotton bed-sheets, kept along one wall. A few aluminium trunks hold clothes and other possessions in a corner. A rounded ceramic water pot and similarly shaped aluminium water pot with stainless steel glasses on top sit near the door. There is a faded fancy calendar on the wall and some tinsel and a picture poster in a simple frame.

The baby is wrapped in a rag cloth as it is considered inauspicious or even dangerous to present a newborn with attractive fancy new clothes or wraps until s/he has passed through a set number of days. Nothing should attract malevolent or jealous spirits. The mother too remains in a ritually ‘polluted’ state and it is taboo for her to bathe in the pond for some days (whole households are considered polluted during this period and husbands are also barred from certain activities such as hunting). During these days, the baby’s proximal senses become familiar with the touch of his mother and the taste of his mother and the natural scent of his mother without the interference of the artificial scents of soaps etc. Relatives

\(^2\)This description of birthing is based on one of the interviews with mothers about their own experiences and performances as mothers, conducted in 2008. It also draws on several Dai interviews.
come and go. The father doesn't sleep with his newborn son and wife during these
days of ritual pollution but he and other relatives come in and out of the hut for a
while to hold and meet the baby and feed and talk with the mother.

What else is in this hut? In one corner is a 3 metre high and 2.5 metre wide
enclosed basket that holds the rice store from the most recent harvest. Some extra
sacks of rice in plastic cement bags sit nearby. Smells of the rice store basket and of
little mice that are attracted by it mix with other smells of the cow dung plaster
floor and walls, bamboo and straw, mustard and kerosene oil lamps and the
occasional pleasant smell of the sacred Sal tree gum that is burnt, producing sweet,
refreshing thick smoke to purify the air and please the spirits. Outside, the wood-
fire smoke of the kitchen hearth partially wafts in, along with the fragrance of rice
being cooked and spices being fried and the dull smells of animals and fowls that
are tethered or free ranging nearby. In this environment, always in physical
proximity with his mother, the baby suckles from time to time and sleeps.

2.1.1.2 Ether/Sound

Muted sounds come into the hut of people talking and calling to each other outside,
cocks' calls, neighbours radios and the occasional ring of the bicycle bell as cyclists
warn chickens to get off the village roads. Gradually the baby attunes his ears to
the audio rhythms of each day. The early morning sounds are soft and fresh, dawn
birds and cocks' calls mingle with the inevitable swishing sound of women and
girls sweeping their compounds with stick brooms. Women begin to clatter as they
wash up the aluminium cooking pots and stainless steel plates from the dinner of
the evening before. Wood is chopped and fires lit. Conversations begin to increase
in volume as children yell out to each other as they go out for tuition or to the pond
to bathe and prepare themselves for school. Sometimes vendors who travel by bike
from village to village call out, announcing their wares, "chura"! (beaten rice) and
so on. The middle of the day can be quieter when children are at school. When
school children return, their play time starts from 4-6pm and the village streets are
full of the sounds of shouts, laughter and cries. As dusk descends children return
home and if it is not a festival night, the village grows quiet, except for the
occasional sounds of radios and muffled family conversations in their cottage
compounds. Night crickets' sounds fill the air, owls hoot and occasionally jackals or
wild dogs howl from afar or sometimes elephants roar, putting the village on the alert.

2.1.1.3 Water/Taste

After some days, the mother and baby go to the pond and take a full bath. They are welcomed at the women’s ghat (stony river or pond bank) by whoever is there pounding their laundry and bathing. When they get home they put on good clothes and sit on a timber framed jute chowki (strung cot) and meet relatives and friends from the village and afar. Soon the baby will be given his name, after consultations with family elders and/or local village priests. In the first couple of years the baby stays very physically close to his mother and is breast fed. She is his primary caregiver although siblings, cousins, aunts, grandmothers and neighbours too will regularly hold, care for and playfully interact with the baby.

The baby is born into a rice-cultivating family (like more than 80% of his neighbours). Their rice plot is half a kilometre from their household. In their compound they keep chickens, goats and bullocks for ploughing. There are two bicycles in his home and a radio. They don’t have electricity but believe that their village will have access to it within a year or two. Like all their neighbours, they do not have a bathroom or latrine and instead use the pond and the fields. All of their drinking and cooking water comes from a communal tube well with a hand pump that is about 250 metres away from their compound. It is his mother who carries the water to the home and carries out all of the cooking, fuel-wood collection, house cleaning, family laundering and utensil washing works.

Rice is his family’s main diet and like most other rural citizens, they enjoy eating cooked rice that has been soaked for a while in copious water with salt and green chilly, often without any other vegetables or legumes. Otherwise small servings of local vegetables are also prepared with chilli and cumin, mustard, fenugreek seeds and turmeric fried in mustard oil. Families feel a great satisfaction to eat their own locally produced rice, which is indeed of a good and nutritious standard.

2.1.1.4 Fire/Sight

Two days after the first Makar Sam’kranti festival (post-harvest winter solstice) after a baby’s birth, most new-borns of Jamda Block go through the stomach burning ritual, where the navel/belly button of the babies are ritually burnt with a
red hot iron rod. The ritual is believed to confer healthy digestive capacity upon babies for life. The baby’s eyes will begin to be anointed with black kajol (collyrum) which is both believed to protect the baby from the evil eye of others and to improve their eyesight. With big darkened eyes the baby begins to recognise his nearest ones and his home.

2.1.1.5 Air/Touch

Every day from the first week or so of birth onwards, the baby receives a mustard oil massage. His mother or grandmother sits with her legs stretched out straight in front of her and places the naked baby on her legs to massage him and then expose him to air and sun for a while before his bath.

The baby sleeps next to mother for the first few years. Even when the mother begins to recommence her daily chores, the baby as he grows into infancy, is never far from her side and she is his primary care-giver. She often fetches water with her baby on one hip and a water pot on her head. Occasionally a child continues to sleep with his mother even until adolescence. But wherever siblings are present, children begin sleeping with other siblings or with other relatives after about 3 to 5 years of age. Sleeping alone is fairly unusual until the child is over 8 or 9 years of age and even then sleeping with others remains preferable or practical for most children. It is considered preferable to sleep with others because solitary existence is not felt to be normal or healthy for human beings, especially children. Moreover, it is often more practical to sleep with others when there are fewer bedclothes or beds than there are household members, so a child will simply stretch out on a bed that has already been made up and inhabited by another family member. Many adults and children consistently sleep inside the huts only in the cold winter. Otherwise, they are just as likely to sleep out in their compounds (central yards) or on verandas. In the summer season, male family members often drag their strung cots out onto the road or simply lie on a sheet on the road where-ever they find the most relief from the heat. Dreams are important in the rural area and are held to signify truths and guidance. From childhood onwards people often recount their dreams to their families.
2.1.2 Village

Most village houses are built by the owner occupants, often with the help of daily wage labourers from surrounding villages. If the family is categorized as BPL (below poverty line) they may have received a Central Government housing grant of R 25 000 or R 12 500 for building materials (http://india.gov.in/sectors/rural/rural_housing.php). Mayurbhanj village houses are generally constructed out of locally made mud bricks. If the bricks are sun-dried and later smeared with an earth and cow-dung plaster, the house is called a “kacha” ghar, which means a raw house. If the bricks have been kiln baked and have a plaster that contains cement in it, then the house is called a “pucca” ghar, meaning ripe or proper house. The framing timber and bamboo are hewn and hauled from the nearby forest. Depending on the income of the family, or their preferences, the hut floors may be made from either concrete or cow-dung plaster. Santali homes are generally noticeable for their external decorative paint styles. Usually the bottom half of the house is painted red ochre and the upper half is either white or yellow ochre. House pillars too are painted in various colours. Sometimes flowers or designs decorate the outside of the homes, for permanent beautification or to commemorate a recent wedding or other festival.

All of the homes of the village are built close together, almost touching each other, even though there is much agricultural land surrounding the villages. The rooves are either thatched or made of semi-cylindrical roof tiles made by the village potter. However, increasingly families are buying and using corrugated asbestos roofing, with or without knowledge of its health hazards. There are thorny brush fences surrounding each house to keep goats and chickens in or out. Gates are often made of old flattened eight litre square tins, or of sticks from the forest. Often a family’s compound has two or three small buildings/detached rooms surrounding a cow-dung plastered courtyard that is a social area for family and visitors and a place where food is prepared and grains are dried. One room will be a kitchen, another may be a cattle shelter and another may be the sleeping and storage room of the family where trunks and sleeping cots are kept. This room may also house the annual rice store. If the household is an extended family, each adult male may have their own attached or detached room where they live with their wife and children. Elderly parents generally have their own room. In some homes women, girls and young children sleep together and men and older boys sleep
together. If all the rooms are attached, they usually have a long common veranda, which serves as a dining, sitting/living and sleeping area. Most of the rooms in huts of the village are dark and assigned more for storage and sleeping than for children’s play and so play generally takes place on verandas or in the courtyards or outside the compound.

Beyond the hut, the growing infant becomes familiar with the neighbours’ homes and the small village store. He becomes curious about the bleating newborn goat kids on the road, the tiny chickens that regularly hatch and scuttle in little groups here and there, the dogs lying in the sun, the bullocks and black water buffaloes tied in special shaded shelters in the family compound and older boys and men going past on bicycles or motor-bikes with passengers carried side saddle on the back. He watches children in school uniforms going and coming to and from school. Just outside his home, shady trees are favourite places to sit on the earth and play with sticks, stones and seeds. The trees of the village include neem, tamarind, jackfruit, mango, guava and drumstick trees whose leaf are regularly fried and served with rice and in spring; the long drumstick fruit is a delicacy, cooked in curries. Near the pond and at the entrance to the village are huge ficus trees that provide a shady shelter for youths listening to their radios and men playing cards.

All villages in Mayurbhanj are sub-divided into hamlets called ‘sahis’, which frequently (but not exclusively) accommodate distinct communities: Santhali, Ho or scheduled caste. Very young children mainly roam and play within their own sahi and school aged children roam into other sahis, wherever they may have friends. Playgrounds are often located in fields in between sahis and on other common grounds such as the banks of streams and ponds.

2.1.3 Rice Fields

When his mother resumes her rice cultivation duties, the little toddler may accompany the women to the field. During the rice cultivation season, the rice fields are the focus of activity. Firewood has been stockpiled so going to the forest is irregular and household chores are done cursorily during these months, as most energy and attention is directed to the “ks’et”, agricultural fields. In Jamda, there is only one (rainfall dependent) rice crop per year and farmers can only commence
cultivation after the "Aks'ay trutiya" festival which is held in June on a day fixed by the Odiya lunar calendar.

The various rice cultivation tasks are strictly gender specific. First the men and teenage boys carry out an initial ploughing with bullocks and wooden ploughs. It is taboo for women to touch the plough or sow seeds as both tasks imply virile masculine interaction with feminine earth. Then the women go and fertilise the fields with cow-dung powder and then men may plough again and sow the paddy seeds. Then after the rains have brought the rice plants to the height of about 20cm, women and teenage girls are the labour force to transplant the rice into even lines and later to constantly weed, tend and watch over the paddy fields. Sometimes all of the paddy may have been thickly sown in a corner of a rice plot and when it reaches about 40 cm high, women/girls uproot and replant all the plants in even lines and rows with a space of about 20 cm in between each plant. Women often work in weeding teams on each others’ plots. Many cultivators carry out a second ploughing of their paddy fields when the paddy is about 40 cm in height. Although the second ploughing knocks the paddy plants down, the plants right themselves after some days and farmers say it ultimately produces a stronger crop. Finally in December, women, men and teenagers participate in harvesting. The “Dhan” (harvested unhusked rice) must then be threshed and stored with the outer husk still on. Stored rice is both household food for the year and a form of bank. For surplus rice may be converted into cash at almost any time by selling it to rice agents who move through the villages weekly with gigantic iron scales, ready to purchase wholesale rice, for resale in municipal markets. Landless rice cultivators who labour on others’ paddy fields are invariably paid solely in kind (with dha’n -- unhusked rice) and their aim, not always achieved, is to amass enough rice stock to last through the year. Farming households pay the village service providers -- blacksmiths, potters, midwives and ritual performers -- in kind with rice. Every few weeks women take some unhusked rice out of their rice store and boil it for about half an hour in a big pot on an outdoor fire. Then they spread the parboiled husky rice out to dry on the ground, preferably on the concrete road strip. When it is dry they sweep it up into a basket and carry the basket of rice on their head to the village rice mill where it is de-husked. This de-husked rice, called cha’wal is brought home and stored in a sack or a 10 litre tin for the daily kitchen.
use as the primary food. Sometimes women make a little extra money by selling this processed rice (chawal) for a higher price than the husky rice (dhan).

Small children sit on the edges of the rice fields as their mothers work. Periodically their mothers come and feed them and older children entertain them. Here, small children become familiar with the features of their family paddy fields and the landscape that surround their village. The land is undulating, the soil reddish brown and occasional tall granite hills raise their peaks above the fields. They have names ending in "Buru" which means mountain and many of them have stories attached to them that the children soon memorise. In the rice growing season streams and irrigation canals course through the fields and for a few months the entire landscape is bathed in a beautiful, strong green colour and the sounds of trickling and flowing water abound. The fields themselves have been delineated years ago with property boundaries of high raised pathways made of accumulated soil that keep the water within the lower lying paddy plots. Occasionally goat and cow herders pass by with herds that nibble grass along raised pathways and are or herded onwards towards the jungle covered hills by young herders. When the paddy fields fill with water in the rainy season, water birds fly in to catch the fish that swim through the plots. Children too go fishing in the rice fields. Older boys work alongside men, ploughing and sowing and older girls participate in transplanting and weeding. Children also have to take on many extra domestic duties during the cultivation season, baby-sitting siblings, cleaning the home, fetching the household water, tending animals and cooking meals and carrying them to the fields for parents or relatives working there (sometimes a distance of a kilometre or so away). Several school principals told me that children are frequently absent during the cultivation season. Children directly conveyed to me their own sense of involvement in farming work as indicated in the following essay on the theme "My work":

Work That I do

We are citizens of Bharata (India), or jewel of her. Generally poor or rich, every type of men are living in this country of ours. The poor man is more laborious than the rich because if he neglects his duty for a single day then it is very difficult for him to maintain his family. Therefore he ignores the burning sun-rays, the freezing cold and rain and works for maintaining his family. So he is called "soil man". As much as he
labours on the soil, he gets results. Who is idle, he never has success in his work and remains fail. In the summer season we plough our fields and gradually on such fields we put manure and sow the paddy and surround it by ploughing. After some days rains fall and the paddy crops come up to their right size. By the collection of the ripened paddy we maintain our family. In our world every farmer becomes a labourer to maintain his life. As you labour, remains results such. In human life sometimes sorrow and sometimes joy comes but it is unknown to anyone.

(Jamda Students’ Work and Play Essays Collection, 2008 -15 year old student)

2.1.4 Forests

When the children are old enough to walk longer distances, they start going into the forests. Never a day passes when there are not people from most Jamda villages moving in groups into the forested hills to collect firewood for household kitchen fires or for fuel-wood business and timber wood business and to collect seasonal fruits, roots, leaves and herbs, or to graze livestock. Workers traverse forest areas across the Odisha-Jharkhand border in their search for fuel-wood, frequently covering 15-20 kilometres one way up and down hills. Amongst the many varieties of forest flora are the sal trees (Shorea robusta) which are the most sacred trees of the Santal and Ho communities, central in their creation mythology and worshipped in one of their most important festivals (Baha festival), palash trees (Butea frondosa) whose flame-red spring blossoms are celebrated in many local songs and poems, the mahua tree (Bassia latifolia) whose blossoms are fermented to brew a variety of local wine and the kusum (Scheichera trijuga) and jamun (Eugenia jambolina) that provide small fruits in the summer. Trees are not the only forest resource utilised and foresters regularly collect tuber potatoes, edible leaves and medicinal herbs. Santal and Ho men also go on periodic hunting expeditions for animals such as the porcupine. Naturally many children develop a strong affinity for the forest, even if some children express their fear of wild animal and spirit dangers. The following essay written in a letter style by a twelve year old girl is quite expressive of the relationship many local children of these villages develop with the surrounding forests.

Work That I do
My village is in the district of Mayurbhanj in Odisha. It is at the foot of the hill. Therefore we collect fruit, roots, wood, leaves and twigs from the jungle. We also collect medicinal herbs. We get a lot of benefit from the jungle. We go to the jungle when we are not at school and on holidays. We eat various fruits in the jungle. We get kendu and chahar fruit to eat in summer. In the month of July we get blackberries and kusum. We also collect mushrooms. Thus we spend our holidays and free time from school in the jungle.

We rear goats and cows to increase our income. On Saturdays and Sundays we go to the jungle for cow-herding or bring leaves to feed our goats. Our parents go on other days. A river flows through our village which comes out from the jungle. We dig wells on the river sand and when it fills up with water we jump into that and bathe. There is no special reason to write but I am writing you a few lines. I wish to tell you about my hilly village and about the things we often find here.

We are two brothers, two sisters and my parents in my family. A spring flows down to our village from the nearby mountain. A check dam has been constructed on that spring. There are many green trees on both sides of this spring. There are many small caves on the foot of the mountain. Tigers, deer, elephants, bears and other wild animals drink water there. We never go in front of them. We watch them hiding ourselves. They are very dangerous.

They are not tamed. Nobody goes near them.

There is beautiful scenery around our village. Many streams come down from the mountain and meet at one place. A 'Ho' film has been shot at that site. There are many 'Ho' films which have the scenery of our mountain and the spring.

There is another famous and beautiful mountain called Yogini Buru. It is almost 60 to 70 metres in height. People say an old woman was weaving a mat on the top of the mountain. The rain of fire fell down from the sky while she was still weaving. She turned into stone due to the fire. Now also the stone looks like a woman weaving a mat. People climb to the top of the mountain to visit her on Rakhi Purnima. People do puja there, males and females go up there.

The deheri (performer of Tantrik/Sarna sacred rites) brings sacred water in a pot from a nearby mountain called Huludi Buru and pours it on Yogini Buru. We have a Ganesh temple inside our village. The Deheri pours the same sacred water in that temple too. If this Puja is not done, farmers believe that there would not be enough rain that year. There could be a drought in the village. Therefore it is necessary to offer water to Yogini Buri on Rakhi Purnima (full moon in August). There is a big tree
of champa (frangipani) flowers on that mountain top. The mountain seems to be very old. I think military forces were fighting here in olden days. That's why there are signs of bullets in the mountain. Girls offer garlands made of the champa flowers which they pluck from the champa tree on the top of the mountain. Many people come to see this puja.

Thus there are many things in our village to see. Please do write and let me know how you feel about my village.

Your friend xxx (Jamda Student Essay Collection on 'My Work' and 'My Village', 2008 - 12 year old student)

Mayurbhanj children learn from their elders and teach their own peers to identify the local flora, fauna, rocks, caves and waterways, to engage appropriately with various resident spirits and how to appease malevolent forces etc. Young herders learn where to herd goats or cows in the forest and how to notice sounds and signs of danger to their herds and themselves. Even small children, particularly girls, begin carrying head-loads of wood or branches back to their villages or sacks full of sal leaves for later use in leaf plate and cup assembly for catering sales. Young boys make and use catapults and bows and arrows to hunt frogs, bats and small birds, which they often cook and eat then and there in the forest.

It is not easy to typify rural village life, for each village and each family home produces variations of experience depending on distance from the Block Headquarters and from hilly forest, quality of the roads etc, not to mention whether the family is a caste Hindu, a Santhali, a Ho and also the economic status, social makeup of the family and the psychologies of the individual family members.

When I began fieldwork in January 2008, I carried out a simple comparative study of three villages: a least, a medium and a most developed village within the same Block (Jamda) that included household surveys in a number of houses in each village. Gurucharan selected the villages based upon his local knowledge of the Block. The least developed village was a remote Ho community village in the mountains and forest, without electricity and with poor road communication and negligible services. There, cultivation was minimal because crops and fruit trees attracted wild forest animals (elephants, tigers etc) and so hunting, gathering and collecting wood were paramount activities. Elephants were such a problem in this village that all of the adults (except the elderly) sleep in tree houses adjacent to
their rice plots during the rice growing season for several months of the year. They keep a bale of hay near the base of the tree and a ceramic pot with a fire in it with them in the tree. If elephants come they set fire to the hay and beat pots and yell to try and scare away the elephants and save their crops from being trampled and eaten.

In the medium developed village (which was predominantly a Santali village) some houses had intermittent electricity supply but most houses were without electricity, the village had poor water facilities (people had to carry their drinking water from quite a long way from their homes), but they had nearby schools, an anganwadi centre (child and maternal health and welfare centre) and comparative proximity to the Block headquarters. Most households were rice farmers.

The most developed village was within the Block headquarters and its households had access to piped water for 2 hours per day, electricity (many homes had television) and close proximity to a range of government services, schools and shops. The daily life experiences and the play of children in each of these three settings are quite different. Most of the villages within the Block fall into the category of medium developed. They are neither as remote and undeveloped as the remote village, nor as well serviced and ‘developed’ as the few villages that are within the Block headquarters. My illustrations above and throughout most of this thesis are based on life in the medium developed rural villages, one of which I lived in throughout my 2008 fieldwork.

2.1.5 Family and Community

Family (usually extended family) with a patriarchal structure, is at the heart of the social life in the village. One of the methodologies of this research involved enlisting a group of school students to write an open essay on the subject, “Myself, My Family and My Village”. Below are several of the students’ essays on their families, which expressed this idea and give a sense of the everyday bonds and struggles of rural families:

Man is a social being. He cannot live alone. He needs a family to live with. So every man and woman rich or poor has a family of his own. My family consists of six members. Father, mother, myself and my two brothers and sister. Father is the head man of our family. Mother is care taker of the house. I am the oldest son of my parents.
I am 17. My brothers and sister are all younger than me. I am now reading in Tendra High School. My two younger sisters go to the same school with me. My little brother is a baby of 3 years old. Our family is a quiet family. We like to spend our days in peace and contentment. We have our wants and difficulties. For that we do not make others unhappy. Father has advised us to put up with wants and we always follow his advice (Jamda Student Essays Collection 2008).

I have my brothers in my family. One of them is younger than me. I have my parents. I have my uncles and aunts as our neighbours. They throw and wash their waste material into our compound which spreads pollution. They don’t heed us if we ask them to stop it. They are throwing their wastage on us. They are always drunk. They wash their cattle in the pond. When we or anyone else talk about it, they usually scold us. So, somehow we are managing, though we don’t like it. We are balancing ourselves with the environment. Taking everything into consideration I think nothing is going to change soon.

That much. (Jamda Student Essays Collection, 2008)

There are my mother, father, 3 brothers, 3 sisters, grandy and grandma in my family. My parents are illiterate. We depend on rice cultivation. My and my parents dream is that I would do a government service job. How many days will they be able to send us to school by working? My mother and father are already 45 and 57 years old. I have an elder brother and a younger brother and three younger sisters. They studied in class 3, 4, and 5. Their ages are 7, 8 and 9. I am 15 years old. I took birth on 3rd March 1993. My mother gets weak so my sisters do every work of the house like cooking, fetching water etc. I feel lucky to get these sisters. I love everyone. It is in a sentence:

“Love is Life

And

Love is God” (Jamda Student Essays Collection, 2008).
In my family are my mother, my father and I. We depend on cultivation. We have mud-brick walls in our house and local earthen roof tiles. We three live in the house. There is a kitchen in one room. There is a small cowshed in my house. Bullocks, cows and calves live there. We have two sheep. We tie them in the same cowshed. We have bowls, plates, mirror, comb etc in our house. We have a small wooden box and we put our important things in that box. We lock this box all the time. We are very poor. We have very little land for cultivation. Sometimes we work outside our own land as daily wage labourers to make ends meet. My father runs his family with whatever he gets as wages. Now the government has provided us with the Antodaya ration card (a card issued to Below Poverty Line families), therefore my father works for money to buy rice. My father pays R100 to buy rice. He arranges money for my studies from his vegetable garden where he has planted chilli, maize, and sa’g (varieties of spinach). We are satisfied with it (Jamda Student Essays Collection, 2008).

Within the home and family children begin to develop their cultural, social and political identities which shape their household beliefs and practices and their intercultural relations with others at the local and state levels. Children become aware of diversity and unity of social composition within their village from an early age as a result of partial containment within kinship and caste social groups as well as everyday interactions with other communities within their own schools and villages. Small, concrete cultural expressions sometimes summed up senses of difference. For example one SC Hindu child said to me, "The adivasi children are different to us because they drink handiya (rice beer) and we don’t”. Nonetheless, by their teens most of the SC youth (mostly but not exclusively boys) were also drinking handiya, but without the spiritual connotations that it holds for the STs. The following Jamda student essay excerpts illustrate these sensitivities of difference and also represent their formal position of unity amidst diversity.

...my village is a big village. Most of the people are farmers. They work in their fields. Among them there are craftsmen like blacksmith, potters and Santals. The villagers are very good and kind. I like the villagers. They like me too (12 year old student, Jamda Student Essays Collection, 2008).

Kumbhar (pot making people), Kamar (Blacksmiths), Gopal (cattle-herding people), Kolho (Ho tribal people) and Tanty (weavers) live in my village. They live in harmony without any conflict. My village is very beautiful (12 year old student, Jamda Student Essays Collection, 2008)

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3 The sacred significance of rice beer is mentioned in the upcoming section on Sarna.
In our village are living three to four castes of man. We are different but in the
dangerous times we stand by shoulder to shoulder (15 year old student, Jamda
Student Essays Collection, 2008).

In Jamda Block, West Mayurbhanj District, where this ethnography was centred,
over 75% and in some villages 80-100% of the population are STs. Santals are the
most populous community, followed by the Hos. SC Hindus, other caste Hindus and
a small number of Muslims form the minority. Due to numeric strength, the
Santali/Ho culture and sociality is the heart and pulse of Jamda’s local social
activity. Therefore I will first introduce some aspects of Santal cultural identity and
will then describe some of the interfaces between tribal and caste communities in
Jamda that also make up the total sense of local community. The Santal, Ho and
Kharia are all part of the Munda Austro-Asiatic language group (related to
Vietnamese and Khmer) who share cultural as well as linguistic similarities.

2.2 Jamda Block, a Tribal Area

2.2.1 Santal History

While there are no written records of the history of the Santals prior to the
colonial era, several of my Santal key informants told me that their songs and
stories narrate oral history of their community’s migration from the far West
(some say from the Indus Valley or Sumer, or further west) where they were
citizens of a sophisticated civilization in well built cities (Hansda, 2008). Parkin,
whose Santal informants also reside in Mayurbhanj spoke of the same narrations
of ancestral migrations, which he noted conflict with academic theories based on
linguistic grounds that the Santals came from Southeast Asia via Northeast India
(Parkin, 2000: 54).

Although their pre-colonial history is obscure, by the eighteenth century Santals
were residing in large numbers in the Chotanagpur area. The introduction of the
Permanent Zamindari Settlement in Bengal/Chotanagpur by the East India
Company in 1793 created a new set of landlords in Santal dominated areas and set
in train events that have shaped the experience and identity of Santals as a
community, which centre on the Santal Hul (uprising) of 1855-57 (Troisi, 1978;
32-34). The uprising occurred after years of oppression and merciless exploitation
of Santals by a complex of colonial government officials, local money-lenders,
merchants and landlords. Twelve years after the rebellion E.G. Man (1867: 110) concluded that four grievances were responsible for the Santal rebellion: i) rapacity of the money lenders in their transactions with tribals; ii) the increasing misery caused by the iniquitous system of allowing personal and hereditary bondage for debt; iii) unparalleled corruption and extortion of police in aiding and abetting the money-lenders; iv) the impossibility for the Santals to obtain redress from the courts. Further to the fourth point, access to courts by aggrieved Santals was extremely difficult not only because of the corruption of clerks, pleaders and court peons, but as many Santals did not know any language other than Santali, they were forced to make use of interpreters and pleaders who were in the pay of their oppressors (Man, 1867, Troisi, 1978: 28).

One of the main grievances of the Santals was loss of land to money-lenders who imposed exorbitant interest rates that could not be repaid in a life time (sometimes up to 500%) (Kaviraj, 2001: 66) for which they forfeited their land and personal freedom. For the Santal, land not only provides economic security, it is a powerful link with ancestors and Santal spirits, for no land is occupied unless negotiations with spirits are undertaken and the spirits too approve residency in a place. Santals occupy land as a village community, which has a coherent social and spiritual organisation. Thus ‘place’ is part of a spiritual as well as social and economic complex.

Kaviraj provides various sources of evidence of anti-government motivations of the rebellion, which refute notions that Bengali-elite money-lenders and landlords were the exclusive targets (Kaviraj, 2001: 40-41). After years of unsuccessful efforts to redress their oppressed plight through appeals to the colonial political authorities, who were indeed complicit in their oppression and with a gradual disintegration of tribal village community, Santals developed a growing urge for a return to their own autonomous sovereignty which was fanned into a roaring flame when the rebellion leaders Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu (two brothers) proclaimed that they had received a divine message from Thakur, the supreme Santal God, to rebel and re-establish Santali governance amongst Santals (Kaviraj, 2001: 86). Thus the rebellion took on a powerful spiritual meaning for many participants who sacrificed their lives in the struggles against the superior weaponry of the East India Company. The spiritual motivations and
conceptualizations associated with the rebellion were the subject of Guha’s analysis of themes of subaltern agency—an atypical form of agency connected with being a vessel for the commands of a Divinity (Guha, 1999). The rebellion in fact represented the fiercest battle that the British encountered during their reign in India. It demonstrated organizational prowess and sophisticated mobilization of tens of thousands of Santali forces supported by other local oppressed people, but failed largely due to unequal weapon power (Kaviraj, 2001, Troisi, 1978).

Although the rebellion was ultimately mercilessly subdued, it did draw stark attention to the extent of oppression that Santals had suffered and were bearing, and caused the Government to adopt ameliorative judicial and administrative reforms. These included forming the Santal Parganas district and mandating significant autonomy to tribal chiefs to dispense their own independent judicial and administrative functions in tribal land areas without state interference or policing (Hembrom, 1996: 16). The rebellion left a deep impression on the future generations as part of their living traditions in Santali songs, dances, dramas, literature, painting and pottery. Amongst the Santals of Mayurbhanj, the 1855 hul was on their lips in relation to their own later political struggles in the 20th and 21st century (Kaviraj, 2001: 154-156).

The post-colonial state initially mandated that those designated as ‘tribal people’ would: a) have autonomous local Panchayat level sovereignty; b) receive special state benefits in recognition of their extreme social marginalization and economic disadvantage; and c) have designated tribal land areas. Although in recent decades revisions of these policies include: a) incorporating rural Panchayat level sovereignty within the ambit of the state electoral system, opening it to any candidate, which means that the traditional tribal panchayat and village political structure now runs parallel to a competing form of electoral panchayat/village level local rule; and b) increasing shifts in focus towards providing socio-economic benefits to all ‘below poverty line’ (BPL) families rather than families with an ST lineage. Finally c) tribal lands in Odisha have come under increasing threat due to development programs and mining projects, which has provoked active resistance. This entire colonial-post-colonial history has a distinct influence on the ethnic identity of Mayurbhanj Santals many of whom remain cautious in relations with
outsiders and desirous of autonomous governance or significant participation in matters of governance pertaining to Santal communities.

The history of Santals in Mayurbhanj District can be crudely divided into several phases. Prior to the (post-independence) incorporation of the princely state Mayurbhanj into the contemporary Odisha state in 1949, Santals had comparable socio-economic status and fairly amicable relations with others in Mayurbhanj, including Hindus, under the administrative diplomacy of the raja. Perhaps because the royal family of Mayurbhanj is said to have ancestral ties with the Kharia people of the Similipal ranges and the Kharia, like the Santal, are Munda. During this period the Santals participated in Mayurbhanj Hindu social performances such as the Ratha Yatra in Baripada etc. Post 1949, Santals began to experience an increasing sense of marginalization and noticeable socio-economic disparity between themselves and caste Hindus. From this time on, Mayurbhanj became a significant site in the broader movement of ‘Santalization of Santals’ (Gautam, 1977: 369-381), a socio-economic, political and cultural assertion of autonomous identity. Santals withdrew from participation in overtly Hindu social functions and the integrity of discrete Santal sacred practices called Sarna dharma, Santal language and literary traditions, came to the fore of their modern political identity as well as cultural expression. Mayurbhanj members of the political movement ‘Jharkhand Mukti Morcha’ lobbied hard for succession of Mayurbhanj from Odisha and its inclusion in an envisioned political tribal state, ‘Jharkhand’, where ‘tribal’ religion (Sarna), customs and social governance models would define the expressions of sovereignty.

When the creation of Jharkhand state was formally accepted by the Central Government and ultimately carved out of Bihar as an independent state in 2001, Mayurbhanj was not included. This disappointment for Mayurbhanj Santals led to a re-grouping of the Jharkhand party’s political focus in Mayurbhanj to concentrate on consolidating their own politico-economic positions within the district/state (the current elected District Administrator of Mayurbhanj, is a Santal woman as is the current elected Block Chairman of Jamda) and promoting Santali language as a primary expression of cultural identity. A decades-long campaign to have Santali used in primary schools in Santal areas (as language of instruction and in textbooks) successfully culminated in 2008 Central Government acceptance of Santali
as a recognized MIL (elementary school Mother India Language). This campaign is part of many Mayurbhanj Santals' emphasis on modernising, including embracing education/higher education without undermining cultural/linguistic identity.

Sarna dharma (Santal religion) is another primary focus of Mayurbhanj Santals' socio-political identity, Sarna dharma is more prominently manifest in Mayurbhanj than in neighbouring Jharkhand state where Christianization of Santals has occurred to a greater extent, or in West Bengal. Carrin-Bouez (1991) suggests that the Santals of Bengal do not have such a strong cultural particularism as those in Mayurbhanj because Bengal has its own features including: a weaker caste system, greater industrialization, broader tradition of education and because Santals there tended to take an active part, along with other low-caste people in conflicts against landlords inspired by communist movements. The communist movement successfully competed with the Jharkhand adivasi movement in recruiting tribal cadres. As a result West Bengal Santals’ political claims have been less linked with religious movements such as promotion of Sarna. This does not mean that Santals of Bengal do not produce symbolic responses to the dominant Hindu society but these responses, Carrin-Bouez suggests, seem to take more individualistic forms than in Odisha, such as ascetic cults of individuals who are divine media or tantrik ojhas (Carrin-Bouez, 1991: 33). By contrast in Mayurbhanj, Sarna is a collective social and sacred movement that inspires socio-political identity. I will now briefly describe some aspects, or broad contours, of the Santal sacred practices and beliefs, social structure and political structure that are still well manifest in rural Mayurbhanj.

2.2.2 Sacred Practices and Beliefs -Sarna Dharma

The first time I entered the home of my research collaborator, Gurucharan Handsa, he indicated to me the place where his home’s household spirit resides, in the same corner of the main room where a large rice storage basket is located. Being a woman, I was not allowed to approach that area. He said that it is his duty to worship this spirit. Gurucharan’s two sons, a seven year old and a four year old (in 2008) were aware, through conversations, stories and through watching their parents, of the presence of the household spirit and a pantheon of spiritual beings including ancestor spirits, nature spirits and more omnipotent entities that reside in their vicinity.
The Santals recognise a supreme deity who holds a preeminent position among all religious beings. This supreme God they call variously Thakur (undoubtedly the same word found in Sanskrit, which means supreme Lord), or Thakur Jiu (Jiu is the Santal word meaning spirit and may be connected with the Sanskrit word jīva meaning soul), or Chando, which also means the sun. However this is a metaphorical title and does not mean either that Santals worship the sun or equate their Supreme Deity literally with the sun. The other name they use for their supreme being is Sing Bonga. The Santal believe in the existence of a vast number of spiritual beings (spirits) called ‘bonga’; Sing Bonga is the supreme controller. Sing Bonga/Thakur is the creator and sustainer of the universe and is a benevolent entity (Troisi, 1978: 74, Hembrom, 1996: 36).

Santals rarely speak or theorize/theologize about bonga. However, they constantly work on maintaining various kinds of relationships with them, with the view that along with optically visible creatures, this world is co-inhabited with a variety of subtle entities/bonga (some beneficent, some malevolent) who exert perceptible influences. Troisi suggests that the following classification represents one way of understanding the various kinds of bonga whom the Santal recognize and relate with:

Village tutelary spirits, whom the village priest worships in the village sacred grove (Jaher) on behalf of all villagers. These pan-Santal national bonga, recognized in all Santal villages are five in number: Maran Buru, Jaher Era, Moreko Turuiko, Gosae Era and Pargana Bonga. There is also Manjhi Haram Bonga, the spirit of the original founder/chief of the village, worshipped in the Manjhi Thana, a sacred site opposite the current chief’s home.

The sub-clan spirits, called the abge bonga, who are worshipped by male elders of each sub clan

The household spirits, orak bonga, who are worshipped by male elders of the home

Ancestor spirits, hapramko bonga, who are worshipped by male elders of a lineage

Tutelary spirits of the Santal ‘ojhas’ (tantric ‘shamans’), called saket bongas
Jom sim bongas

The deku bongas. Deku means foreigners (non-Santal-outsiders) and the deku bongas are the deities worshipped by non-Santals (i.e., Hindu deities) some of which are incorporated into the Santal pantheon as bongas to be offered sacrifice

The spirits who are malevolent or spiteful, from whom inaction is desired. These bonga include the village boundary spirits (siima bonga), village outskirts spirits (bahire bonga) who live in mounds and ditches and roadways etc, the mountain/hill spirits and the water spirits who reside in ponds, rivers, streams etc. (Rongo Ruji and Baghut Bonga).

The spirits which the tantrik/ojha finds (through divination) are the cause of disease or other mischief and will exorcise. These include naihar bonga, thapna bonga, kisar bonga and the bonga who are the husbands of witches

The tramp or stray mischievous spirits and impersonal powers that are not objects of worship but which have to be scared away through magic or exorcisms. These include bhuts, curins, ekagudias and rakas (Troisi, 1978: 79).

Whenever Santal (or Ho) people found a new village, after careful divination, they first determine the place of the jaher/jaher thana (sacred grove) and leave at least five sal and mahua trees uncleared as abodes for five important jaher bongas. These five bongas are common to all Santals. Three sal trees in a row are assigned to the bongas Marang Buru (the chief among the bonga, although subordinate to Thakur, a grandfather like entity), Jaher Era (the Lady of the grove) and Moreko Turuiko and two mahua trees are assigned to Gosae Era and Pargana Bonga (Troisi, 1978: 80-83). The priest cleans and plasters the base of each tree with cow-dung plaster and places stones there as the abode of the respective bongas. The jaher is thus a place where all eminent bongas may reside and be conveniently worshipped in one place. Only males are permitted to enter the jaher, which is demarcated by landmarks and carefully placed border stones, however within the jaher, only the village priest (naeki) is allowed to directly offer worship/sacrifice to these pan-Santal deities on behalf of the village community members. Each village has its own jaher which guarantees that all Santals who belong to the village have worship/sacrifice performed on their behalf by their village priest. Participation by each household consists of providing items for sacrifice (Kochar, 1966: 243-244).
On the days when village-level sacrifices/pujas to the bongas to the bongas are to take place, the village godet (messenger) informs all the villagers beforehand and collects some rice and a small fowl or chick from each household for the sacrifice. The priest observes personal sacrifices leading up to the worship (celibacy, sleeping on the ground, fasting, purificatory bathing etc). Sacrifices to bonga and worship within the jaher by the village priest are the main performances of Sarna Dharma, the pan-Munda religion.

The jaher is at the heart of Sarna and of Santal village society. From their earliest days Mayurbhanj children become aware of the location of their own village jaher and are alert for the signs of jahers in other villages. These areas are off limits as children’s playgrounds and are particularly taboo areas for girls and women. While the jaher is a male-only ritual space on the edge of each village, the akara is another culturally important space in the centre of each Mayurbhanj Santal (and Ho) village, usually it is a clearing under the shade of a large tree. The akara is a dance ground and place for village meetings. Dance (and music) are the heart and soul of Santal culture and are part of all marriages, festivals and other social occasions which regularly punctuate the local calendar, nowadays including annual school sports carnivals and meetings. Dance is performed collectively by the entire community, women, children and men. While both women and men are songsters, most Santal musical instruments are played by men and these include the bamboo flute, a variety of drums and country violins.

The Ho of Mayurbhanj similarly have sacred jaher and akara as part of their village spatial layout and one more important site, the shashan (burial ground/s). The Ho commemorate their deceased relatives/ancestors through megalithic grave stones in burial grounds right within the village and sometimes within the household compound. Ho grave stones/graveyards are not ‘dead’ or morbid spaces where people would hesitate to linger. Rather they are part of the living, bustling village and people sit on and use them in various every-day ways, including as children’s playgrounds. By contrast the Santal usually immerse any remaining bones of their cremated deceased relatives in the rivers.

Other key ingredients in Sarna practices are a) worship with and consumption of ‘handiya’, fermented rice beer, which is considered to be a god given drink and b) seasonal festivals and c) life cycle rites. Marang Buru initially taught Santals the
preparation and consumption of handiya and its mildly intoxicating effects are considered spiritually efficacious, bodily healing and bringing joy and life to the community, especially when combined with traditional dance. While handiya remains a sacred substance for the Santals (and other Munda people) of core cultural significance, issues of the harmful social effects of over-indulgence/alcohol abuse are prevalent in some areas. Children soon grow to relish the annual lunar calendar cycle of festivals. They are times of feasting and dancing for the whole village as well as sacrifices and rites in the jaher. Among the life cycle rites of Santals are special rites for children. One of these is for any children who cut their first teeth on the upper gum. As this is considered an inauspicious omen that could spell catastrophe, even early death for the child or relatives, the antidote is to symbolically marry the child to a dog or tree. After the marriage ceremony the child has no significant obligations towards the dog or tree and when they attain adulthood they may marry, as usual, a human spouse after the performance of a ‘divorce’ ritual gesture. Gurucharan explained to me that both of his sons had unfortunately cut their first teeth on the upper gum and consequently he had held discussions with the village manjhi and naiki (chief and priest) and arranged that in due course the village would hold a double marriage for them with two dogs. As mentioned above, Sarna has undergone a post-independence revitalization and particularly in Mayurbhanj District, it is part of a modern socio-political and cultural-linguistic affirmation of identity.

2.2.3 Santal Social Structure and Beliefs

Santal social structure is legitimated at an abstract level by cosmological beliefs, as is common with other social groups and their religious beliefs, such as Old Testament narrations of human origins and migrations and human origin tales from the Puranas. The following Santal story of human creation (which follows on from a story about the creation of earth) both describes how human beings came into existence and justifies the clan order and marriage laws of Santal society.

In Santal cosmology God created two birds, Has and Hasil, who flew beneath the sun and above the earth, which was then largely water (being in the sky meant being in between two worlds: fire (sun) and watery earth) and finally nested and laid two cosmic eggs out of which hatched the first man Pilchu Haram and the first woman, Pilchu Burhi. The union of these two brought forth seven sons and seven
daughters who eventually intermarried and formed seven exogamous clans, the first human populations. Later five more clans were added to create the twelve clans of the Santal society (seven prominent, five minor) (Chaudhuri, 1987: 15-17, Troisi, 1978: 28-30).

The names, totems and social status of the clans are as follows:

Hansdak (Hansda) whose totem is the swan/goose (related to the first birds in the creation myth which control four elements, sun, air, water and earth) and whose social status is as advisors/ministers. The Hansdaks/Handsas are the most senior clan.

Murmu whose totem is the antelope (the first earth animal and which initiated hunting amongst the Santal) and whose social status is as priests. The Murmu are the second senior most clan.

The Kisku, whose totem is the kingfisher and whose social status is as kings.

The Hembrom, whose totem is the betel nut.

The Marndi, whose totem is a type of grass/weed and whose social status is as traders.

The Soren, whose totem is a constellation of stars and whose social status is as soldiers or warriors.

The Tudu, whose totem is the owl and whose social status is as musicians.

The Baske, whose totem is stale rice and whose social status is as cooks.

The Bedea, whose totem is the sheep but who are not found today because they are all lost through intermarriage.

The Paria, whose totem is pigeon.


These clan titles remain the surnames of all Santals today. For example Gurucharan and his two sons carry their patrilineal title/surname, ‘Handsa’. Children learn the lore and tales specifically related to their family’s own clan.
Their clan identity also has some bearing on their relations with neighbours from different clans and there is some sense of juniority-seniority related to these recognitions. All people who fall outside these clans are referred to as diku (outsiders). Traditionally marriage arrangements were centred on clan considerations. Marriage with diku and clan endogamy were both prohibited and there were also some inter-clan marriage restrictions related to the totems and elements they represented. For example marriage was forbidden between the water element swan (Hansda) and the earth element antelope (Murmu). Nowadays while many clan-related marriage restrictions are ignored, families/tribal elders still carry the consciousness of what are considered ideal versus undesirable alliances. Most of the parents that I interviewed during my inter-village household surveys told me that they intend to arrange their children’s marriages and would emphatically marry their children within their own Santal/Ho community. At the time I did not seek to ask about whether they would arrange marriages according to clan restrictions.

2.2.4 Village Level Political Organization

Mayurbhanj children who grow up in Santal villages appreciate from an early age that they are part of a structured village society that incorporates all village residents, governing, guiding relations and social functions and assisting them in times of trouble. The village is the central unit of Santal customary law. The political and executive structure of each village involves:

The village headman, Manjhi

The headman’s deputy/ assistant, Paranik

The village messenger, Godet

The guardian of morals and youth, Jog Manjhi

The spiritual authority, priest, Naeki

The priest’s assistant, Kudam Naeki (Hembro, 1996:25-30)

The village headman (manjhi) is the ultimate authority in settling disputes and dealing with marriage arrangements, which are at the heart of Santal sociality, and
divorces, judicial matters related to breakdowns of appropriate social and customary conduct, theft, property damage, accusations of witchcraft and so on. He is also the ultimate authority in land matters. In customary law, land is occupied and owned by the entire village community and families are provided with intergenerational usufruct rights over their designated house and agricultural plots. Although the manjhi (village chief) is the ultimate arbiter, village committees play an important political role in all of these negotiations and settlements and are variously formed with a) village elders and b) male representatives from every household. Thus in practice most decisions relating to village social life are taken democratically. However, this is a male-only democracy.

Beyond individual villages, Santals are also united through inter-village committees and a parganait, who is a manjhi elected amongst manjhis of up to twelve villages. He is the ultimate arbiter if, for example, a defendant is dissatisfied with a punitive decision given by their own village manjhi and wishes to appeal against it. The highest court of judgement regarding social customs was the Lo Bir (Sendra) council, the general hunt council to which the Santal communities of a region gather together in an annual hunt-related convention. This gathering is also a place where Santals can discuss matters of contemporary wider political significance related to their community and interfaces with the state.

Women are excluded from these traditional village political and executive structures and village committee meetings, as they are from most village level sacred activity. Women’s subordinate position at the level of family reflects the patriarchal familial structure. Exclusion at the village level (in sacred and political settings) also relates to the widespread notion that women and girls have innate knowledge of witchcraft or proclivities towards practising it and so cannot be trusted. This does not absolutely paralyse women’s social participation in village level matters as they may present their cases/stand as witnesses at village council meetings, but it definitely constrains the ways that women may politically participate/express their opinions in the ‘traditional’ political context. Women exert their influence at the level of family and neighbourly relations outside of village meetings. This subject is discussed further in chapter five.

Children are similarly excluded from the adult male domains of village governance and ritual activity. They do however participate in all festivals and there are
several festivals where young boys’ participation is central as the following
translated excerpt from a conversation with a Jamda Manjhi/ chief suggests.

In January, which is called ‘Magh’ in the local lunar calendar, there is a festival called
Magh Bonga. Until this puja is performed no-one can climb onto their roof for repairs
(re-thatching) or cut any branches of trees (i.e., fuelwood gathering). Children play an
important role in Magh Bonga. On the morning of the festival the village messenger
and head-man’s assistant collect rice and chickens from each house in the village
which is taken to the Jaheer and cooked. Meanwhile in the morning all the unmarried
bachelors go to the forest and bring the branches of a particular species of tree. Even if
that species was growing in the village they must go to the forest to collect a branch
and they must go on an empty stomach (fasting). At about 4pm all the boys and adult
men go to the Jaheer.

The priest selects one of the young boys of the village and he will have the branch
attached to him, like a bullock’s plough. It is an honour paid to the child to be selected
for this ceremonial role. The small boys then pull the ‘plough’ (branch) through the
village up to the home of one of the prominent households. It may be the head-man or
the head priest or any prominent family. When they reach there, the children throw
the branch onto the roof of that home. The prominent family gives the boys some muri
and other treats. Then all return to the Jaheer for a male only feast (Jamda Manjhi
interview, February 2008).

The Santal socio-cultural expressions in Mayurbhanj that I have touched on above
occur within the context of multi-ethnic villages with ongoing heterogenous
interactions between Santals, Ho and Hindus of different castes. Now I will
describe some of these interactions.

2.3 The Interface Between Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled
Castes in Mayurbhanj Villages.

Upon clearing tracts of thick forest between Chaibhasa in Jharkhand and
Rairangpur in Mayurbhanj and founding Jamda villages, Santals and Ho
communities invited occupational castes to come and reside in their villages to
provide basic services including pot-making, blacksmith work, midwifery, cloth
weaving and so on. These services would complement the core agricultural and
forestry economies of the land-holding tribals who paid the service providers in
kind (rice) (jajmani exchange) given in bulk after the annual harvest.
The scheduled caste Hindu communities who perform these occupational services contribute their own cultural and sacred practices to the villages. The homes of my extended adopted village kin (from the weaving jati/occupational caste) all have puja rooms or areas where images of different Gods and Goddesses are reverently housed. Children and elder family members (more frequently women and girls) often worship every day by placing incense, flowers and a pot of fresh water on the alters. They also follow a weekly puja cycle which includes Shiva puja each Monday, Goddess Tarini puja each Tuesday and Lakshmii puja on Thursday. During each Tuesday Tarinii puja there are several persons who enter trances and become mediums of the Goddess in two or three villages and thus oracles for other worshippers. Hindus also follow the annual cycle of Hindu state festivals and pujas (Shiva ratri, Jaganath festival, Durga Puja etc) and their own life-cycle rituals, such as marriage and death observances. There are other displays of asceticism and devotion by individuals and congregations such as village kirtans, sometimes held all night long, or for days (see dvd chapter 6).

By 2008 few of the Scheduled Caste Hindus in Jamda were carrying out their caste-occupations. For example in the village where I resided many of the Hindu families were originally from the weaver caste. One generation ago they used to provide all of the local clothing (saris, men’s lungis and other garments, towels etc) but now people buy factory-made synthetic clothes in the weekly village markets. Thus the weaving caste families have mostly turned to other occupations including rice farming and forestry like their Santal/Ho neighbours, government service jobs (teaching, police work etc), small business, and intermittent mining. Their relations with the Santals and Hos are through local economic exchanges, working alongside each other in common economic pursuits (i.e., cultivation and forestry and for children, attending school) and mutual participation in overlapping local ritual and social functions, as well as local village level meetings. Because of the holistic nature of communal relations in rural tribally dominated yet heterogenous villages, Pfeffer in Skoda (Skoda, 2005) proposes the term “deshia” -- inhabitants of the land -- to refer to the collectivity of these inter-dependent and socially interconnected communities. This term would refer to all native inhabitants of remote hilly areas which includes those classified by the government as scheduled tribals (STs), scheduled caste (SCs) and other backward classes (OBCs) as mutually dependent in terms of socio-cultural identity. This interdependence is expressed
economically and ritually. For example during the Uda yatra festival in April. The festival is organized and overseen by Ho priests but various SC Hindu communities have pivotal roles at various stages. For example, only members of the Lohar blacksmith caste are permitted to insert the iron hooks into the backs of the devotees who will hang from high swings. (See chapter 6 for details).

Carrin Bouez (1991: 22-23) suggests that this Hindu caste-tribal interaction involves, for the Santals and other tribal people, a degree of Hinduization without Sanskritization. That is, without any aims to enter the caste system and attain upward mobility in a caste sense, or imitate the behaviour of a dominant higher caste, tribals often incorporate local village level Hindu practices into their own practice, such as: rain-making pujas, Manasa puja, some vaeshnavite devotional cults centred on Krishna; and tantric cults centred on Shiva. However: a) it cannot be said that all tantric and Shiva oriented practices were brought from outside the sacred realm of the Ho and Santals; and b) as I observed, the ritual exchanges also move in the other direction and local scheduled caste Hindus have tended to incorporate their own versions of several important local tribal rituals, practices and festivals. For instance, the Patra community (caste Hindu) have evolved their own festival that replicates many aspects of the Santal Baha (flower) festival. The Patra flower festival is held around the same time of the year as Santal Baha. SC Hindus also actively participate in festivals and rituals held to appease local bonga. For example, each year in January, Jamda Block holds a ‘walk on fire’ sacrifice, which is attended by many thousands of people from surrounding villagers from all tribal and scheduled caste communities. The ceremony is held to appease a particularly powerful local malevolent Bonga. Rural scheduled caste villagers accept most of the bongas classified by Troisi above (px) as either beneficial or malevolent entities to be reckoned with in their local daily life. Carrin Bouez (1991) argues that much of what all local people (SC Hindu and ST) tend to share in, has common ascetic, tantric elements rather than Brahminical elements. Odisha, Bengal, Mithila and Magadha (North and South Bihar) and Jharkhand are the main homes of Tantra.

Tantra predates Vedik Hinduism and is a vigorous, practice-oriented human expression. Whereas the Vedas are more scripturally based (textual) and Vedik Hindu institutions are responsible for instituting the rather fixed economico-ethnic
order of caste hierarchy based on notions of purity-pollution, tantra represents an egalitarian socio-economic order where devotion (bhakti), not socio-ritual purity is the touchstone. This is not to deny that tantric institutions involve hierarchical orders of seniority-juniornity wherein sacred functions assume seniority. However in tantra, junior-senior relations do not equate with supposed inferior-superior social status in the same way as expressed in the Hindu caste system that served to shore up political and economic domination by higher castes over those designated as either low or outcastes (Sur, 1975).

The heart of tantra is the realization of a fundamental link between microcosm and macrocosm. However, being practice-oriented, tantra has taken on various forms according to the times, places and persons of practitioners (Buddhist and Hindu variants for example—which each may again be classified into further historico-geographical variants). Tantra connotes a variety of senses for people in Mayurbhanj. They understand it as a form of practical and vigorous mysticism, involving mobilization of the kundalini, chakras, pranayam (vital force/breath control), bij mantras (efficacious acoustic roots), self-sacrifice (tapasya) and all important bhakti (devotion), whose aim is identification with, union with the Supreme Being, the Supreme Truth. They also understand it as a forceful mode of mastery over the elements of nature and the so-called ‘supernatural’ or psychic elements. This manifestation of tantra is often feared, as its practitioners often seek to dominate others psychically as part of their show of power. Magicians’ convincing illusory shows are sometimes referred to as this type of ‘avidya tantra’. Upavidya Tantra is an expression by which practitioners aim to gain one or several “Siddhis”, successes, powers or attainments through connections with one or another Deity. For example an Upavidya Tantrik may wish to attain siddhi of Manasa Devi puja (The Snake Goddess). If, through ardent practice, they are successful, they may then have power of communication with snakes and the power of healing snake-bites by uttering specific mantras. Witchcraft involves the use of objects and understanding of their qualities, such as plants, stones, symbols and sounds (mantras), hypnotism and also utilization of “spirits” and is considered a low form of tantra. Some call it avidya tantra, that is, tantra leading to fulfilment of selfish desires, a narrow aggrandisement of the unit ego rather than the dissolution of unit ego in union with the supreme being (which offers enlightenment) implicit in vidya tantra. Confusingly people in Mayurbhanj villages
often refer to dhaninis (witches) as tantriks as they do to tantrik healers (ojas, ‘shamans’ who may be upavidya tantriks) and to tantrik mystics/yogis.

Mayurbhanj STs and SCs both place great faith in local tantrik ‘ojhas’ and tantric spiritual mediums (who may either be ST or SC) for healing, countering witchcraft attacks and finding guidance in dilemmas, rather than calling upon Brahmins for ritual services. Medium-ship is a fundamental aspect of local Mayurbhanj expressions of tantra and it frequently takes a dramatic form, where vigorous devotional identification with the deity leads to the deity entering the person. Mayurbhanj STs and SCs share self-reliance in their own performance/practices of spirituality, which runs counter to mainstream upper caste notions of the centrality of Brahmins in providing intermediary access to God and divinities for lower caste people. This is not to deny that Brahmins’ ritual services are deemed necessary by SC Hindus in important life-cycle rites and in other festival contexts.

SC and ST families of Jamda villages share a number of social practices that the SCs do not necessarily share with their higher caste Hindu brothers and sisters. For example Mayurbhanj SCs and STs ritually exchange children, which strengthens social ties between them. The only daughter of the SC Hindu family who I lived with was adopted by the wife of the village Ho headman. This Ho family’s own daughter was similarly adopted into the SC family. This mutual ritual exchange of daughters was largely symbolic as the girls remained mostly with their own paternal families but on certain days (i.e., festivals) they would go and visit with their adopted families. Both families did however go through a formal ceremony of adoption of each others’ daughters, with implicit obligations. SCs and STs also observe many similar life cycle rites including birthing practices (local Dais attend and perform similar rituals at the birth of ST and SC children), stomach burning rituals associated with the first Makar Sankrant of a baby’s life, same practices to avert local illnesses or perceived spirit dangers. Another example is the ‘shubha rasta’ ritual. One SC Hindu lady who told me about her marriage ceremony described how her family consulted the village Santal tantric who is the only person capable of communicating with the village ‘devata’/spirit, and arranged for him to perform a shubha rasta sacrifice to clear an auspicious pathway between the bride and groom’s family homes. This ritual, performed literally on the
roadway between the two homes, would create harmony between the two families becoming affines.

Thus, both commonalities and distinctiveness and separateness are apparent amongst various communities who live in the villages at the social and sacred levels. In addressing common local problems, facing similar economic, livelihood, environmental and health challenges and participating in a number of common local rites, festivals and practices, communities stand in solidarity, yet some tensions surface in questions of politics and ethnic identity. For instance, while SC Hindus at times expressed to me their sense of disadvantage as a local numerical and political minority, and must assume a position of juniority in relation to the village tribal chiefs in villages where they reside, at times they assert a sense of socio-political superiority as members of the dominant state Hindu society. While STs thrive in having a homeland area where Santal/Ho language and culture are the norm and where they are safely in the political and population majority, they are aware of a struggle against social and economic marginalization in certain wider domains. Gurucharan gave me the following illustration of this from his own experience.

When I arrived in Bhubaneshwar (capital of Odisha) for higher studies I went to a tea shop and ordered tea. As I sat drinking, the owner of the shop chatted with me and finally asked me where I was from. As soon as I said that I was from Mayurbhanj his whole demeanour changed (western Mayurbhanj is well known as a ‘tribal area’). He refused to touch my empty glass and ordered me to take it out the back and wash it myself.

Saying this much Gurucharan was silent for quite a while. I expectantly waited to hear what happened next. He then said,

I picked up my glass and smashed it on the ground. Then, telling the owner that he wouldn’t want his glasses to be polluted, I picked up every last glass in the shop and smashed them. Then I slapped a 50 rupee note on the counter ⁴ and walked out (2008).

One day I stopped by the side of the road to learn a game that a small group of children were playing. When the play-mates told me their names, Gurucharan told

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⁴ Enough to cover the costs of the glasses
me that their surnames indicate that one of them is Santali, one is Ho and the other one is an SC Hindu. As chapter one indicated, while children’s play may involve exclusions and gender/age or other ‘community’ social divisions, play is also a site where social divisions are dissolved. I found that almost all of the games that children taught me were popular cultural practices of both ST and SC Hindu children. Much of children’s make-believe drama also drew on themes that resonate with both SC and ST children living in a shared environment, although some cultural specificities also arose. For instance, I occasionally came across Hindu children performing mock Hindu weddings with their clay dolls.

2.4 Interfaces Between Village and State

Despite a high level of economic, cultural and political local autonomy, interfaces with the state, with NGOs and with markets and media (i.e. television) are widening and deepening in rural tribal areas such as Jamda. Tribal village council leadership now coexists with decentralized panchayat level local electoral governance (Panchayat Raj) instituted by the state. Local elections are open to any candidate including Hindus, OBC and others. Views are diverse on the extent to which the Panchayat Raj disrupts the tribal village council. While Hembrom suggests that the two domains deal with differing concerns, the tribal with customary law, marriage negotiations, tribal land issues, witchcraft accusations and the Panchayat Raj with development and local-state interactions (Hembrom, 1996: 31), others are more critical.

Other state-village interfaces include: the block development office run by a state appointed officer/civil servant; the block education office; the block agricultural office; the Primary Health Centre (PHC); the integrated child development scheme (ICDS) office; and the elected block and panchayat representatives’ offices. These state development agencies are major forces in evident rural transformation.

While all of these state/NGO institutions influence rural children’s lifeworlds, three significant public institutions directly relate to children: “Anganwadi centres” administered by the Integrated Child Development Scheme (hereafter “ICDS”), schools and hostels. As these are pertinent in the direct lived experiences and socialization processes of children I’ll briefly describe these.
2.4.1 Anganwadi Centres

Anganwadi centres are village level outlets for the services of the ICDS that is, India's response to the challenge of providing pre-school education on one hand and breaking the vicious cycle of malnutrition, morbidity, reduced learning capacity and mortality, on the other (http://wcd.nic.in/icds.htm).

Funded by the Government of India (Central and state) in partnership with UNICEF, CARE and the World Food Programme, ICDS aims to provide: preschool non-formal education based on a play-ways approach, supplementary nutrition and weight monitoring, immunization, health check-ups and dispensing basic medications, referral services, nutrition and health education to the poorest families and those living in disadvantaged areas including undeveloped rural areas, tribal areas and urban slums. Jamda Block is one of the state’s under-developed remote and rural tribally dominated areas and a malaria zone and is therefore an important target area for ICDS. Consequently, there are dozens of anganwadi centres across the 80+villages of the Block.

Although all anganwadi workers (called ‘Didi’ – elder sister) undertake basic preschool teacher training and have play-ways learning programme manuals with songs, rhymes and play activities for pre-schoolers, most Didis I met say that they are too overburdened to actually run such a daily programme. According to a local headmaster there is only one anganwadi centre in the vicinity of this study that to his knowledge actually carries out some form of regular preschool/nursery programme with the under six year old children who attend. I only saw one instance of a play programme in all of my anganwadi participant observation during my time in various anganwadi centres in 2008. This thwarted my early intention to make the centres a primary site of observing and learning about children’s play.

Be all this as it may, the centres are most rural children’s first regular interactions and socialization with the state and public institutions of childhood in their own village lives. The interaction is largely related to health check-ups/referrals to the primary health centre in case of severe malnutrition or sickness, weight monitoring and a daily feeding programme. Most children under five years old from below poverty line families come to the centre each day for a midday meal of
rice, sometimes with a small quantity of legumes added to it. Children arrive and wash their plate and hands at a tube well and then sit down in lines on the ground and wait to be served by the anganwadi cook. Once they have been served a few children sit there and eat their meal but most children immediately carry the plate of hot rice back to their homes. Once when I was at the home of a family whose child returned with their plate of food, I noticed that the mother immediately took the plate of rice and re-distributed some of it to all members of the house, with larger portions to the adult men, which undermined the anganwadi centre purpose of combating early childhood malnutrition. I was told that this is what generally happens when children take the food home.

Some of the anganwadi workers saw a gap between what the centres can actually offer children and what they purport to offer, caused in their view by the fact that the centres are understaffed. Each worker bears too many duties without adequate pay. As a consequence the centres were not a site for rural pre-school children’s peer play, even though this was one of their main stated purposes.

2.4.2 Schools

Counter to decades of educational neglect of children in remote, rural tribal areas, schools are rapidly growing in the rural areas as a key public institution of childhood. They are, therefore, an important site for exploring children’s enactments and experiences. As chapter six deals with schools in detail, I do not elaborate on schools here.

2.4.3 Hostels

Almost all of the Mayurbhanj rural schools, private and public, have hostels attached to them. Many children told me that residing in hostels, particularly in the high school years, is an expected part of their ideal educational experience. One day I was chatting with some local village children about hostel living. They all, (without exception) told me that within the next year or so they will enter hostels. I asked them why. They said that if they want to go to better schools then they have to enter the hostel because better high schools are distant from their homes. I asked them, “If the government ran a school bus from the Block headquarters (where there are more high school options) up to your village, would you then prefer to live at home or would you still prefer to live in the hostel”? All of the
children replied that they would still prefer to live in hostels because, “then you are not distracted by other duties and can concentrate on studies”. This seemed particularly so for those children, especially girls, who are burdened with many domestic duties. Parents receive economic relief when their children enter hostels because for rural Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste students there are no hostel charges and the hostel students’ living costs are borne by the government.

Nevertheless when the time comes to actually enter the hostels, the experience is quite traumatic for many children. Fourteen-year-old Kalpana, for example, regularly told me enthusiastically that she was waiting for acceptance into a high school girls’ hostel. Finally she was accepted and the time came to enter the hostel. But then she went through several traumatic weeks, weeping regularly and fearing separation from her family and village, refusing to go and confiding to me that there are rumours amongst her teen-aged friends that a ghost inhabits one of the girls’ hostels. She ultimately came down with malaria fever and a respiratory infection during these stressful weeks. When she did eventually enter the hostel she had barely recovered and had lost a lot of weight. Her mother then regularly told me that she was not eating in the hostel as the food was unpalatable to her. She wanted to come home, her mother said, but if she did she would lose a year of study as she would not get admission in the local school once the school year had started. She also told her parents that the school attached to the hostel was no better in terms of teaching and curriculum than the high school nearer to her village that she could have accessed on foot, while staying at home. Other students adjust better to their hostel lives, particularly when they find good peer support. One young girl who lives in a hostel told me that she misses her family but much prefers living in the hostel with her friends and doesn’t want to return home. She encourages her younger sisters to enter hostels.

The prevalent intervention by the state which extracts rural students from their families and villages and installs them in (often distant) hostels for education purposes is obviously a major socializing factor. It is an intervention that removes poorest children from their families with the notion that this represents the ‘best interests of the children’.

The idea of moving into a peer dominated living space for middle years education is not foreign in the tribal areas where traditional youth dormitories
accommodated children aged from around ten to mid/late teens and where peer-learning was the dominant form of pedagogy. What is different between tribal youth dormitories and hostels though is that where youth dormitories had an integral and sometimes central place in village sociality, culture and geography, hostels remove children from their villages as well as their families, physically and culturally. In the context of this play study, I planned to spend time in several local rural hostels to understand more about this living experience from hostel students’ perspectives and to observe children’s enactments of play in this context. I was unable to do this for lack of time. Thus I never developed the rural hostel-based play/recreation focus, which would have provided a comparison with children’s play in the villages.

2.5 Significance of the Ethnographic Setting on Mayurbhanj Children’s Play

This introduction to the ethnographic setting aims to contextualize the upcoming chapters. As we can see rural villages are spaces where intra-family dynamics interact with village level community dynamics; where intercultural relations interact with wider political agendas; where macro forces of development by the state and international agencies exert new socio-economic agendas but must interact with ‘on-the-ground’ socio-cultural life-worlds. In this complex environment children experience rural life and seek to make sense of their world and their own identities. Children are in fact at the heart of state and international development agendas. Children’s peer play is an important expression that occurs within this interactive space. The various chapters of this thesis all draw on particular features of the interactions between play and local context, the ways that children at play reproduce and transform it. Chapter one described how a particular make believe drama drew upon living themes that are experienced by children in their village social world, where sorcery and goddesses influence relations. Chapter three highlights the spatiality of village games, how games interact with the physical environment. Chapter five delves into ways that local conceptualizations about gender influence play. Chapter six is about the interfaces between children’s play and local manifestations of the sacred domain. Chapter seven looks at the interactions between rural schools and children’s performances of play. Finally chapter eight looks at local approaches to the work-play dichotomy, as they pertain to Mayurbhanj children. Childhood in Mayurbhanj fosters distinct
styles and expressions in children’s peer play, even though there are universal elements that drive it.
Chapter 3  Games and Spatiality

This chapter is about popular everyday games that school-aged children played in Jamda villages during 2008. It is also about the relationship between children’s games and the spatial context within which they are played. In this regard I will focus on the cultural practices, values and orientations towards the perceptible materiality of the environment in which actors live and play. In the agrico-forestry villages of Mayurbhanj, reverence for the earth/soil is at the heart of people’s orientation towards the spatial context and as this chapter will show, children’s games too involve earth/soil as a central motif. The chapter begins with an exploration of games and then discusses the games-spatiality connection.

Although children’s games include spontaneous ones for which rules are created by a private play community (of maybe one or two players) and then forgotten after the game ends or changed in mid-play, this chapter focuses on games with publicly recognized rules, particularly competitive games or contests (sometimes referred to as agon) and games of chance (referred to as alea). I have divided such children’s games that I observed and played in Jamda into two broad categories: sitting down board-games and active games.

At the outset the word ‘game’ as used in this chapter needs to be defined. Following Salen and Zimmerman (2004), a game may be seen as a system (a set of parts that form a complex whole). Unlike natural systems (i.e., solar systems, nervous systems), games are artificially designed systems whose aim is to produce meaningful and pleasurable experiences (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 50-52). Any particular game system consists of three aspects or component systems: formal; operational-experiential; and contextual/cultural. The formal aspect of a game is its rules, which include: constitutive rules that mathematically construct the game and instructional rules that tell players how to play. The operational-experiential aspect of the game is the play of the game. The play of a game refers to the meaningful human actions and consequent experiences of the players including the strategies they develop (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004); how a player executes his ultimate victory over an opponent, for example. The contextual or cultural dimension of a game refers to whatever exists beyond the periphery of the game itself but is in interaction with it. Is a game of cricket taking place in a
suburban backyard, a schoolyard, a national stadium, being relayed by satellite around the world, or on common land within a village? Such cultural contexts are a meaningful dimension of the game being 'played'.

This view of games expands on the idea of a game as a 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1970). The 'magic circle' notion sees games as designed processes occurring with delimited time, space and social roles and tends to focus on the formal and operational-experiential aspects of games. Taking note of the context of a game as a component of the game itself provides an expanded way of thinking about what a game is and does.

This chapter has two aims: to give a taste for some of the popular games (formal-operational) that children were playing in Mayurbhanj villages in 2008 and to explore the link between games and the socio-spatial context. The chapter begins with an illustration of each of the two above game types: a sitting down game called astang and an active game called palish. Then I explore some aspects of the children-games-spatial context matrix.

3.1 Every-Day Games

3.1.1 Sitting Down Board Game: Astang/Charkiphort

Throughout Odisha, schools and government offices must, by law, close by 10.30am during summer to prevent citizens suffering heat-stroke. Without electricity and fans in the village, most people simply lie low during the middle of the day. This is what everyone in my adopted family’s household was doing one summer day, while the compound courtyard turned into a baking oven. Suddenly, twelve year old Gautam, my adopted nephew, climbed over the wall (taking a short cut from his home due to the heat) and invited me to come and play Astang with him, his sister, Sujita (nine years old) and visiting cousin, Rani (sixteen years old). I agreed and accompanied him back to the veranda of a neighbouring house. Gautam took out a stub of white chalk and drew the following geometric form (red lined image only) on the cow-dung plastered floor of the veranda:
Astang is a game of both strategy and chance (with dice) played by up to four players who each have four counters or pieces. The objective of the game is for each player to move all their pieces from their own “home base” (one of the outer squares marked with an “X”), snaking around the game board (see the spiralling arrow marking direction of a player's movement) to the inner nucleus of the board. How many and how far each person’s counters move depends on throws of the dice. The first person to get all their four pieces to this central ‘home’ is the winner.

Gautam and Sujita collected natural objects for use as our counters such as tamarind seeds, pebbles and 1 cm pieces of twig. The local dice used to determine how many spaces a player may move consisted of three half pieces of tamarind seed. One side of the tamarind seed was dark red (the colour of its outer skin) and the other was white (its inner part). They had sanded the inner white portion smooth on a stone. When a player has to throw the dice, the tamarind seeds will land with either the white or the red side up. The white side equals two points and the red side equals zero points. So, if a throw of the three half seeds comes up with one seed with white side up and two with red sides up, that equals two and if two seeds come up with white sides up and one seed with the red side up, that equals the number four. All white sides up equals six points, plus a bonus throw of the dice. However if all three seeds come up together on the red side then that equals
twelve points plus a bonus throw. In coastal Odisha, the dice used in this game are a number of cowrie shells instead of tamarind seeds. As Jamda Block is inland, tamarind seeds are more readily available than cowrie shells.\(^5\)

Gautam explained to me that you can move your pieces singly, doubly or in triple but you can’t move all four together. So if you got number four from your throw of the dice, you can move one piece four spaces ahead or you can move two pieces two spaces ahead together but not four pieces one space ahead. If another player lands his or her piece onto the square where you are, you are ‘eaten’ and have to go back to your starting home -but only if s/he equals your strength. For example, if you have two pieces on a particular square, then any other player must land two of his/her pieces onto that square to send your two pieces home. If a player lands on another player and sends them home they get another turn (throw of the dice). In some versions of the game, all the outer squares marked with “X” (different players’ home bases) are safe places for all player pieces. The first person to get all their counters home is the winner and they are given the title “Raja” (king), the second person becomes “Ranii” (queen), the third one home is “Mantrii” (minister) and the one who comes last is “Chakrii” (servant).

When Gautam finished drawing the Astang board on the ground and we had selected our counters, each person had a throw of the dice/tamarind seeds and the person with the highest number got to go first. The game began and we all entered the game’s ‘magic circle’ and focused our attention on the game board. The heat of the day was almost forgotten. We had new play roles, linked symbolically to our own four little counters that we each moved and the chance number that our own

\(^5\) Variation: You can also play this game with either 4 or 5 half pieces of tamarind seed as the dice. In this case, if all seeds fall on the white side up, then it equals 4 points or 5 points respectively and if all fall on the red side then it equals 8 or 10 points respectively. Otherwise only the white side counts and each is equal to 1 point per seed. If you get all white side up, or all red side up, you get another turn at throwing the dice.
throw of the dice gave. Gautam, Ranii and Sujita all flicked their wrists deftly and professionally while scattering the dice (seeds).

During the game, Ranii, as the eldest was slightly aloof from the exuberance of the two younger players, but still involved and invested in the game. Gautam responded leniently towards me as a first time player, giving me hints on how I could move to best advantage and warning me when any of my counters were in danger. And as my understanding of the game progressed, they all became more competitive with me. Sujita (the youngest), however, was merciless from the start! Whenever she could, she landed on my pieces, sending me home. Her earnest, competitive streak was mixed with good humour and made the game more spirited and enjoyable. As her counters came up behind another player’s she would say in Odiya, “cooking, cooking!” And when she landed on someone, she would say with satisfaction, “I’ve eaten you”, or “you’re eaten”. Her usual gentle politeness and developed sense of social etiquette had a new and a different expression in semi mock tones of the tough player. We jointly experienced the satisfaction of ruthless competition with each other, with sometimes sly, sometimes overt moves to frustrate each other’s progress and gain advantage in winning. As a competitive game, astang provides artificial conflict. It was fun for us players to aggressively oppose each other and to experience the nervous tension as a player moved their counters up behind our own ones. At the same time we experienced bonds forged by sharing, for the period of the game, the world of game meanings contained within our play circle and sharing uncertainty, both at the level of what each player’s throw of the dice would yield and uncertainty of the final outcome of the game. Ultimately Ranii won and took the title of king, Sujita as a close second became queen, Gautam was the minister…… and I came last and got the title of servant!

Sutton Smith (1959: 14-15) suggests that all competitive games anywhere in the world involve one or several of eight universal basic game challenges that make up the statement of game purpose: the chase; the hunt; the rescue; the capture; the seduction; the attack; the race; and the harassment. The game challenges are accompanied by particular responses of a) uncertainty and b) fun. The game Astang indeed, has at its heart one such basic challenge. It is essentially a race to the centre of the board. It also involves subsidiary challenges of chase and
harassment/attack. I concur with Sutton Smith that it was engagement with the basic challenges that stimulated the uncertainty, excitement and fun that we players experienced during our game.

Sutton Smith also suggests that along with these universal basic challenges games often carry role clothing in the form of names for the game, or the players, or the game-pieces that carry temporal (changeable) local cultural salience, which adds an immediacy, an emotional relevance to players of a game (1959: 15). So a similar game in various locales may be called different names or carry different titles for game roles. The linkage of games and their roles etc to popular themes or icons is something that has been intensively capitalised on by global corporate game-marketing industries which create ever new games based around figures popularised in globally marketed films. Such games are also accompanied by a plethora of marketed children’s goods including clothing, school bags, pencil cases, breakfast or snack foods, gimmicky trinkets and so on to actively immerse children in a context where icons associated with a game make the game feel culturally relevant (Barbaro and Earl, 2008). In other words children’s attraction for games combines the fundamental universal challenges of games with specific current themes of cultural and spatial salience. In Astang, Sujita’s jocular calls, “Cooking, cooking” and “I’ve eaten you”, represented local idioms which were also expressed in a non-literal sense in chapter one (p. 49).

Several other local board games and some active games have names, role-clothing or game talk that link to locally relevant socio-cultural themes. For instance, the team tag game Bahu Chor (Bride Thief) involves one team protecting one of their players who is named the “Bahu” (young bride) from being kidnapped by the other team, the Chors (Thieves) as the Bahu attempts to run between two home bases on diagonally opposite corners of the play field that represent her natal village and her in-laws village. This reflects the cultural protectiveness towards brides that has a cultural prominence in rural India. The board game Bagh-Bakrii/Tigers and Goats relates to the immediate concerns of local herders who often play this and other board games sitting in the shade of trees while their herds graze in forests where tigers and other wild-cat species are actual threats to their herds.

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6 In Tigers and Goats there is a contest upon a star shaped game board (drawn on the ground) between a player who has seven goats (counters) and a player with two tigers (counters of a
Another important cultural connection or relevance of the game astang or charkipfort is its long history that is linked to ancient Indian ludic elements of cosmology. In *God Inside Out: Siva’s Game of Dice*, Handelman and Shulman (1997) draw upon mythology linked to stone panels in Elephanta and Ellora caves and narrative accounts from early medieval Puranas and poetic anthologies that describe the dice games of the God S(h)iva and his wife Parvatii, to expound on the significance of the ludic element, “liila” (cosmic play) in Indian cosmology. Shiva represents unmanifest Divine Consciousness and Parvati represents the Divine Creative Energy, the force of creation or Shakti. Shiva’s defeat by Parvati carries the esoteric meaning that unmanifest Consciousness becomes manifest as the cosmos under the influence of Shakti. The chapter, “When Siva Plays” provides a description of the actual game that is being alluded to as played by Siva in mytho-philosophical references based on textual and iconographic evidence (in, for example, the above mentioned cave carvings). The game is known throughout north India today as chaupar that is obviously a version of the Jamda village game charkiphaut/astang.

Players move their pieces or tokens counterclockwise around the board in accordance with the throws of the dice. Cowrie shells can be used in place of actual dice. The object is to assemble all one’s tokens in the empty middle square before the opponent can do so. Pieces that are “bitten” by the opponent in his movement through the board are sent back to the beginning; some boards have “safe” squares in which the token is not susceptible to this kind of attack. Various rules apply to the final progression down the center of the fourth “arm” and into the middle space. It is also of some importance that the game progresses via the radical dispersion of fragmented self representations, toward a point of ultimate reintegration in the empty central space (Handelman and Shulman, 1997: 32)

This reference confirms what elders in the village told me, that this game and the other board games that children were playing are very old and have been played and handed down through the generations from parents and grandparents to children. The western game Ludo is related to it and Handelman and Shulman
suggest that a variant of this game, known as Jnana chaupar or “the game of karma”, is the source of the familiar game Snakes and Ladders (1997: 33).

Here the dice regulate movement from the lower reaches of the board, by way of various dangers, traps and potential bonuses, toward the higher ontic realms of the cosmos at the upper limit of the board. This game has been exhaustively described for Tibet, more than any other. It is closely linked to divination, the dice disclosing, in external clarity, the karmic-existential state of the player in his every move (Handelman and Shulman, 1997: 33)

Thus, when Sujita, Gautam and Ranii played Astang with me they were practising a cultural performance that has a history and cultural associations that have been drawn upon by cosmologists, artists and poets. They were maintaining an embodied continuity between a symbolism-laden past (a game played by Shiva and Parvati) and their own present. Continuity though does not imply sameness or a state of non-change of cultural practice. While playing this traditional game, they (and I as their student of the game) were renewing what the game means by bringing our own contemporary experiences to it. Of course, neither preserving continuity nor practising a lofty South Asian tradition was their conscious motivation in playing. In fact they presented Astang to me as a contemporary, local and popular game.

So what was their motivation to play? Undoubtedly, their conscious motivation was the enjoyment that the game brought to players and the occasional onlookers. Gautam and his sisters made a rational choice about how to utilise a time period that was too hot for physical exertion and yet, with their abundant youthful energy they did not want to merely lie around as most of the adults were. We became so involved in the flow of the game that our own discomfort and boredom caused by diminished capacity to act during the hottest part of the day were somewhat forgotten and the game itself provided many excuses for jokes and quips. Not only were we, the players, enlivened by the game, several stray on-lookers also became involved. Spectatorship is a vital part of any game in the villages, which generates its own witty commentaries on a game in process, a sort of side game for older spectators and learning-by-looking for young children who are looking on. The game did not involve gambling, which adults’ board games often do. We generated our enjoyment through our own responses to the game’s basic challenges that led
us into spirited contest with each other. On the other hand, our enjoyment came through the bonds with each other, generated by our joint entrance into the liminal space of the game circle.

Figure 3  Playing “astang” on the village road
Sujita, Gautam and Ranii selected the game Astang from a large repertoire of local board games known to them. Some of the other strategic board games that I learned and observed children play included: Dhum Dharap (see figure xx) that is a more complex (and consequently more meaningful and pleasurable) form of Naughts and Crosses; Diip Choyi (see figure xxx) that is similar to Chinese Checkers, Das Pachish and two versions of Bagh Bakrī (Tiger and Goats — also checkers variants). Like astang, such games all begin with someone carefully drawing the required geometrical design for the game board on the ground. Boards were often drawn with a stick into the soil or with charcoal or chalk or white stone on concrete roads or on flat granite stones that are part of the landscape. Every Ho village has large granite gravestones in cemeteries that are scattered in the midst of the houses and working areas of the villages. In several places I saw das pachish game boards permanently engraved on gravestones and adults and children sitting to play on the graves in the shade of large old tamarind trees that stand amongst the graves.

While Astang relied on a combination of the luck of the dice and some strategic skill, many other games rely on cognitive strategising (not chance). Some games rely on small motor skills such as Loka Guti (a variant of knuckle bones, using pebbles, with ascending skill levels); Pitka (a variant of marbles that uses flicked pebbles to target and capture other players’ pebbles); Karom-board. Many children (and some adults) told me that their favourite sitting down game is Karom. This game requires a crafted wooden, painted and powdered game-board. It is loosely similar to snooker/pool except that wooden discs replace snooker balls and the discs are hit to slide into corner pockets using one distinctive red disc flicked by the fingers of the player, rather than a snooker cue and a white ball. However as Karom-boards cost around 500 rupees, few families can afford to own one.

3.1.2 Active Games: Palish/Kopra Ball

It was more common to see children involved in active games than board games. 4pm till 6pm is the time when groups of children congregate for various active games such as Kabadi, chur (chasey) and kho kho. This is the time when they return from school in the cooler months and is also the time when it’s becoming cool enough to play outside in the summer.
In 2008 Palish (kopra ball) was one of the most popular games played by children after school back in their village. The challenge of palish is for team A to build a tower of clay discs, destroy it by bowling it over with a ball, then rebuild it while racing against an opposing team (team B) who want to permanently block team A’s chances to rebuild by using the ball to tag and ‘eliminate’ team A’s members person by person as they approach the discs to rebuild the tower. If team B gets all of the team A members out, then team B wins that round and is given the role of bowling next. If team A manages to rebuild the tower, they win that round and get to bowl again.

Figure 4  The “palish” disc tower

Amar makes the best palish balls. He scrounges plastic bags from here and there throughout the village and binds them with recycled twine into a tight ball. The end result is pretty durable and bouncy. Prasenjit was the last one to make a set of clay discs needed for the tower in the game Palish. After all he lives next door to the village potters who give him and any children broken clay roof tiles for their

Prior to the pervasive use of plastic bags, children made their balls out of cloth rags (and sometimes still do). The local word for cloth, "kopra" is still used. One of the names of this game is "kopra ball".
games. Prasenjit and a friend chipped and chiselled them into about ten discs of decreasing size that could be stacked on top of each other.

It’s late afternoon and shadows lengthen as the hot sun is almost touching the adjacent forested hills. Amar, Prasenjit and about twelve other children are about to play palish in the field near the pond. A young girl plucks a branch and sweeps the bowling pitch clear of leaves and pebbles. Another girl and two boys squat and stack up the disc tower at one end of the pitch. Some other children pace out a space from the disc tower to the bowler’s place and draw a line for the bowler in the earth. One of the oldest boys orders everyone to stand in a row starting from the shortest child (boy or girl) at one end, sequentially to the tallest at the other. They have all changed out of school uniforms into their home and play clothes. Boys in singlets and faded old shorts, or flared long pants, girls in colourful synthetic skirts or “frocks” that the littlest girls have tucked up so they can run faster. Some children have stepped out of their rubber chapals/thongs to play barefoot. Their faces are vibrant with excitement to start their game. Then the tallest player takes one step back, the next person one step forward and so on until all the players are divided into two teams: those who are back and those who are forward. Which team will bowl first? In lieu of a coin toss the eldest boy picks up a flat stone and spits on one side of it. The two team leaders pick a side and then toss the stone into the air. Prasenjit’s team will bowl.

Prasenjit bowls twice to try and knock over the tower of discs. No luck. Another boy steps forward and also bowls twice. No success. Amar steps forward. Each team is allowed 6 attempts at bowling over the tower and if they don’t succeed within their 6 attempts, they have lost one round and the other team gets to bowl. Amar misses on his first bowl and now it’s his second try and the team’s sixth and final chance. There is suspense in the air. He calmly takes a run up and bowls cricketer style, hitting his target and scattering the clay discs in all directions.

Now the fun begins and Prasenjit’s team members start to run here and there while yelling at each other, “Watch out, dodge the ball”! “Carefully, carefully, stack it up”! Bare, dust-caked feet run over the playfield. From here on Prasenjit’s team’s task is to rebuild the disc tower that they had just smashed down, while dodging the ball that is now in the hands of the other team. The other team guard the scattered tower discs and throw the ball at anyone from Prasenjit’s team who
come close to try and rebuild it. Whoever is hit by the ball is out. But whenever the ball flies into the distance, Prasenjit’s team members dash forward and put more discs back, rebuilding the tower.

Already Prasenjit has felt the sting of the ball and is out of the game. Amar is soon out (the bigger you are, the bigger target you are). Finally it’s up to the younger and smaller boys and girls to try and sneak in and rebuild the tower. The older children who are out yell encouragement and directions to them but one by one they are getting hit by the ball and out. They have stacked eight discs back in place with two to go. Most of the little ones, who were running here and there are now out. Six year old Lakera dodges well and runs fast. She sprints forward squats and replaces the last two discs. Her team members cheer as they’ve won that round and they get to bowl again.

The Palish bowling pitch and the players’ bowling style reminded me of cricket. But the game had more exuberance and invoked a more feisty mood, particularly when players aimed the ball at other players to try and hit them and get them out. The shouts and squeals of those dodging the ball were also unlike cricket! I often wondered about the significance of each bowling team intentionally knocking down the tower they had built and then having to rebuild it to win a round but the players were more interested in the fun they were having than explaining to me the meaning behind the actions in the game.

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8 Quite often a small, select group of older boys dominated the bowling role unless a younger, less experienced child persisted in their demand to have a go. They either bowled cricketer style or softball style.
There is a powerful and interesting blend of fierce individual or team competitiveness and the distinct maintenance of collective harmony within Mayurbhanj inter and intra village games such as Palish. Unlike the 1970s Euro-American new-games-movement which sought to create a genre of non-competitive (hence ideally non-conflictual) cooperative games, village games are sites brimming with playful conflict and therein provide what Sutton Smith calls “guilt-free release of aggression” and delimited experience of fears. Guilt free because the aggression is symbolic and if (as sometimes happens) it crosses a boundary and causes genuine harm to a player, or invokes fear that actually reduces a player to tears, the spell of the game is broken and it is no longer play. This was quite apparent as the children often threw the ball hard at opposing team players.

A primary focus of much game theorizing has rested on the notion of competition. Darwinian-inspired theorizing about competition rests on evolutionary ideas of ‘survival of the fittest’ and natural selection. While winning and losing are obviously real drivers of children’s intentions during their games, there are other
evident fundamental human and social drives at play. These include: the desire to belong, the desire to connect with others and the desire to be useful. Children who had developed long associations with each other through their games and play appreciated each others’ particular strengths and weaknesses and interacted meaningfully with these. Thus their games rested on the important blend of competition and cooperation. As illustrated in the above descriptions of the astang and palish games, rural children express a matter-of-fact resourcefulness and great dexterity in their capacity to generate the requisite play props for almost all of their traditional games and sourced and manufactured their game props directly from the immediate environment. Children knew who had the best skills in certain tasks and called on that person to employ their useful skills in the service of the game for the benefit of all players. It was clear that children derived satisfaction from the creative acts of producing their own props and toys and pride in their own products.

To join in local competitive and conflictual games anywhere in the world necessitates accepting the authority of implicit cultural norms/etiquette as well as explicit game rules. In Jamda villages this means inclusion of players of various ages. Every afternoon that I went out into the village playfields and streets to meet up with children at play I would find a medley of children between the ages of about five and fourteen congregated for one or another game. Older and skilled players are obliged to accept younger, less skilled players in their games even if it lowers the standard of play. Obviously village peer cohesion and cooperation are paramount, trumping conflict and competition.

In highlighting the socially cohesive nature of village games I don’t mean to discount the select groups that form for exclusive games. Sometimes older boys fiercely play chakrrii (a hockey variant) or football and prohibit younger boys from joining them (girls almost never join in). Sometimes a group of girls play Bahu Chor (Bride Thief) or another game that is visibly a girls’ only domain and boys don’t join in. And when younger children (boys and girls) play Luk-Lukani (a variant of hide and seek), older children generally don’t join in. Often non-school-going children avoid the game field altogether while school going children are in the midst of a team game, or play their own side games. As indicated in chapter one (p 48) particular children are sometimes ostracised or bullied. Children at play
occasionally express their tempers, shout and abuse each other and their games involve a play of dominant and less dominant personalities with consequent more or less willing submission to the authority of the most dominant players. And of course sometimes a few children will start a game that excludes everyone except a few best friends or family members. However, along with the occasional conflicts, dramas and abuses and all of these segregated and exclusive group games, there are: a) frequent anomalies, where for example, one boy joins in a girls-only game or an older child joins a younger child’s game; and b) a frequent return by school-aged children in the village to playing games such as Palish (and Kho Kho and Kabadi) that include young, older and both genders. Moreover a common mood unites all players in the village, who may be participating in heterogeneous games at a given time but drawn together by sharing the same play-field or strip of road. The spontaneity of inclusive player participation within the village is much as one would expect from an extended family, underscoring that children recognise their village as a social unit (see p.50-51).

In the school playground however, children adhere to a different play code with explicit age and gender division. I realised this when I asked a mixed group of students to teach me some of their popular games in a school-yard. Sujita (mentioned above) remained aloof from the games with sober gravity. She is a keen player in her village and plays athletically with both boys and girls. When I asked her why she was not participating, she drew me aside and explained, “Aunty, we don’t play with boys at school”. As more remote rural children attend school than ever before, school-going children within the village are gradually distinguishing themselves as a recreational social group from non-school-going children within their own village. This distinction is not complete because in some families, one or two siblings will attend school and one or two others do not and within the village they all play together. However, children’s 4-6pm game communities within the village did seem to consist mainly but not exclusively of school students.

3.2 Spatial Context: Playing on the Mother-ground

As mentioned, games take place in a delimited time, space and social context (magic circle), which both constrain and give freedom to players to perform in particular ways that bring them meaningful experiences. The setup of a magic
circle enables the game at hand as a chess board and its pieces and rules facilitate
the chess game. But the magic circle does not exist in a vacuum. It is situated in a
particular context, which is, in fact, another component of the game itself.
Whatever exists outside the magic circle, the cultural milieu and geo-spatiality in
which a game is played infiltrates the porous borders of the magic circle and
influences players’ modes and approaches to play, just as what goes on inside a
game’s magic circle impacts upon the context.

In this section we will consider the interface between games and the spatial
context of Mayurbhanj villages. In chapter one (p. 50) I briefly referred to the
effects of spatiality on children’s play in relation to village layout, how for children
the entire village is like a common play-ground that incorporates the concrete road
strip, the bathing ghats at the pond and river, shade of trees, fields and other areas.
I noted that this sense of the village as ‘a common’ generates a sense of play-
community amongst children of all ages between about 5 and 14 years. However in
this chapter my particular focus is children’s games and spatiality in relation to
‘ma’ti’ the soil and earth which is central in village life-worlds.

David Lancy (1996) uses the term ‘playing on the mother-ground’ to represent
how Kpelle children’s communal play spaces within Liberian rural villages are
unobtrusively watched over by a multiplicity of mothers. The same phrase, playing
on the mother ground, captures the way Jamda rural residents regard the ground
itself as a mother. Even the word ‘ma’ti’ which means soil has an audio resonance
with the local term for mother ‘ma”’. Earth/soil is a dominant motif in the lives of
many Jamda families, culturally and economically. For example, as my adopted
sister-in-law explained to me: on the morning of marriage, the bride in Jamda goes
out into a field with seven children, digs soil from the field and ceremonially
carries it home. She then ritually pours this sacred soil onto the top of the head of
her mother who is herself seated on the earth (see photo of this ceremony, taken
by one of the boys who participated in the photo-voice experiment in figure 7).
Figure 7  Wedding ritual. Bride pours sacred soil over the head of her mother

The whole rice cultivation process, from start to finish, is laden with sacred symbolisation in which earth/soil represents the divine feminine or womb-like fertility and seeds represent divine masculine virility (see p. 73 and chapter 2 video link). Most homes are made of mud-bricks and clay tiles, usually prepared within the village itself and the floors are regularly smeared with a fresh plaster of soil and cow-dung. Soil is the site where priests draw ritual yantras in sacred grove ceremonies (as will be described below). When a baby is born, the placenta is buried in the soil at the front doorstep of the home and finally the Ho community bury their deceased relatives in the soil within the very confines of the village, or even their own home compound. Thus soil has spiritual, emotional (mother), ancestral and economic/livelihood value to the whole society.

For children the reddish brown soil has other values for play: it is ever available and it has wonderful mutable potential. They can easily draw lines and figures on it and mould objects from it. Soon after my arrival I asked a group of girls whether they ever play with dolls. They all enthusiastically told me that playing with dolls is one of their favourite activities. 'Can I see your dolls?' I asked. They looked surprised. 'Auntie, we have to make them first'. They then explained that they collect mud from the bottom of the pond, mould whatever dolls and paraphernalia they need for a particular game or story that they want to play with dolls and leave
them to dry for about an hour and then they start playing. They said they’d call me next time they were planning to make and play dolls and they did.

So, unsurprisingly children’s games within the village largely use the earth/soil as their game board. Players sitting on the earth are playing on the lap of their mother. Their bodies are at ease and confident with such contact. While small children everywhere, given half a chance, will soon play with earth, one of the differences is that in Mayurbhanj there is a reverence for the soil and earth as divine mother, the carrier of life. To join in a game in the villages means sitting on the soil or upon the Ho granite megalithic graves, some of which have game boards engraved on them, which immediately brings you into the local context of play, into tactual contact with soil that is revered or the grave of a local village ancestor.

Whenever I am free and alone I rest with my Batul under a tall and shady tree. I like to go to the river-bank and build different types of sand houses, caves, temples etc (excerpt from an essay on 'Leisure', School Student, Jamda, 2008).

Figure 8  Sand creations
Figure 9  Game: “dhum-dharap”

While watching Jamda children drawing up one or another game board upon the earth I was struck by the similarities between the way that they create their geometric designs and the way that men in Mayurbhanj create ritual figures during local sacred rituals. I will give a couple of examples. When Sal trees (Shorea robusta) blossom in March there is a spring festival that the Santals call ‘Baha’ and the Hos call ‘Ba’. This is the time to worship the Sal as the most sacred tree, that features in Santal creation story. Jamda villagers celebrate Baha in the jaher (sacred grove) (see p. 88-89).

Women are only permitted to enter the sacred grove during Baha. Before going to the grove, there was a male-only gathering at the priest’s home where dozens of men began singing loudly and beating drums and clashing cymbals as they prepared for some of them to become possessed. After a while five men began to vigorously shake their heads and bodies for some minutes and then enter into a trance, where they became mediums of one or another Santal God, Goddess or Spirit. Then the priest and the village headman stood up and led the Gods, Goddesses and spirits within the shaking and dancing mediums and other

9 Although women don’t participate in this part of the Baha ceremony, I was authorised by the village chief and priest to attend and photograph events.
ceremony participants in a procession towards the sacred grove. Outside the priest’s house they were joined by a long line of women and children who sang and danced with interlocked arms rhythmic side-ways steps along the road up to the grove. Inside the sacred grove, the women danced a circling dance for several hours around the wooden posts (decorated with Sal blossoms) that represented the Sal spirit. The dance and singing soon induced a highly charged and dreamlike atmosphere, while the priest worshipped the Gods and spirits inhabiting the men who were acting as mediums.

When the dance ended, all the women left the sacred grove and the priest started to perform a ritual sacrifice in front of the remaining men and boys. He told the young boys to sit close by and watch carefully what was taking place and learn. He smeared some cow-dung plaster on a small square of earth and then, using a rice flour paste, drew a diagram with a long white rectangle with many small squares inside it and three big ones in the centre. The three big squares were abodes/ ‘rooms’ for major Santali Gods and Goddesses and the small ones were abodes for a host of minor deities and spirits. After setting up his figure, the priest recited some mantras and began making some offerings into each “room” (square): some uncooked rice grains, some sindur (sacred red powder) with which he painted dots on the ground, some Mahua fruits and Sal blossoms and finally the blood of small sacrificed chicks.

In the local Tantrism, mantras are words and sounds, whose acoustic vibration and ideation carries the potential force to transform persons or things. In a similar vein, yantras are two-dimensional diagrams or three-dimensional configurations/machines that produce a potential transformational output, which may be abstract or even material. The above design was a yantra that invoked the idea or presence of dwelling places of spirits and gods within the grove. Once the diagram was drawn the priest could perform the necessary offerings into each square (Gods’ abode), which produced results, giving satisfaction to those gods, and satisfaction to the participants of the ceremony.

As I sat inside the sacred circle of the grove and watched the priest intently at work creating his geometric design/yantra to perform his ritual sacrifice, I was reminded of the times that I had stopped along the road at various places in different villages to learn one or another new game. Sitting on the earth children
would begin by intently drawing quite elaborate geometric game boards with a stick in the soil, or with white chalk or charcoal on a granite rock or cement road strip. Only when they had created the appropriate design/diagram and assembled the necessary props could the players enter the “magic circle” of the game.

Like the priest who uttered mantras before carrying out each offering, children would often utter mantras or appeals to a chosen God or spirit, or touch the dice to their forehead with a mix of devotional sincerity and playfulness before casting the seeds that serve as dice, as part of their strategy to achieve their game goals. The objects/props of the priest’s performance were grains of rice, (the life essence of rice cultivators) blood of innocent chicks (something that was painful for me to watch), sacred forest fruits etc. The objects/props of the children’s games were seeds, stones and sticks used as counters/pieces that could also be killed and ‘eaten’ and could also get new life and begin again. The earth is the site of player performance for both children’s games and sacred performers.

Figure 10   Baha ritual in sacred grove
Figure 11  Game: “Dhiip choyii”
In a second example, one day I accompanied a group of children who were going for a walk towards the hills. We chatted as we walked and I barely noticed as some of the children ahead of me made a couple of sides steps detour off the track and then back onto it. Suddenly one girl urgently told me to stop and detour off the track too. I thought the problem may have been faeces. “What was there”? I asked. The children asked me whether I hadn’t noticed the lines drawn on the track. “No, I didn’t see anything but what was it”? I again asked. They said that it was clear that someone had performed a tantric ritual exactly at that spot and it would be extremely risky if I stepped on that site. They looked across the field and saw a pile of drying mud-bricks that someone had created out of the soil and concluded that whoever had made the bricks had performed/or called a tantric to perform a ritual on the road to warn any passers by not to steal their bricks or they would suffer tantric attack as a consequence of the ritual that had been performed on the road. Local security was effected by the power of lines on the ground.

Thus I generally felt this cross-link memory between watching the physical performances of sacred rituals and children’s games rituals because of the very actions of drawing figures on the soil and manipulating items within the figures to attain particular states of being and other ends. Back home in Australia I feel something similar when I walk into my friends’ home and find them at work on one of their multiple computers and their son at play (digital gaming) on his own computer. The computer has become a dominant motif in the domestic spatiality, economic and cultural exchange. There is a link between the modes and resources of children’s games and the central cultural and economic modes and resources in any given environmental or spatial context. In rural Mayurbhanj, where livelihood depends on the soil and where a lot of the sacred and cultural activity takes place not in temples or other buildings but on the soil in sacred groves, children’s games also take place on and with the soil in many cases.

Another relationship between games and the socio-spatiality concerns the comparatively high level of economic self-reliance amongst local cultivators/foresters families and children’s self-reliant and innovative approach to manufacturing the props required for games. The list of props and toys that children were regularly making included: cricket bats and hockey sticks which boys carved from wood that they cut down in the forests; kopro balls (balls that
children made from tightly bound cloth and string) and latterly plastic bag balls; ceramic discs for palish; bows, arrows and catapults; toys including cars made either of clay or discarded bottles/containers etc, carts, clay dolls, miniature animals, miniature pots and plates; and of course game boards, which are generally drawn straight onto the ground, and dices, counters etc. In brief, children were rarely unable to play a game due to lack of required game accessories. Tinkering with things and making things seemed to occupy quite a few children during their leisure time. As I will describe in upcoming chapters, many children expressed confidence and sense of accomplishment in their own dexterous handiwork when tinkering or making play props.

3.3 Time and Space: Rhythms and Change

3.3.1 Seasonal Game Cycles

So far I have drawn attention to some of the interfaces between spatiality and children’s games, drawing particular attention to soil. But no space is static, rather it changes over time, particularly in rural areas where seasonal cycles interface with people’s lives so minutely. The seasons also influence what games children play. When I first arrived in Jamda it was winter and post rice harvest, so the fields were brown with paddy stubble and exposed soil. In the empty rice fields I often saw boys playing a traditional version of hockey that they called Chakrii 10, with hockey sticks from the jungle and a puck cut out of old rubber thongs/chappals. A few months later when we (children and I) were documenting their games, I asked some boys whether they would organise a game of Chakrii so that we could photograph or video it and they told me that as they only play it in the winter, it would be too hard to convince enough boys to play it for the record. Cricket and football are more or less summer versus winter sports. The post-harvest winter period was also the season for annual village sports carnivals, which were important inter-village cultural events that included archery, cockfights, athletics, inter-village contests (i.e. tug of war), and culminated with exuberant Santal and Ho dance performances. The annual cycle of sacred festivals that are so linked with the agricultural seasons also involves special games and contests associated with particular festivals. For example, Odisha’s swing festival is only held during the summer solstice (see p 210) and the chariot festival, which usually involves a

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10 The international game of hockey originated in India
fairground of play activities and lots of drama competitions, is held at the start of the rainy season.

3.3.2 Changes Over Time

Jamda village game modes are changing with material changes wrought by ‘development’. Now village game boards are as likely to be drawn on the concrete road strips that run through the centre of most villages as they are on soil. Gradually more rural villages are obtaining electricity, which motivates more families to purchase televisions, which naturally influences children’s activities during their leisure time. Variation and transformations in children’s games according to how developed a village is were made apparent to me when in the early stages of my fieldwork I carried out the three village comparative study of a least, a medium and a most developed village within Jamda Block. The games and other play of the school aged children in these villages varied, with children in the most developed village increasingly spending more time indoors in more solitary forms of recreation that relied more on commercial toys and game props. Girls in developed areas were less likely than boys to go onto the streets to play in team sports such football or cricket. More children in the most developed village also reported watching television as their favourite leisure activity. While the comparative differences in play vis-à-vis more and less ‘developed’ settings were clearly visible, my primary focus was on the games and play of children in the medium/less developed farming villages outside of the Block headquarters that make up more than 90% of the 82 villages of Jamda Block.

While reminiscing, a number of adults told me that all of the sitting down games that I observed being played today, they played in their own childhood. These include charki-phort (astang), das pachish, karom board and many more. Men often still congregate on the village roads under a tree to play games (which sometimes involve petty gambling) such as karom board, cards or das pachish. They also said that most of the traditional active games (kabadi, kho kho, bahu chor, palish, pond games, tree climbing games etc) have been around for years and they used to play them. Some men told me that while football has been popular for generations and they were avid players, cricket and volleyball were uncommon during their youth, although they are now highly popular and people keep a keen pay attention to national and international cricket matches via radio.
3.4 Discussion

An important argument of this chapter is that children draw on the central resources of their spatial contexts as resources for their games. I have argued that earth is one of the core resources in Mayurbhanj village-spatiality that children were drawing on for their games in 2008. One of the effects of game playing in close contact with earth/soil (a contact that has profound salience for Mayurbhanj children and adults) is manifest in ‘at ease’ bodies. I observed this in the children with whom I played and experienced it myself.

The village environment and its outlying surrounds provide ample space for children’s games. I once asked various children how they would feel about living in the town, or in the block headquarters. All of the primary school aged children whom I asked said emphatically that they would never prefer to live in the town because there aren’t the play spaces for them and their friends that are there in their village. This love of their village and its environment was expressed in many of the students’ essays on the subject, “Me, My Family and My Village”. Although most children also wrote that they would like to see practical development of their villages in terms of resources such as good roads, clean water and electricity, many young students also expressed deep appreciation of the natural resources of the villages, which were also resources for their own peer play and recreation. Here are excerpts from the essays of four students.

We observe many festivals in our village such as Rojo, Dashahara, Dolo, Gomha. People dance in the occasion of Rojo every year. The festival of Rojo continues for three days. The villagers enjoy this festival very much. I like my village very much. I cannot forget my village even if I am very far from it. That is why I am always careful for the development of my village.

Last words, my village is very beautiful.

X is our village. It is completely a hilly region. These hills are called Yogini Buru. Most of the villagers are Adivasi people SC and general people are less in number. Most of the villagers are farmers. Government job holders are very less in number. Most of the villagers are economically poor.

The reason for which I like my village is –My village remains cooler even in the scorching heat during summer as it’s a hilly region. I like to stay in my village during
our long summer vacation. I like the heart touching festivals celebrated by the Adivasis throughout the year. I like the greenness of my village. There is plenty of cultivable land. The green colour decorates my village and its surroundings during the peak days of rice cultivation. Our village is calm and peaceful compared to other populated area. Our village is free from pollution which is a common thing in big cities. So I like my village very much.

Our village develops very much. The roads are pitch, with planted trees on the road side. They give us oxygen. The trees give shade. There is no difficulty to have bath, for there are 5 ponds. There is electricity in our village. There is a beautiful garden where there are many flower plants. I go there for my mind fresh. There are many mango and pippul trees. Birds stay there. Our village is situated near the mountain. So this is my born place. It is in a sentence:

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever".

Whereas some of the teenaged young people (especially girls) said that they wouldn’t mind living in the town because there are more college options and there is electricity and running water and that now that they are older they don’t roam around the village and play with their friends as they used to. However even these teenaged girls said that they are glad that they got to spend their childhoods in their village because of all of the options for games and play and would not have liked to live in the town when they were younger. It is worth bearing in mind that due to their economic statuses as STs and SCs, most rural Mayurbhanj families would be most likely to reside in highly congested settlements (bastes) if they were to migrate to urban areas and their children would face the highest impact of the fact that children’s outdoor, autonomous peer play in natural settings is rarely considered a priority in urban economic planning. Moreover many informal or unplanned urban settlements prioritize almost every inch of land in providing private dwellings.

Obviously the forms of children’s play and games change rather than disappear when children live in urbanized settings. Some of the earthy game forms and interactions with trees, rivers, ponds and natural objects that have been discussed here will disappear. Store-bought games and props proliferate and increasingly digital games that reflect the game-spatiality/resource context of urban settings. As Pramanik (2007) and Nath (2006) note, in congested rural town locales.
outdoor collective games with friends and siblings get replaced with indoor, more solitary games, television viewing, or with adult-organized sports. This is particularly so for girls. Spatiality conspires with temporal factors towards an overall depletion of opportunities for peer play.

As rural areas become more digitally and market connected and electricity becomes more available, these types of games may soon become popular in Jamda’s remote villages too. Indeed there is already a steadily growing uptake of mobile phones in the rural areas and one of the reasons that young people are enthusiastic about mobiles is access to gaming-‘apps’. Computers were unavailable in the medium remote villages during 2008. Yet many children were already learning computer studies at school and had text book knowledge of many software applications, without ever having seen a computer. I can imagine that it will not be long before the rural blocks have increased access to the internet booths that are already present in the towns. When this happens, it is predictable that computers will become an important medium for children’s gaming as they already are in urban areas of Odisha and elsewhere in India.

However as games do interact with spatial context (it is part of what a game is), as long as the villages remain agro-forestry dominated locales, they retain a variety of special possibilities for young people’s outdoor autonomous peer-games that hone players’ creative skills in specific ways and make for distinctive game experiences that the children who participated in this research expressed that they find extremely fulfilling. They are thus an important mode of interaction with land.

When children, games and spatiality interact in Mayurbhanj rural villages, it is not just that the environment influences the games. The players and their games also shape the environment and give the environment a particular meaning. The cement road strip, the village pond, certain ‘vacant’ plots, trees and other things gain a cultural meaning for children and adults precisely because they are sites of games. I remember certain places within the village in a particular way because of the games that I participated in at those spots. One adult whom I interviewed told me how he used to love going to a particular spot on the river bank during the rainy season in his childhood to play certain games with rainy season streams that would trickle into the river. Thus land builds up memories of association through
children's games. In villages, children's playfulness and games are an important contribution to the 'spirit' of the land.
Chapter 4  Playing With Concepts: Theoretical Models of Play

Children transform sticks into houses, mud into food, themselves into mummies and daddies. These transformations are ‘as easy as child’s play’. Anthropologists’ transformations are thought to be hard work, i.e., field work. Both children and ethnographers are constructing and transforming the contexts in which they exist in order to make sense and sometimes nonsense out of the worlds in which they live. (Schwartzman, 1998: 7).

Chapters one and three offer impressions and preliminary analysis respectively of a) a dramatic play and b) various games that some Mayurbhanj children enacted in 2008. In both cases I described how their play interacts with the spatial, social and cultural context. In this chapter I explore theoretical models of play to further make sense of peer play in preceding and upcoming chapters. While there is a diverse range of scholarly approaches to play, I ultimately select a combination of Sutton Smith’s play as performance theory and insights from the new paradigm of cognitive science known as enactivism as models to orient the ethnography and analysis. This combination of approaches explores the theatricality of play and its everyday, embodied, experiential dimension.

The chapter begins with a summary overview of a range of play theories. Then I introduce Sutton Smith’s play as performance theory. Third, I summarize enactivism and its insights for play. Fourth, I illustrate ways that play as performance theory combined with enactivism may help us in approaching and understanding the phenomena of children’s play in Mayurbhanj. This thesis queries both the pre-1970s emphasis on children’s play as functional in socializing children and the post 1970s emphasis on children’s play as transformational of social and cultural contexts. Notwithstanding the vast contributions of both pre and post 70s approaches, the former tends to overstate the passivity of children at play as empty receptors and imitators of a static socio-cultural paradigm and the latter tends to over-rate the socio-cultural transformational agency of children who enact play. The hypothesis proposed in this thesis is that play/children at play represent a particular form of interaction with context that simultaneously participates in the construction, perpetuation and transformation of those contexts. ‘Interaction’ is the term that I think better represents the relationship
between children's play and context. The combination of performance theory and enactivist theory helps elucidate this theme and the relevance of the word, interaction.

4.1 Overview of Play Theories

While searching for a theoretical frame to orient analysis of my 2008 ethnographic representations of Mayurbhanj children's play, I entered the wide and varied field of scholarly work on play. The field may be broadly divided into two approaches: individualist theories concerned with the psychological/cognitive structures that generate and are stimulated by play texts and collectivist theories that treat play as a social phenomenon and are concerned with the collective symbolic representations and the contexts that make a play frame and text what it is and the modes of communication and processes involved in social enactments of play.

The individualist approaches to play, which are concerned with play as a psychological phenomenon include: theories of phased cognitive development (Piaget, 1951), play as the zone of proximal development (which facilitates leaping one step ahead of one's current cognitive development level) and cognitive-linguistic transition (Vygotsky, 1966), play as emotional transition from attachment with the mother (Winnicott, 1971), play as exploration (Berlyne, 1960), play as mastery of conflict and novel situations (Erikson), play as arousal (Ellis), play's relation with intrinsic motivation and 'flow' states (Csikszentmihayli, 1970) and psychoanalytical approaches that view play as compulsion, compensation, wish-fulfillment, tension release, mastery of anxiety, reality testing, mastery through role reversal and so on (Freud and other psychoanalysts).

The collectivist play theory approaches treat play as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Here the interest is in the relationship between play and social, cultural, temporal and spatial context. One such play theorist was the historian Huizinga who wrote extensively on games, contests and the essential link between the ludic and culture. Characterizing humans as homo ludens, he argued that the ludic propensity represents the progenitor and essence of human culture. He notes the similarities in the processes of games and law courts, operating 'theatres', parliament, boardrooms etc. These lie partly in the establishment of magic circle arenas of activity where special game rules prevail, that are separate from, yet interact with the
contexts in which they occur (Huizinga, 1970). Caillois extended and redirected the work of Huizinga, arguing that four play forms: mimicry (make-believe play), agon (contest), alea (chance/luck games) and ilinx (dizzy making play) may be explored in different socio-cultural and historical contexts as a way of coming to understand the diverse complexities of contexts (Caillois, 2001). Four classical social science play theories include: recapitulation theory (Hall, 1911) discharge of surplus energy theory; relaxation theory (recuperation from tiring activity); practice and pre-exercise theory (Groos, 1901). Practice theory evolved into a range of functionalist views of play as socialization. Other social theories include: play as liminal activity related to rituals of initiation, seasonal transition and conflict mediation (Turner, 1982), play as power (Spariosu, 1989), deep play that reveals symbolic, underlying cultural representations (Geertz, 1973), play as inversion (Babcock, 1978), play as models, mimicry and mockery (Handelman, 1974), play as dialectics (Sutton Smith, 1979), transformation (Schwartzman, 1998) and meta-communication (Bateson, 1972).

This summary depicts two broad interests in play – as a mental phenomenon versus as a social one. The two theories that I will now elaborate on aim to integrate individual cognitive/experiential and social/cultural approaches to play. Sutton Smith’s play as performance theory suggests that play is never simply solitary action but always a performance before/with real or imagined others. Although play performances involve the interior cognitive, conative and affective interplay of individuals, he suggests they are not explicable merely by psychological theories, as the social and cultural dynamics of play are inextricable and theoretically relevant (Sutton Smith, 1979). The embodied enactivist approach to play is a phenomenological cognitive approach that emphasizes the ontology of social interaction and social cognition.

Following is an outline of Sutton Smith’s play model which, as noted, attempts to integrate the ideas of play as both a social and psychological phenomenon.

4.2 Play as Performance Theory

There are three key points made in the play as performance model: that play is fundamentally social; that play is theatrical/performative and has a dramatic narrative structure; that play involves individual cognitive, affective and social
dimensions and consequences or effects. Sutton Smith suggests that the social nature of play has its antecedents in mother-infant social exchanges. He frames play's theatrical nature through introducing the idea of play as a 'quadralogue'. This term draws on the notion of 'dialogue', as a verbal interaction between a speaker and the one being spoken with, or between persons who are in turn speaker and then listener/respondent. 'Quadralogue' suggest that within play there are always four roles interacting: actor, counter-actor, audience and director. A solitary player may act as both director and actor on his own stage and a mother may perform as player, director and audience for her baby who is the counter player (Sutton Smith, 1979: 300-302). The individual-psychological aspects of play that he notes are intertwined with play's narrative structure and its relation to cognition, conation and affect. Finally, there are the consequences of play and these Sutton Smith represented as both individual (psychological) and social. I will now sequentially describe these elements of Sutton Smith's play as performance schema.

4.2.1 Play Antecedents: The Mother-Infant Paradigm

Sutton Smith draws on psychological and anthropological evidence to show that the most important prerequisite for play is that it is modeled by other persons. He gives special (but not exclusive) weight to the mother-infant relationship (or nurturer-infant in cultural settings where older members who are not the mother are the ones who primary performers of play antecedent exchanges) as one which provides a precondition for play among complex animals. Play depends upon the protection and stimulation of the young by nurturing older members of the species who also give their young initiatory play modeling\(^\text{11}\). Sutton Smith suggests that early pre-play exchanges between older nurturing members and their young constitute the prototypical antecedent play situation (Sutton Smith, 1979: 300). For ease of language however, I will refer to this play antecedent, as Sutton Smith does, as the mother-infant communicational frame. He suggests that this frame will consist of some variants of the following:

\(^{11}\) Bambi Schieffelin on Kaluli, says that from about a week onwards, the mother holds her child facing outwards and more or less orchestrates his/her interactions with others, so that while a communicational frame is established, it has more to do with the baby-other people via the mother's socializing it in this way. SCHIEFFELIN, B. B. 1990. *The Give and Take of Everyday Life: Language Socialization of Kaluli Children*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
Proxemic bubble  closeness of faces
Play face  raised eyebrows, open mouth, wide open eyes, mock surprise
Play gaze  infatuated gazing while talking
Play vocalization  higher pitch, elongated vowels, slower speech
Face presentations  zooming in and out
Play time  usually after meals and before infant’s sleep
Play place  on her knee, in her vicinity, in a crib etc

(Sutton Smith, 1979: 300)

Within this communicational context, the mother and baby engage in a series of dramatic exchanges of contrasting actions. As the child grows older these episodes may be joined together in a cumulative way, rising to an emotional climax after which there is a release of euphoric energy. Sutton Smith calls this the aboriginal paradigm for all ludic action, suggesting that all play is a metaphorical statement of this literal state of affairs (Sutton Smith, 1979: 300). He further suggests that ludic action, wherever it is, always involves the establishment of a) the secure communicational frame b) the manipulation of excitement arousal through contrastive action within that frame and c) one or more of the following fundamental role behaviors which provide the template for all play behaviors in later years:

Exchange Routines: the mother imitates the baby, which causes the baby first to examine the mother carefully, then to intentionally repeat its own earlier sound. After a time mother and infant become engaged in a turn taking “round” within which each does the same thing, usually with increasing enjoyment, smiling and laughter.

Central Person Routines: The mother manipulates either the situation or the child to provide increasing excitement, as when she plays hand games, tickling games or
peeping games with the infant. By one year of age, the same infants can themselves become the performers rather than the responsive counter-actors.

**Unison Routines:** If much of society rests on turn taking and on performing for each other, even more rests on our ability to act in concert with each other. The ways in which the mother burbles or sings along with her infant, dances or walks along with her infant, where they both share the same sounds and the same bodily movements, the same rhythms, are innumerable. They are the bases of social order and may well be more fundamental than the other kinds of routines described here.

**Contest Routines:** the baby holds and pulls the mother’s hair and the mother escapes; or the baby twists the mother’s nose or bites her finger and she escapes. These have the character of games because there are tacit sides, rules and outcomes which decide who is the winner. However because the players are not equal before the rules and the whole is staged by the benevolent parent for the entertainment or excitement of the child, it is better to call them contest routines/precursors (Sutton Smith, 1979: 301-302).

### 4.2.2 Play Transitions

In contradistinction to the varied concepts of play-transitions posited by Vygotsky and Winnicott, Sutton Smith’s notion of play transitions refers to play framing. To frame an act and context as play involves: frame negotiations with others; a social disposition acquired from the above described prior mother-infant playful encounters; a low state of arousal (i.e., neither under nor over stimulated); and an appropriately complex play setting (existence of objects or persons with which/with whom one can frame a play event) (Sutton Smith, 1979: 306).

Sutton Smith suggests that infant solitary play oscillates between exploration (of a context, person or object) and play framing (in relation to the context, person or object). Play framing is best represented by Bateson’s theories of meta-communication exemplified in his “this nip is not a bite” illustration where a meta-message communicates that an action is ‘only play’. Along with practising play framing, transitions to play also involve play-frame negotiations with others, children and adults (nurturers). Within this world of communication and power management infants and children learn and begin to practice signals about
pretending-not pretending, play-not play. Children can only get play going if they can negotiate with others about the play frames that they wish to establish and the players' roles. Play requires start- and end-markers and cues. In brief, play transitions refer to the social and individual actions that get play performances going (Sutton Smith, 1979: 305).

'Play transitions' doesn't only refer to activities of infants. Players of all ages must establish markers that cue onlookers or co-performers to the framing of an upcoming situation as 'play'. This may be as subtle as a change in the tone of voice to indicate that one is now joking during an otherwise non-playful conversation. Or it may be as pronounced as protracted negotiations with others to decide upon a game or the narrative of a make believe drama and the arrangement of roles, turn-taking, props, play site set-up, start and end cues etc. Having thus 'transitioned' into play they have to get on with the story, the play text, where narrative, plot and dramatic action or game rules enter. This is the realm of the play structure.

4.2.3 Play Structure

Once a context has been framed as play, performers have to get on with the actual play narrative. Play structure is primarily concerned with the enactments of play texts -- the dramatic narrative and enactment of game rules within the play frame. Play as performance schema suggests that all play-texts/dramas within play induce the modulation of arousal (through excitement and uncertainty, followed by climax or denouement) -- that was first enacted in the earliest playful social exchanges between mother/nurturer and baby (Sutton Smith, 1979: 307, 1982). In the earliest mother-infant performances modulation of excitement/uncertainty was achieved through exchanges of sounds, gestures and facial expressions (smiles, surprise etc). In later play, modulation and crescendos of excitement and uncertainty are achieved through enacting ever more complex game rules and dramatic plots and narratives (Sutton Smith, 1979: 307).

Along with this central affective dimension, the play structure involves cognitive acts of creating either templates of existing forms of social practice or transformed, innovative social practices. Sutton Smith suggests that the play structure involves affective, conative and cognitive aspects that operate within and between individual performers. Thus the play structure is both an individual (embodied and
psychological) and a social phenomenon. Following is a brief summary of the various aspects of play structure, social and psychological (Sutton Smith, 1979: 308).

4.2.3.1 Social Aspect

The social aspect of play's structure refers to the play routines between persons described in relation to the mother-infant paradigm: exchange, central person, unison and contest routines (see p141-142). As children mature the nature of these playful routines with others becomes more complex, with intricate rules, contexts and nuances.

The other social aspect of play's structure is its theatricality. Even individual play falls within the category of dramatic social 'performance'. One can find an illustration of the performative quality of play in Garvey's studies which show that part of play's enjoyment is its distinct register or stylized speech, such as: children speaking 'motherese' when pretending to be a mother; preparing the audience (real or imagined) for forthcoming climactic events with lower volume confidential cues; and intermittent in-role and out-of-role enactments (Sutton Smith, 1997: 193-194). The theatricality of play is also inherent in the interplay of the quadrilogue roles: director, actor, counter-actor and audience/spectator.

4.2.3.2 Affective Aspect

Play stimulates feelings in performers and audiences and feelings in turn enliven play.

A strong case could be made that peers come together for these kinds of arousal. To be where the action is, is the major reason for peer interactions in the first place. The communication that is needed to keep excitement alive, the structures that are necessary to make it live are subsidiary to these climactic ends.... From this point of view socialization is not the end of play, but pleasure is (Sutton Smith, 1982: 74).

As a play theorist, Sutton Smith did not enter into anthropology of emotions debates regarding the extent to which the emotional dimensions of play are either individual bio-psychological phenomena, or culturally constructed, responses to social emplacement of the kind articulated by Lyons, Leavitt and Lutz (Leavitt, 1996, Lutz, 1986, Lyon, 1995). Rather he exclusively presented the affective aspect
of play-structure (as he did the cognitive and conative aspects) as asocial, acultural individual psychological phenomena. He highlighted work that described how affect within play is linked with: the intra-psychic modulation of arousal through experiences of uncertainty and excitement and pleasure; intrinsic motivation, flow states, optimal experience or deep absorption in an activity (Csikszentmihayli, 1970); the experience of positive affect including 'fun' (Sutton Smith, 1997, Lieberman, 1977) (and Sutton Smith's own proposition of bi-phasic affect in which the affective structure of play involves a) a phase of increasing uncertainty and excitement (characterized by the involvement and vivification described in Csikszentmihalyi's conceptions of flow) and then b) after the climax is reached, one of general tension release and euphoria being the downward slope after the peak (1982, Sutton Smith, 1979).

4.2.3.3 Cognitive and Conative Aspects

Play is widely accepted as a primary site of cognitive learning or cognitive development, particularly due to the extensive work of Piaget. Piaget proposed that play functions as an important part of how children develop emotionally, cognitively, socially and morally through a series of stages. He argued that in early immature play children accommodate objectivity into their subjective interior world (i.e., seeing the world as operating in fanciful ways according to the child's cognitively immature subjective viewpoint) and as a child passes through the various play stages s/he ultimately arrives at the cognitively mature stage of assimilation of objective reality and matches his/her subjective viewpoint with that objective reality (Piaget, 1951). Thus for Piaget, play is primarily said to facilitate cognitive development from immature accommodation of objectivity to mature assimilation.

By contrast Sutton Smith suggests that play is primarily a reframing of activity. To play with something is to open it up for consideration and for choice (Sutton Smith, 1979, 1982). Play opens up thought, constitutes new thought or new combinations of thought, which may at first be rudimentary, but are alternatives to prior involvements. The new frame for a child may be an old frame for a culture (i.e., a playful enactment of a socially conventional gender role) but it is always a venture into new rule systems and subject matters that have not been a part of the child's accomplishments beforehand (Sutton Smith, 1982, 1979).
Following Bateson, Sutton Smith argues that cognitively, players carry out a logical act of negation, which temporarily suspends players' usual way of framing classes and relations. He views this act of negation as a reversal of the usual contingencies of power and sees in it the embryonic form of what will later become the rites of reversal described in anthropology, as for instance in Turner's ideas on social power reversal in liminal states (Sutton Smith, 1979: 307-308). In games, he suggests, players bring incompatibles outside of play into new forms of synthesis. Winning and losing, which sometimes have unmanageable effects outside of play, become the operating principles for a series of sought after cooperative engagements in games. In brief, Sutton Smith suggests that the cognitive aspect of play structure involves suspension of ordinary framing as a negation, reversal and the creation of new syntheses.

Sutton Smith reminds us that children in their peer play select from their own experience, not just from instrumental behaviors modeled by more mature peers and kin. With increasing conative/volitional competence child players can select and manipulate instrumental behaviors they have previously encountered/experienced in new ways, including through the exaggeration or caricature of instrumental behaviors (Sutton Smith, 1979: 318-319). Bateson's notion was that the player plays in order to create novel frames and therefore to create novel thought for himself. Thus play represents an autonomous, intrinsically motivated performance.

In summary, Sutton Smith presents play-structure as the involvement with the dramatic text within the play frame. Socially, play structure is a 'performance' involving actor, counter actor, director and audience that influences and reconfigures roles of participants through exchange, unison, central person and contest routines. Play's dramatic text is stimulated by and generates affect as a modulation of arousal through mounting excitement and uncertainty and ultimate climax and denouement. Cognitively and conatively, play-structure suggests autonomous experimentation and novelty of framing and subsequent thought.

4.2.4 Consequences of Play

Sutton Smith points out that most of the current socialization theories of play have omitted the fact that a great deal of children's play is reversive; it is nonsense,
hilarious or a nuisance to adults. He suggests that the high proportion of reversive play probably indicates the extent to which the consequence of play is a conventional training into integrative behaviors or non-conventional training into variable, innovative behaviors (Sutton Smith, 1979: 316). Sutton Smith argues that the chief consequence of play is frame flexibility, or the envisioning of possibility, and calls this consequence adaptive potentiation. It makes many alternatives possible, although none are necessary (Sutton Smith, 1997).

There are implications for the above analysis on an individual level and on the social level. If an individual is a rampant frame maker, this work tells you he is going to be more flexible, more autonomous and more optimistic. Although play only potentiates all of these things in the individual, whether they become adaptive depends on many other elements in the larger culture. In sum, the major cognitive consequence of play at the individual level is an increase in cognitive alternatives available to the player, as well as the flexible management of these (Sutton Smith, 1979:315-317). Sutton Smith also iterates that as an act of reversal, play is also an exercise of autonomy (Sutton Smith, 1982).

In terms of the affective consequences of play performances, Sutton Smith suggests that a peer group strives to be a kind of club or community, pursuing whatever excitements are available.

Approaching peer interactions only in terms of socialization mistakes an occasional consequence (sometimes important, sometimes trivial) for the central meaning of the activity. Peer interaction is not mere preparation for life. It is life itself. Play with peers allows for a buffered orientation to experience within which it can be restructured to afford more flexible control and excitement with others. This is what peer interaction seeks to be about and when successful makes its members enjoy their lives on this planet (Sutton Smith, 1982: 75).

Sutton Smith here emphasizes the lived experiences of enjoyment with others as an important affective consequence of play. Such enjoyment begins with the earliest nurturer-baby interactions and gradually proceeds to peer play enjoyment.

Sutton Smith speaks of unison routines as perhaps the most important play routine, which also expresses this sense of shared lived experiences of the moment. Shared lived experience of the moment through unison routines are a
social as well as affective consequence of play. Sutton Smith points out another significant social consequence of play by reiterating what social play does. Play suspends ordinary routine behavior and makes social frames flexible. Religious life, ceremonials and rituals share with play the creation of frames which are not grounded in the usual modes of natural and social life and the use of meta-messages to convey the message that all is not what it seems (Sutton Smith, 1979: 317). Handelman (1977) cited in Sutton Smith (1979: 317) argues that in ritual we make belief, while in play we make believe. In both cases we depart from the reality we ordinarily follow, but in once case we do not take seriously our departure and in the other we take it even more seriously than the so-called ordinary reality.

It may not be that most of children's play is much different from ritual in its intrinsic function, except that they are creating frames which will enable them to assimilate the ordinary frames, while the ritual adult is creating frames which transcend and give cosmological grounding to the ordinary frames (1979: 317)

Play includes playfulness or nonsense, which breaks frames in an unusual way or with unpredictable rapidity. It also includes childlike repetition of adult conventional frames but with the children themselves in charge, so there is joy in autonomy and role reversal while the content is a facsimile of ordinary life. There are also frames of play which do not seek to imitate everyday frames but to reveal other aspects of feelings and relationships that the ordinary frames must deny. These are what Geertz called "deep play" and psychoanalysts call compensation and Turner called anti-structure. There are many varieties of such play from obscenity to professional sports. Here new frames make belief about the whole earthly reality which experience encompasses, even though much of it is left out of the ordinary frames. In sum, play is a form of social frame creation and that is the flexibility that it brings to its creator. Sutton Smith concludes that the social consequence of all this social creativity is a greater competence of social improvisation (Sutton Smith, 1979: 316-318).

4.3 Usefulness and Limitations of Play Performance Theory

Play as performance theory has several uses for an anthropological exploration of Mayurbhanj children’s play. Firstly, it emphasizes the sociality of play from its neonatal inception onward. This brings to the fore the ways that play is the result of
(and an effect upon) particular social relations and shared expressions and experiences. Viewing play as a kind of performed sociality guides research towards diverse, local expressions of universal play performance features. Sutton Smith’s theory highlights lived shared enjoyment of players as a central and driving feature of play. This is an often overlooked feature of play that deserves attention.

It also draws research attention to the ways that play functions (amongst other things) as a social and culturally transformative performance whose primary consequence is the preservation of flexibility and variability/adaptive potentiation. This emphasis invests the performance of play (as a form of behavior) and children who play with significance, as participants in an ever changing socio-cultural progression. These are important elements to consider in socio-cultural analysis of Mayurbhanj play and its role in children’s participation in social and cultural transformation.

Sutton Smith concludes that the main consequence of play is its potential to provide variability, flexibility and innovation. While this is a useful corrective to a prior overemphasis on play as conventional socialization, or integrative behavior into existing (calcified) social structures and cultural paradigms, my own ethnography suggest that we should not tip the balance too far in the other direction. Otherwise we err on the side of over-emphasizing the transformative quality of peer play. As the various chapters of this thesis suggest, micro and macro structures, economic processes and systems and cultural paradigms including schooling and gender conceptualizations have a profound effect on children and their play. Overemphasizing play’s transformative potential pays inadequate heed to these effects. This thesis is therefore concerned with the ways that children at play interact with each other and with their social, cultural and environmental contexts and the mutual effects of these interactions.

Another limitation of performance theory is that although Sutton Smith collates the social and psychological aspects of play into a single theoretical model. In doing so he represents the affective and cognitive aspects of play as purely intra-psychic phenomena. For the purposes of this anthropological enquiry into play however, asocial, acultural cognitive and emotional analyses are not the realm of study. Just as linguistic nurturer-infant socialization models reveal important distinctions in cross cultural settings, cross-cultural (and other comparative) play studies (Ochs
et al., 2005, Schieffelin, 1990) would debate the extent to which acultural models of children’s play and of nurturer-infant play antecedent paradigms are reliable. This is where the insights into play from enactivism provide a more integrated approach to play as a contextually situated, experiential, autonomous, yet interactive (emergent) phenomenon. I will now turn to enactivism.

4.4 Insights into Play from Enactivism

In order to understand the insights into play that enactivism offers, I will first summarize key points about enactivism as a cognitive theory. Then I explore its relation to human values and social cognition and finally, its contribution to understanding children's play. My purpose here is not to enter into a debate about enactivism as an approach to cognition and cognitive development (a subject beyond the scope and discipline of this thesis) but simply to draw on certain of its insights about play. The reasons I begin with a summary of enactivism are: a) without understanding the cognitive science context of enactivism, we may not appreciate its contribution to play theory; b) anthropological play theory and theories of child socialization have always maintained a parallel relationship with traditional cognitivist theory and so, as cognitivist theory expresses itself through new paradigms, anthropological approaches to play must keep apace with these paradigms. My interest in enactivism is that: a) it offers a useful and markedly different kind of synthesis of the social-contextual and individual-psychological dimensions to children’s play to that which Sutton Smith sought to represent; and b) the enactivist conceptualization of interaction helps elucidate the notions of play as an interaction with context that are prominent in this thesis.

4.4.1 Summarising the Enactive Approach to Cognition

Varela, Thompson and Rosch et. al (1991) provided an introduction to the enactive approach. They noted three successive stages of dominant approach to cognitive science: cognitivism, emergence/connectivism and enactivism. The guiding metaphor of cognitivism is the digital computer. Cognition is equated with computation, operations carried out on symbols that represent what they stand for. Hence human cognition was equated with mental representation. As cognitive science is a multidisciplinary domain with exchanges with the fields of artificial intelligence, neuro-science, neuro-linguistics, pedagogy, psychology, psychiatry and the social sciences/anthropology, the characterization of cognition as symbolic
representation influenced all of these fields (Varela et al, 1991: 7-8). For instance in the social sciences, Geertzian approaches of interpretation (Geertz, 1973) link to the representational approach.

One of the alternatives to the notion of cognition as computational representationalism within a discrete agent’s cognitive structure was emergence/connexivism. An emergent identity arises when a number of simple agents interact in an environment, forming more complex behaviors as a collective. Emergence traded localized symbolic processing within a discrete agent’s cognitive structure for distributed ones (that extend over a network of components or structures) resulting in global properties resilient to localized malfunctioning (Varela et al, 1991: 8). A second alternative, enactivism, questioned the basic premise that cognition is computational/representational (Varela et al, 1991: 9).

Behind the notion that cognitivism is representational are three assumptions: i) that we inhabit a world with particular properties (length, colour, sound, movement etc); ii) that we pick up these properties by internally representing them; and iii) that there is a separate subjective ‘we’ who does these things. These three assumptions imply commitment to objectivism/subjectivism about the way the world is and how we come to know the world (Varela et al, 1991: 9).

Enactivism represents an alternative to this perspective that is based on the conviction that cognition is not the symbolic representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind. Rather it is the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of a variety of actions that an entity in the world performs (Varela et al, 1991). Embodied enactment implies an experiential dimension to knowing and cognition that is different to symbol manipulation (that humans and artificial intelligence share). It does not discard the idea of cognition as representation but suggests that representation is not the sole feature of cognition and as mentioned above, that sense making is not the retrieval of invariant fact from a context but an experiential interactive process between the subject and the context. This does not necessarily imply the kind of extreme relativism that has been much criticized within the social sciences. It does however recognize that cognition and knowing is always subject to the ever-changing history of interactions of the subject and objects (Varela et al, 1991: 9).
Di Paolo, Rohde and De Jaegher (2007) cite several predecessors of enactivism including Piaget’s theory of cognitive development through sensorimotor equilibration, Poincaré’s theory of the active role of movement in spatial perception, Goldstein’s theory of the self-actualizing organism, Merleau Ponty’s embodied phenomenology, Eastern mindfulness and meditation traditions, Dewey’s pragmatism, contemporary embodied and dynamical systems cognitive science ideas, neuroscience, evolutionary biology and robotics.

They suggest that enactivism makes an important contribution to theories of social cognition, social interaction and social understanding. It contributes to understandings of value, which is seen by traditional cognitive science theories as information appraisal within an agent’s cognitive architecture. Importantly for our purposes, they also see an important contribution of enactive theory in broadening understanding of children’s play.

Di Paolo et al present five highly intertwined ideas that constitute the basic embodied enactive approach to mind/cognition:

autonomy

sense-making

emergence

embodiment

experience

Following is an outline of these intertwined ideas.

**Autonomy.** ‘Autonomy’ implies that the autonomous entity/system follows laws set up by its own activity. If a system has ‘no say’ in defining its own organization, then it is condemned to merely follow an externally given design like a laid down railway track. In order for a system to generate its own laws, it must be able to build itself at some level of its identity. An identity is generated whenever a precarious network of dynamical processes becomes operationally closed. Autonomy as operational closure is intended to describe *self generated* identities at
many possible levels -- for example, at the level of a person, a couple, a family, a community with shared goals etc (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 7-9).

Cognitive systems are autonomous in an interactive sense. Autonomy is not unconstrained – it has externally imposed limitations. Yet autonomous systems don’t merely respond to external stimuli, they actively regulate the conditions of exchange with their environments and in doing so they enact a world or cognitive domain. This view of cognitive systems as autonomous and enactive rejects traditional passive views of cognition as responses to environmental stimuli and satisfying internal demands, both of which subordinate the role of the agent to mere obedience to stimuli/demands (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 8-9).

Views of cognitive systems as autonomous also recognize the dynamical on-goingness of sensorimotor couplings of perception and action in sensorimotor loops. They also emphasize the role of the agent in constructing, organizing, maintaining and regulating those closed sensori-motor loops. In doing so the cognizer plays a role in determining the laws it will follow, the game being played (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 9).

**Sense-making.** Implied in the notion of autonomy is the realization that the autonomous agent casts a web of significance on their world. The regulation of sensori-motor coupling with the environment has an important aim or direction: the continuity of the self-generated identity (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 9).

Di Paolo et al (2007) point out that organisms do not passively receive information from their environments which they translate into internal representations. For natural cognitive systems are not in the business of accessing the world merely in order to make accurate pictures of it. They directly participate in the generation of meaning by their actions, they enact a world. Sense is not an invariant presence in the environment that must be retrieved. Finding of meaning is a formative activity and never the extraction of information as if this was already present. This concept of sense making (evaluation) is at the heart of what it is to be cognitive in the enactive view. It is the evaluation of the consequences of interactions for the conservation of an identity.

**Emergence.** The connected concepts of autonomy and sense making described above invoke some notion of emergence. Meaning is not discoverable either in
elements of the environment (social or physical) or the internal dynamics of an agent's cognition but belongs to the relational domain between the two. Emergence is used to describe the formation of a novel property or process out of the interaction of different existing processes such as between an individual autonomous agent and another or a community of others (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 10).

More than simply an aggregate of dynamical elements, the emergent process must have its own autonomous identity. Furthermore, the sustaining of this identity and the interaction between the emergent process and its context must constrain and modulate the operations of the underlying levels. A cognitive emergent process may be fleeting (within a single act) or protracted. The clearest example of emergence is life itself as the phenomenon is found at various levels in different multi-cellular organisms (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 10-11)

**Embodiment.** For enactivism, a cognitive system is embodied to the extent that its activity depends non-trivially on the body (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 11). One of the original implications of embodiment served to contrast human cognition with computational models, including artificial intelligence. Di Paolo et al (2007:12) argue that invoking ideas of embodiment is not just a matter of moving the mind from the sheltered realm of computational modules in the head into wet and messy bodily structures. Embodiment means that the body is not a puppet controlled by the brain but a whole animate system of many autonomous layers of self coordination and self organization and that mind, cognition is inherent in the active body. It explores the resilient Cartesian dualism implied in the idea that a cognizor, like an alien presence, will control their body through self imposed disciplines and contrasts this with the ways the body creates the experience of a self, not quite the same as a metabolic self by creating, supporting and transforming new identities.

**Experience.** Experience, or the felt, lived aspect of life cannot be demonstrated using our current scientific tools. Science, including social science, is by and large aimed at description and analysis of the exteriority of structures rather than the experiential, lived interiority. This does not make lived experience any less factual or relevant. For enactivism, experience is central. It is intertwined with being alive and enacting a world of significance which goes beyond being data to be explained. Di Paolo et al suggest that experience serves the role of clarifying our
commitments. Life is a process of interiority. Metabolism itself has all the credentials of a concern-full being. It is precarious, it separates itself from non-being, it struggles to preserve its identity and it relates to the world in value laden terms (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 13). One can see that this embodied view of experience as a process of clarifying our commitments is intertwined with sense-making, which demonstrates the intertwined nature of these elements.

Having briefly described the five intertwined ideas involved in the enactivist approach to cognition, I will explore the implications of the enactivist approaches for human values and social cognition.

**Human Values**

Cognitive science has not dwelt much on value, which has meant that evolutionary-history explanations have tended to dominate. This translates as value being viewed as built in by the evolutionary survival strategies adopted by our ancestors as they encountered situations or the urge to spread genes as widely as possible (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 15). Enactivism juxtaposes this view that values come in genetic packages with the view that values are the consequence of the kind of dynamical system that a living organism is. Values such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ may be viewed as judgments about the extent to which a situation, or interaction affects the viability of self-sustaining and precarious processes that generate an autonomous identity in ever changing circumstances (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 15-17).

**Social Cognition: Interaction**

Cognitive science ideas on social cognition and social understanding/ways of understanding others’ minds have been dominated by Theory of Mind views that see minds as enclosed, opaque puzzles for us to figure out. Simulation theory suggests that we figure out others’ minds by: a) radically acting out the behavior of others; or b) imagining ourselves in another’s shoes, to figure out what another is thinking. Both presuppose thorough disconnection between subjects and reliance on one’s own resources of reason or imagination to understand others (2007: 25).

By contrast, Gallagher (2007) offered an embodiment response in which he suggests that we have embodied experiential experience of others in social situations because we are coupled with others in an embodied way from infancy.
This occurs through inter-modal links between our own proprioception and visual perceptions that link our own body schema with the bodies of others. For Gallagher the link is experiential, not objective. So we are not confronted with an object to dismantle but someone we relate to at an experiential bodily level (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 26).

The enactivist view, as articulated by Di Paolo et al, suggest that Gallagher's view is limited, for while it pays attention to the interior actions of the embodied cognizor, it does not pay attention to the social interaction process itself. They suggest that embodied enactive views must pay attention to the mechanics of social interaction in self-other co-determination and as an autonomous process of sense-making (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 26-27).

Interaction is the sensori-motor coupling between an agent and another agent or aspect of its world. These interactions may be accidental or non-accidental. Coordinated (non-accidental) interactions rely on timing. Enacting the social world, enacting meaning and value happens in the precise timing of coordination. Coordination may be functional or rhythmic. An example of functional coordination is making an appointment to meet up with someone. A basic example of rhythmic coordination/timing is the interaction of two people trying to pass one another in a narrow hallway. Rhythmic coordination in interactions may partially explain why we feel differently with different people, shy in presence of some, flamboyant with others — along with other factors such as history of encounters, respective backgrounds, moods etc (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 27-28).

Di Paolo et al (2007: 27) suggest that to understand each other involves active coupling with another which modifies sense making/meaning, or adds a new level to sense making, and that we must pay attention to interactors and the interaction process itself. For the interaction process, rhythmic coordination, is an emergent autonomous process, no matter how transitory or lasting. This view of any interaction as an emergent autonomous process is at the heart of ideas of social cognition and points to a different way of conceptualizing culture than solely as shared symbolic representations.
4.4.2 Insights from the Enactive Approach to Cognition for Play Theory

Enactivism is dissatisfied with evolutionary explanations of play that view it as training motor skills for productivity. Naturally enactivism will also go beyond cognitive science explanations that view play as practicing operations on symbols that represent what they stand for. Without negating play’s representational potentialities, the embodied enactivist play model suggests that play is a special mode of embodied enactment in which the thoroughly intertwined aspects of autonomy, sense-making, emergence, embodiment and experience assume particular expressions. Play offers a particular mode of social cognition that rests on the play-interactions of players with each other and with environments. The interaction represents an emergent autonomous identity that has an effect on underlying layers and is shaped and formed by them.

*Autonomy and Play:* As mentioned, autonomy implies that an entity follows laws set up by its own activity and self-generated identity. When the child becomes the regulator of play, the activity takes off as a form of life. The child learns to generate new rules, new constraints that structure and reevaluate reality and that must be followed. The child is unhappy if she cannot bounce the ball more than the nine times she has managed so far. In allowing her body to submit to the arbitrary rule that she has invented, the norm becomes as serious as any biological norm. The player is law-giver and rule follower, question maker and respondent (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 39). Autonomy in play occurs at multiple layers from the individual to that of an interactive group of players. Autonomy in play is always constrained by contexts, yet implies that players are active to negotiate contexts according to their own identities.

*Sense-Making and Play:* Values and sense making are the consequence of the kind of enactive, dynamic system an organism is. Sense, value and meaning are linked with the aim of the continuation of the (autonomous) identity of the sense maker(s). Play is a mode of activity that allows for controlled experimentation of action and reaction without all of the same consequences that ensue in non-play and thereby provides children with a special site for sense-making. Play is a site where sense and non-sense can live comfortably side by side, which allows a novel space for creation and re-creation.
Emergence/Interaction and Play: Players are also drawn in by the elements of social interaction and the satisfactions in participatory sense-making that play affords. Enactivism suggests that play interactions involve emergence. Through play with each other, players generate an emergent autonomous enactive identity that encompasses multiple players and even the play spatiality and technologies. The interaction (emergent) process involves rhythmic coordination. The extent to which a player is or is not in synchronization with that interactive rhythm determines how they will experience and enjoy (or not) the interaction. Play interaction therefore, is an important site where children enact and develop social cognition or shared, lived experiences and shared sense-making and value creation.

Experience and Play: Di Paolo et al suggest that play cannot be understood without an experiential approach that asks why players are interested in play? One response is that players are drawn by the kinesthetic feeling in play of the contrast between “I can” and “I cannot”. The to and fro of these kinesthetic feelings as expressed in play is experientially attractive to players. Running may be fun, running after or from someone, even more so (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 38). The experience of enjoyment is a core quality of play within enactivism. Fun is the exploration of the limits imposed on bodily activity and social interaction. When the possibilities are extinguished the game becomes boring but fun also changes and revises norms that reopen play (2007: 40). Over time, play is a self-structuring process governed by the expansion and contraction of possibilities. Its freedom lies in the capability that players acquire of creating new meaningful (not arbitrary) constraints. The playful body is a new form of autonomous being, a novel mode of the cognitive self (2007: 40).

Embodiment and Play: Di Paolo et al suggest that children at play explore novel meanings of fake situations using embodied, concrete interactions. Piaget’s views on pretend play and accommodation and assimilation wherein new situations are copied according to the player’s existing sensori-motor schema are close to the enactive approach. However, while Piaget sees play as predominantly assimilation, he misses out on the significance of players’ processes of construction of new environmentally and bodily mediated meaning and value.
Creative Construction and Play: The enactivist approach to play emphasizes play's link with creative construction as against the predominant emphasis on assimilation. For instance, Di Paolo et al draw attention to four modes of human cognition:

point mode that deals with the here and now

line mode that considers the immediate past and future

construct mode that unsticks thought and meaning and re applies it to novel scenarios in other times and places

transcendent mode that can consider no time, no place -- abstract thought, metaphysics (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 36).

While humans share modes i and ii with animals, Di Paolo et al argue that an essential quality of human cognition is that it may invent new goals, invest them with value and submit passionately to them. This requires meaning-manipulation, the ability to un-stick meaning from a fixed situation and stick novel ones onto it. If one is to look for an activity that could play a part in this activity, it must: a) be embodied; b) allow for ambiguity; and c) be capable of generating novel kinds of flexible meaning/value (Di Paolo et al, 2007: 36-37). The worst candidates would be pre-specified activities that are firmly goal directed where meaning is well defined by situational constraints. The best candidates would be activities that are goal generating, where meaning is fluid and open-ended. Di Paolo et al (2007: 36) suggest that play, particularly unstructured play is a prime embodied activity that facilitates the above cognitive modes iii and iv, modes that are quintessentially human.

4.5 Correlations Between Mayurbhanj Play Ethnography and Performance/Enactive Theoretical Approaches

There are several potential applications of performance and enactive schema in interpreting my 2008 ethnographic material on Mayurbhanj rural children's play within this thesis. To demonstrate these I will first make use of the notion of play as a fundamentally social performance whose antecedent lies in nurturer-neonate exchanges. I will offer one example of this in the Mayurbhanj context. Secondly I will revisit the video drama described in chapter one to show how these theories:
a) provide a more nuanced appreciation of the ethnography; and b) support the hypothesis that children's play is an important mode of interaction with context, driven by enjoyment, that alludes to, perpetuates, is constrained by and transforms its context. These examples should suffice to hint to the reader the correlations between these theoretical approaches and a general orientation of the thesis that will be more fully developed in the following chapters.

4.5.1 Performance Theory's 'Play antecedents' in infant-nurturer exchanges: Baby Massage Example

The play as performance theory rests on the idea that the root of play lies in the earliest mother-infant exchanges. Therefore, although my research focus was on peer play among school aged children (five to fourteen year olds), I will offer one example of a particular nurturer-infant routine that I observed in early social relationships – baby massage. Baby massage is performed in Jamda village homes as a routine part of baby care. However the only time I filmed such a baby massage was during my 2008 stay in a women's hospital a couple of hundred kilometers distance from the Jamda villages. I offer that film here as it is quite representative of the same massage routines that occur in the villages. The intent of baby massage is not to 'play' with the baby per se. Rather, it is seen as part of the routines of proper, healthy nurturance, along with bathing and feeding. Nonetheless fleeting play-exchanges slip into the interactions with babies during massaging. Moreover the entire routine relates to some of the antecedent behaviors that Sutton Smith speaks of, such as proxemic bubble and rise and fall of arousal that I will briefly elucidate below.

See video footage of baby massage.

Sutton Smith suggests that unison routines may be the most important social antecedent of play -- the experience of being in concert with others. Baby massages, as this clip depicts, do involve a unison concert of carer and baby. While the nurturer is obviously the primary enactor, the baby is active in open receptivity to the massage, without which the massage would not proceed – as sometimes happens when a baby does not want to be massaged.

The carer also plays a central person role when she jocularly accosts the baby verbally and mock-slaps him, while simultaneously providing a safe and nurturing
context and stimulating him through touch. Such central person interactions, Sutton Smith suggests, are the antecedent for future games such as chasey etc where a central person initiates action and co-performers respond.

At four days old, the baby in this video seems aware of the communica
tional difference between play and non-play in his acceptance of a playful mock slap and playful jocular tease. I often noticed this mix of jocular teasing and controlled rough play combined with pleasant tactual stimulation and nurturance in Jamda villages' mother-infant interactions. As you can see, the carer did not concern herself with delicate or cautious handling and this firm handling and tone of voice modulated or de-emphasized the strong tactual stimulation. Such handling and the rather rough or disinterested jocular tone of voice coupled with the affection bestowed through deep massage may possibly reflect widespread notions amongst many rural families (SC and ST) that excessive fascination and molly-coddling and gazing at babies may attract ever-present malevolent spirits for whom babies are a vulnerable and easy target. Thus although carers constantly keep their babies close and express deep attachment and love for them, they also often treat them with superficial nonchalance or use rough jocular tones. Such nonchalance is even more emphasized if the infant displays symptoms of what are considered to be ill-fortune or inauspiciousness. In such cases many families employ rituals to "throw away" their baby and in extreme cases, in fact do give away (throw away) their baby to another to care for, in the belief that this will prevent the death of their baby. The idea of throwing away the baby is a ritualistic gesture intended to convey to spirits that it is not worth their while being interested in this baby.

Regarding the state of the baby and the environment, the baby was awake and was not hungry or disturbed. In other words he was moderately aroused. The environment for the massage was also suitably selected and the mother and auntie were in a comparatively secluded corner of the rooftop. Such factors seem to be requisites for play in later contexts: children who want to play together seek a secure and relatively undisturbed place -- magic circle of play (which in Jamda villages is often under the shade of a tree); a negotiated secure social context (with friends who have been admitted into the play circle); and the players should not be hyper-aroused due to other unfulfilled basic needs, such as hunger or thirst.
4.5.2 Enactivism and Baby Massage as Play Antecedent

The baby massage playfulness and play antecedent can also be further appreciated through the lens of embodied enactivism (i.e., in terms of the intertwined elements of autonomy, sense-making, emergence/interaction, embodiment and experience). Embodied (sensory-motor) and emotional experience is socially situated experience (Lyons 1995). Feelings are stirred in the baby and the carer by their social and inter-body experiences and actions, the form of the massage techniques, the fleeting play moments and the local meanings and values/sense-making about baby massage. This suggests that there is an interactive process that occurs here.

The process involves autonomy of both baby and carer and an emergent autonomous identity of the two in interaction. The baby either accepts and apparently enjoys the massage, or at times rejects, protests and obstructs the massage by crying, depending on the nature of the interaction-rhythm established between the carer and the infant. This regular tactual experience and the feelings stirred by it build up the identity of the baby in relation to the other/carer in an embodied way.

Now let us turn to some examples of the meeting between Mayurbhanj play ethnography and the theories of performance and enactivism in relation to school-aged children at play with peers.

4.6 Revisiting Chapter One

4.6.1 Performance Theory Correlations

Chapter one describes a make-believe drama created, enacted and filmed by a group of children in 2008. The drama offers a complex local twist on the universally popular theme of a battle between opposing forces. There are various ways that the performance theory of play adds nuance to understanding this ethnographic description.

Firstly, the theory suggests that all mature expressions of play relate back to the original paradigm of all ludic action—the mother-infant paradigm—where players engage in a series of dramatic episodes rising cumulatively to an emotional climax, after which there is a release of euphoric energy or dénouement. Such was the goddess drama story, that culminated when the goddess slayed the tyrant. The
mother-infant paradigm also speaks of unison routines (moving in concert with others) and exchange routines as important expressions of such play. Along with inevitable disputes and clashes along the way, the children worked/played as a unit, interchangeably directing, acting, arranging props and make-up, spectating, and filming as described in chapter one.

Secondly, play performance theory speaks of transitions – the oscillations between exploration of a context and then setting up play frames and moving between in and out of play-frame actions. Transitioning into their drama, the children sat for a while in a circle on a field at the base of the mountain where they talked and decided on the story line and some basics of casting roles. Throughout the performance various children moved between in and out-of-character roles and sometimes took over directing another child.

Another aspect of performance theory is play-structure, which refers both to the activity and narrative/rules of play within the play frame and to the modulations of arousal related with the enacting dramatic narratives or game rules. This involves affect and cognitive acts of creating templates of existing social practices or transformed innovative social practices. As just mentioned, the drama followed a narrative structure with attacks and struggles and finally the slaying of the aggressor by the goddess savior. All of this narrative action meant that the children passed through ups and downs of emotional tumult. I also mentioned that along with the ‘in-frame’ drama script there were ‘out-of-frame’ unscripted dramas taking place amongst the children that culminated in a fisticuff fight between two boys and an ostracism. This too was a part of the children’s performance of play and as chapter one describes, it had deep roots in children’s own conceptualizations about village sociality. Tensions, conflict and tumult were not the over-riding affective expression related to the drama. Rather voluntary desire to participate and a spirit of liveliness and creative ebullience seemed to fire up amidst the players involved. There was mimetic, dramatic action and it was magnetically attractive to all participants and onlookers.

One of the key conclusions of performance theory is that children’s play is primarily of consequence for its transformative potential. In chapter one I noted that there are certain subtle ways in which this children’s play may be viewed as transformative. For example, following Bruner, Rosaldo and others, creativity can
be seen as fundamentally transformative of existing cultural practices. Creative performances, like poetry, are not carbon copies of that which they reference; they comment upon and often reformulate the dilemmas a society faces at a particular historical moment, often through oblique references, non-identical simulations of a ‘reality’, parodies or more subtle allusions. By the nature of the actors expression, in the children’s drama the evil Avidya Tantrik was rather appealing and the actor who played the Goddess and who ought to have been all-powerful turned out to be rather timid. The enactment of the play seemed to set in motion a series of afterwaves within the families of the two boys who fought during the play. So it can be said that the drama was not inconsequential for the children involved. Moreover, the mere participation in the drama brought to its creators the enhanced competencies of social improvisation and dramatic improvisation.

However, as I concluded in chapter one, while it is misleading to overrate the idea that children were passively assimilating/being socialized into local social structures through their play, it is also misleading to overrate play’s transformative potency, thereby burdening children with over-rated expectations of social agency. For in fact children at play interact with the forms of micro and macro structures and paradigms, subtly transforming and being affected by them.

Sutton Smith reminds us -- following Williams (1961)-- that not all consequences of play are future oriented. Much of the consequence is in the shared, lived experience of the moment. Experience is an important theme in the enactivist approach to play. Let us turn now to insights from enactivism on the chapter one drama.

4.6.2 Enactivism and the Children's Drama

Autonomy: I noticed that the further away the children strayed from the village centre and the watchfulness of the adults of the village, the more unconstrained they became in some of their expressions. Since I am an adult, I am sure my presence was also something of a constraint on them. Nonetheless, for performing the Goddess drama, they took themselves (and me) to the fields near the base of the sacred mountain, outside the built-up part of the village where there were no other adults around and where they could negotiate and at times argue about how
to proceed. By and large the children as an autonomous group defined their own performance, its narrative, roles, props and video shooting processes.

**Sense-making:** Sense making is not a mere response to stimulus, or the retrieval and passive reception of invariant facts or information from the environment. It is active and relates to continuation of identity. Through their make-believe drama the children were making sense and nonsense about dilemmas that they face in their every-day lives. In this case they drew on shared perceptions and experiences related to problems of avidya tantriks and how they target children in their local area. They drew on representations of their local deity, Yogini, as a protector and affirmed their self identification with local cultural conceptual paradigms and social expressions. But their drama was not entirely serious and left some room for ambiguity. The children also rapidly made sense of the video camera as a tool and medium to combine local village theatre styles with their own notions of film making, arguably influenced by Bollywood-style film making.

**Emergence/Interaction:** The play involved coming together in a rhythmic coordination of multiple autonomous players which generated a shared interactive identity. Participation in this shared identity seemed very important to the concerned children. The mood was full of energy which attracted players to be a part of the action. The emergent identity subsumed all of the players and involved the shared meaning making and enacted story/drama creation. The players bounced ideas off one another and negotiated respective roles, activities which entailed their own dramas. Rhythmic coordination occurs in the precise timing of interactions in space. For example Gautama saw Baedya the cowherd spying on the group from a nearby hill and called out to him to come and take on a role. Baedya came over and ultimately took on the lead role of Avidya Tantrik, which provoked a whole train of events mentioned in chapter one. The result of this emergent/interactive process was a common social cognition brought into existence by collectively creating and being part of the drama.

**Embodiment:** The enactment of this play was perceptibly sensory: tactual, visual and auditory. Like so much of Mayurbhanj children’s play, the children in this drama were almost constantly in tactual contact with each other, nestling up against each other, holding hands (in and out of the drama’s scenes). The tactual dimension of the drama involved: children holding hands, children lying on the
dusty earth in the shelter of an image of the Goddess, children being beaten by branches and driven out of their village, plucking sacred Sal tree leaves for offerings to Yogini Goddess, children being attacked by the trident wielding Avidya tantrik, the Goddess attacking the tantric and knocking him flat onto the earth, placing her foot on his prone body plunging her trident (in play only) into his body. Beyond the drama, there were children making each other up, painting each others’ faces and adorning each other with leaves etc. There were children fighting each other in wrestling bouts and not-so-playful fist fights. There were children hanging one arm around another’s neck while waiting for the next action to unfold.

The auditory landscape of this children’s play involved multiple animated local dialect Odiya conversations amongst the children, narration by the actors of their spontaneous parts as the drama’s unfolded, the voice of the camera-operator-cum-drama-director boy shouting directions to everyone, children singing chants in praise of the Goddess, the persistent, humorous snorts of the little boy who played the evil Tantrik’s apprentice, the natural sounds of the landscape, birds and distant sounds of goats and silences.

The visual dimension of the drama unfolded in the light of a summer late afternoon/pre-dusk in the shadow of the sacred mountain’s granite rock. The visual landscape contrasted the soft sage-green of dry summer fields and Sal trees with the multi-colours of the children’s polyester clothes. Some of the children applied make-up and blackened and reddened the face of the evil Tantrik. The eight year old girl who played Goddess had red lipstick and white dots painted around her eye brows and a leafy Sal headdress.

The visual effects of the filming were another aspect of this play. One of the things that amazed me was the fact that the boy who filmed the drama had only used a camera on one other occasion and yet he performed in-camera edits by using the pause button and issuing directions and then re-recording, to create effects such as the miraculous appearance of the Goddess manifesting in human form out of her symbolic image of a tree.

All of these sensory impressions invoked motor responses and feelings in players and spectators. Those present shared in a lived experience of the moment that in this case could be re-experienced later on when the video was played back,
provoking new enjoyments and conversations about ways that they wanted to use the camera in future for more video dramas.

*Experience:* Play interacts with context – but with what purpose and with what potential? What is the specificity of the play mode of interaction? In line with both performance theory and enactivism I concur that lived, shared experience — in particular enjoyment — is central to play’s potency. While many moods (shyness, anger, sense of exclusion, eagerness to participate, excitement of new directions and thoughts of how to proceed) and ups and downs accompanied the enactment of the Goddess drama, the overwhelming spirit of the gathering was creative ebullience, eagerness to participate in a shared process and satisfaction in being a part of the play community who were unfolding the play venture of that particular day. Another important feature of the drama may be summed up in the word ‘spontaneity’. The children were in a ‘flow’ and freely expressed new versions of a drama that was unfolding and being reinterpreted on the spot as their feelings and interactional responses saw fit. Their use of the camera, with ‘in-camera’ edits (which any camera operator knows requires quite a developed sense of filmic craftsmanship) also demonstrates the spontaneous flow that the children were in. This day’s particular play venture was no more or less significant to them than other days’ chosen ventures, expeditions, games, contests, dramas, festival play forms and so on.

### 4.7 Summary

In this chapter I have detailed the play as performance theory and enactive theory as two theoretical frames of play that help to orient ethnographic accounts of play in Mayurbhanj. While I have just described how these theories enhance understanding of a make believe drama from chapter one, they may also be applied to the various expressions of village-level play described in other chapters: in games, in dizzy-making/ilinx play, school sports play, gender play etc. All play involves the same alternating exchanges, rising tensions, contest, central person and unison routines and so on. All may be considered in light of structures and consequences. All the chapters, as one will notice, suggest that the various manifestations of children at play involve the thoroughly intertwined elements of autonomy, sense-making, embodiment, interaction (emergence) and experience.
These operate not only at the level of individual players but in emergent social cognition.

The combination of these two theories reflects the theatricality of play and its every-day, embodied, interactive, sense-making (and ‘social-cognition’) aspect. Once objects in the environment are imbued with play meaning by actions that in turn demand from the child an adaptive interpretation, these objects become toys -- would be cars, houses, creatures etc. The child is now acting at the pinnacle of her capabilities and bringing forth an alienated meaning through her gestural schema and then submitting to the reality thus created through adaptive equilibration (the absence of which would make play unchallenging and unreal) (Di Paolo et al., 2007: 39). Performance theory and enactivist insights help us to appreciate the inter-connectedness of the social and the psychological/experiential dimensions of play. The combined theories frame play as a mode of behavior that both depends upon and absorbs children’s surrounding materiality, social structures and cultural paradigms and is directly involved with the construction of new environmentally and bodily mediated meaning.
Chapter 5  Children, Play and Gender

It was a monsoon afternoon but the sky was as dark as dusk with black clouds. Rain poured down in sheets, with a sound that overwhelmed all others. Most people of the village sat indoors in dampened rooms. Gradually the rain lessened, the sky brightened and through the lighter rain came the sound of a bamboo whistle from Manoj’s grandfather across the way from where I stayed. Walking over to listen, I saw my adopted-kin nephew Manoj (five years old) dancing all over the verandah as his stage to his grandfather’s melodies. He was wearing a pretty pastel-coloured frilly girl’s frock and his face was made up with lipstick, eyeliner and the decorative white dots above the eye brows worn by brides and female dancers. Manoj’s mother had helped dress and make up her son so that he could dance to entertain all of them through the long monsoon afternoon.

In contrast to Sutton Smith’s ideas of play as performance (last chapter) Judith Butler uses her description of performative acts to argue that gender is neither a biological fact of the body, nor an apparently seamless identity. It is the product of a repetition of acts through time, the sedimentation of a history of gender normative repeat performances that are enacted by each person as they live their lives (Butler, 1988: 520). She recognizes that to guarantee the reproduction of a given culture, kinship systems involving heterosexually based systems of marriage require the reproduction of human beings into defined gendered modes which reproduce both the culture and the kinship system itself. To this end taboos and punitive regulations guarantee the channeling of sexuality into one or another given mode of gender, suited to heterosexual marriage (1988: 524). Her main point is that one way in which this system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed is through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions (that are in fact culturally scripted performances and enforced acts). Her aim then, is to disrupt taken-for-granted hetero-normative gender assumptions. Without entering into a debate with Butler on her notions of the irrelevance of the facticity of the biological body, her thesis on the overwhelming influence of cultural scripting in gender constitution within subjects is compelling.
However gender performances in the rural villages of Mayurbhanj are not always clear-cut. While I lived in Mayurbhanj, my own cultural assumptions of gender normative behavior were repeatedly unexpectedly disrupted. Coming upon Manoj, who is frequently fond of projecting a boyish macho nature, dressed up as a little girl to dance was just another instance of regularly seeing gender inversion performances. One question posed in this chapter is 'what is the cultural and social relevance of the male to female gender inversions that are prevalent in both children’s play and in wider cultural contexts in Mayurbhanj?' This chapter also explores connections between Mayurbhanj gender role inversions and an apparent gender paradox: a combination of symbolic high regard for femininity and social exclusion of women and girls from key domains of social and economic decision making in the area.

In this chapter I point out that the frequent and unselfconscious gender inversions of boys into female roles during children's play has parallels in some adult and adolescent cultural performances and sacred performances. The cultural performances (of both children and adults) sometimes exaggerate femininity with theatrical excess. Such performances seem to be based on the premise that out of modesty women and girls will generally not participate in dramatic or dance performances (although women do participate in tribal collective dances and girls do enact playful pretend dramas with their peers). So theatrical gender-inversion performances (that at first seems to defy Butler's theory of performance constituting gender as either a discrete masculinity or femininity) do reinforce the type of heterosexual normative behavior that Butler refers to above. In other words, when boys and men playfully, or dramatically appropriate girls' and women's roles they reinforce local gender role stereotypes of both females and males through play and drama.

While theatrical/dramatic identification with femininity is generally temporary and many cross dressing performers are married men themselves, in the case of sacred performances, some men identify themselves more lastingly with allegorical divine feminine principles and goddesses. For some men this identification becomes a deep aspect of how they represent themselves. Many

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12 It is male to female gender role inversions that predominate and I never saw any female to male inversions, nor are they common in cultural performances.
sacred performers recognize their personal identification with Shakti (Feminine Cosmic Energy/Power) as something quite distinct from social gender roles. For others the boundaries are more blurred and their identification with Goddesses or a divine feminine principle involves accepting some culturally conceived attributes of femininity (adornment etc). As I will illustrate, the existence of diverse local forms of male to female gender role inversions also influences children at play and lends to their own playful representations of femininity a sense of awe, power and unpredictability.

Both theatrical/dramatic and sacred male to female gender inversions represent femininity from a largely male point of view, which influences the every day experiences and expectations of women and girls. On one hand the representations celebrate the divine power of femininity and on the other, by conceiving of females as not-quite-human, women and girls are to greater or lesser extents excluded from male-dominated social domains.

In this chapter I will describe how a small group of Jamda children conceived of and performed gender as they produced some brief video dramas and how these performances relate to the first half of the gender paradox: symbolic high regard for femininity. I then represent some portraits of the every day lives of several children associated with the video dramas. Through these representations I demonstrate some of the ways that girls and women experience the second half of the paradox: social marginalization of/disadvantage for females. After the ethnographic descriptions and illustrations I discuss some of the implications of the children's performances for childhood theory and for gender theory. To begin though, I will try to situate the gender paradox (social high regard/disregard for the feminine) in the context of current South Asian gender theory and debates.

5.1 South Asian Gender Debates

Contemporary South Asian gender scholarship is a heterogeneous arena of rich and complex debates about gender in the context of South Asian history, political economy, religion and social, environmental and cultural issues, some of which are abbreviated below.

Historical feminist scholarship explores changes in social discourses and practices surrounding gender over time. It deals with such issues as the gender ramifications
of colonialism, that in part justified its right to authority by declaring local treatments of women to be barbaric. Both Indian revivalists and reformers, drew on a belief in a glorious pre-Muslim and pre-colonial past, a golden Vedic Age of Indian womanhood. Reformists mobilized this idea to support the notion that India has its own capacity to meet the enlightened standards of the West (promoting education for girls, abolition of child marriage and sati, and so on) Chakravarty (1989) and Roy (1995).question the golden age construction of the past, on several grounds, including by pointing out that even if (as Brahminical texts suggest) the status of upper caste women was high, there was exploitation of non Aryan peoples, especially women.

Political economy gender scholarship explores and debates the impacts on women and girls of succeeding phases of post-colonial governance and economic structuring from post-colonial Nehruvian secular socialist-democratic beginnings (albeit influenced by the in-fighting of post-colonial ruling elite factions) to the State’s post 1980s turn to liberalization and structural adjustments. The gender impacts of the spread (in recent decades) of neo-right-wing Hindu politics at the mass and state levels is another hotly contested subject. Scholarship also covers work on the impact of the widespread “NGO-isation” of women’s organizations with access to international funding and the taking up of the rhetoric of women’s ‘empowerment’ issues by the State, as well as legal/constitutional questions of women’s rights (Menon, 1999: 12-18).

Scholarship on religion and feminism is similarly complex, diverse and contentious. In the 1970s much Indian feminist theory was aligned with Marxist critiques of religion. Leftist feminists tended to characterize all religions as patriarchal and discriminatory and such scholars would ignore, resist, challenge or use religion instrumentally for feminist propositions.

By the mid 1980s some feminists, who wished to overcome the western biases in much feminism and explore a distinctive Indian feminism began to draw connections with other South Asian scholarship on religion that noted the centrality of the feminine principle, goddesses, and women who were socio-spiritual luminaries. (Menon, 1999: 10-12). Madhu Kishwar, editor of the women’s journal Manushi, is an important representative of feminist scholars who have
articulated a feminism that is in interaction with Bhakti traditions and Hindu way of life.

This led to a wider reappraisal within Indian feminism about its connection with religion and faith from the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to several disparate factors. First, there was a recognition that for most Indian women, their family and religious community supersede their commitment to feminism and women's issues (Dietrich, 1994, Omvedt, 1994, Menon, 1999). Gender scholars recognized the fact that faith or spirituality is a critical force in women's lives, which meant that it couldn't be ignored but needed to be treated as a significant subject by feminist theorists. Second, the rise of the Hindu nationalist movement and its mass influence could also not be ignored by feminist/gender theorists. The Hindu right incorporates ideas and practices from the feminist movement and recruits and promotes woman leaders in its cause, while simultaneously retaining a firm commitment to patriarchal family values that are extended to the organizational structure of Hindu right movements themselves. Naturally the notion of Hindu nation has political implications for members/women of minority communities and for all women (Menon, 1999: 10-12).

South Asian feminist and gender analysis has become a critical part of social analysis in ever widening political, economic, social and cultural domains related to India's internal and global processes.

5.1.1 Gold's Gender Theory Binary

The multiplicity of approaches to understanding social issues of gender in South Asia and the rich tapestry of debates and issues cannot really be simplified. However, Ann Grodzins Gold (2000: 204) offered a model of contemporary gender scholarship consisting of two types that she readily acknowledges are simplifications. Type one includes all diverse scholarship that highlights systemic devaluation of women and consequent disempowerment of women at every level, from social and economic to cosmological and psychological. Type one analyses are frequently political economy approaches fortified by quantifiable economic and political data and references to examples of misogyny in social codes and religious texts. While type one analyses generally credit women with some voiced protest and reflexive critique, they frequently conclude that any moves women do make
are comparatively powerless against the structural circumstances (Grodzins Gold, 2000: 204).

In contrast to Gold’s model of type one literature, type two scholars take an ethnographic approach and are interested in women’s varied modes of negotiating the social structures and conceptual paradigms that they inhabit. Ethnographers including Raheja, Gold and Bagwe, who all lived with rural women as ethnographers, tend to pay tribute to the self-confidence, energetic natures, dignity and opinionated defiance of women around them. In Gold’s words, the women she came to know were not merely smart and manipulative in a ‘weapons of the weak’ fashion but were vocal and often in control of household finances, sociality and domestic rituals. Women’s exercise of power went well beyond the covert. Gold stated that in her initial twenty one month rural research period, nothing made it possible for her to see women as crushed by misogyny at the level of cosmology, social structure or daily life (Grodzins Gold, 2000: 208). While she did meet unhappy women trapped in extremely oppressive situations, that were in part a result of culturally imposed gender structures, (as she does, she points out, in New York), she could not see these women (nor such women in New York) as bound under an absolute regime of gender hierarchy impossible to penetrate or protest against (Grodzins Gold, 2000: 208). Type two authors usually base their writings on women’s daily routines, vernacular expressions and domestic religious practice. While they acknowledge women’s numerous disadvantages as revealed in statistics and myths, they find it worthwhile to listen to women’s varied interpretations of their own plights and to consider their actions and words as potent in particular situations and having potential to alter structures.

Gold lays out the two approaches side by side to see where disagreement may lie. She asserts that while few type-two South Asian scholars are so romantic as to deny the problems faced by women, some type-one authors give scant credence to type-two approaches. Their response is: How can women’s words, songs and rituals matter in the face of structural male dominance that allows disempowerment and abuse? Aren’t women just letting off steam and in the process only reinforcing their own bondage? However as Gold points out, many women too have a stake in the system, and if it is a system that deprives them economically and politically, then in what does their stake consist? South Asian
women may well, on the one hand, submit to social conditions prescribed by what Nita Kumar calls repressive male-stream discourse, while on the other they defy those discourses psychologically and manipulate them materially (2000: 206-207). This, in a nutshell, is Gold’s representation of a binary of approaches to understanding gendered-ness in South Asia: a political economy focus on women’s structural disempowerment versus an ethnographic focus on understanding women’s own motivations and strategies of negotiating gender power dynamics. Gold portrays a binary in order to stress the importance of attempting to understand the interpretations and motivations of those who are being represented.

5.2 A Paradox

Living in Jamda in 2008 and focusing on the lives of children and their play performances, I was brought face to face with some implications of children’s gendered-ness in peer-play, family and school settings. While accepting that Gold’s reduction of the inevitably complex analysis of gender into two types is oversimplistic, I could relate to both Gold’s type one and type two approaches to gender. In keeping with the work of type-one (political economy) gender theorists, I noted various gender related disadvantages. For example, when I carried out a 7 day diary and essay writing project with some rural school children, of the 58 children who participated and returned diaries and essays to me, only 8 were girls, which was largely a reflection of girls’ lower levels of enrolment and attendance in the upper years of elementary school.

In keeping with type two authors (ethnographers) I found that the lives of girls and women could not be understood by being reduced to statistics of gendered disadvantage. Real girls and real boys are part of complex webs of familial and community relationships. Each girl and boy that I came to know faces complex problems as they negotiate their way through their peer, family and community interactions and inter-personal obligations. Their own conceptualizations about gender and practices as gendered persons are similarly part of complex webs of conceptual paradigms, world-views and familial division of labor.

In the ethnographic attempt to understand Mayurbhanj children’s perspectives and motivations through the lens of their play, I was struck by what seems to be a
particularly South Asian gender paradox. In this paradox, on the one hand femininity is revered through symbolic high regard and respect, and on the other, actual women and girls experience numerous disadvantages of practical exclusion, overburdening and disadvantage in everyday life. The river Ganges exemplifies this paradox in the non-human sphere. The Ganga is worshipped as a divine goddess by millions of people each day. Kin entrust the ashes of their deceased and hope that one day their own remains will mingle with her, or at least that drops of her water will be poured into their dying mouths. She is in the minds of people who adore her, even if they live thousands of kilometers away from her. The Ganges is also possibly one of the most polluted rivers in the world. In idealization of Ganga’s divine capacity to purify, the river bears the burden of innumerable sorts of pollutions, threatening its vitality. Here is the paradox of incomparable reverence but overburdening the river beyond its capacity, endangering its healthy existence and flow.

I could not fail to notice that boys and men proffered profound regard for their female kin and for sacred symbols, icons and conceptualizations of femininity. The word ‘mother’ is saturated with profound emotional, vital, dispositional, spiritual, national and agricultural/’force of nature’ meanings. This was highlighted in chapter three on the relationship of Mayurbhanj residents and mother earth. Various male authors have testified to the profound and life-long influence of mother figures of the family (Kakar, 1996). It is common for even infant girls in Jamda to be respectfully called ‘little mother’ by elder males. The word ‘mother’ invokes sentiments of deep value for femininity by which women and girls are revered as embodiments of nurturance, tolerance, sacrifice and protection, the heart of the family.

At the same time, it is not news to mention that many rural women and girls carry proportionally higher burdens of work, while they are frequently excluded from important areas of decision-making on personal, family or community matters in spite of their overwhelming investment in those matters. In brief, the village world of children of Jamda, as I observed it, is pervaded with a strong and vibrant feminine influence and powerful conceptualizations of femininity, paradoxically coexisting with everyday exclusions of girls and women and social and economic disadvantage.
One afternoon the village messenger passed along the streets of the village, calling out that a village meeting would be held in two hours time at the usual meeting place under the shade of a village ficus tree. He called out the order that every household must send a representative to the meeting. "Will you go?" I asked the mother of the household where I stayed. "Of course not" she replied. "Only men will go". "But your husband is at work and won’t be able to attend" I said. "Then one of our extended family male members will let us know what the meeting issue is", she replied (from field-notes 2008).

Let’s turn now to children’s play. To begin with, how do children seem to represent conceptualizations about gender in socio-dramatic play?

5.3 Children’s Video Dramas and Symbolic Regard for Femininity

In chapter one (p. 45-46) I recounted a video drama conceived and produced by a small group of children about a Tantrik Goddess, an evil Avidya Tantrik and some children. Here, I present several more short dramas conceived, performed and filmed by some children from the same village. I then discuss some of the ways that the children’s video creations seem to reflect on the significance of gender including symbolic reverence for femininity. One of the features of their dramas is that femininity represents an ultimate power (positive or negative) or divine power. Another feature is that males not only portray themselves in macho roles as fighters and protectors, they also unselfconsciously identify themselves with femininity through gender inversions.

5.3.1 Video Dramas

5.3.1.1 Drama 1

On a summer afternoon in a post-harvest empty rice field outside the village, Gautama, the eldest boy in the group, enthusiastically took up his own playful role as camera-operator and film director. His execution was surprisingly smooth considering he’d never touched a camera before. Within minutes of learning the basics of video camera operation, he and his peers almost simultaneously conceived a plot, enacted and filmed it. The short film was a kidnapping drama. The actors were spontaneous and enthusiastic in acting their own parts and directing each other as the drama and filming rapidly unfolded.
The two-minute film, edited in camera, opens with two boys fighting each other. Gautama conceived this visual device to let the audience know that the two characters are thugs. The two boys who enact the thug roles take to their wrestling so earnestly that it is as if they almost forget that they are acting! The camera then pans to five girls who are happily playing a cat and mouse chasing game. The thugs come up and snatch one of the smallest girls and carry her off. The other girls cry out in shock and fear and then quickly gather their senses and chase the kidnappers (several girls have unscripted mishaps of tumbling over rice stubble, but they laughingly get up and continue the drama). Ultimately they overcome the thugs, rescue their sister/friend and beat and kick the thugs and then run off with their rescued sister.

5.3.1.2 Drama 2

The second film was shot a few days later on a large flat granite outcrop at the base of Yogini Buri, the sacred mountain near the village. The children had arranged some costumes for this drama and called me to ask if I would come out and bring the video camera so that they could shoot it. At first Gautama was shooting, but then he decided that he wanted to act in the film to be a part of a fight scene, so he asked me to film. When we reached there I found eleven year old Amal was already in costume, cross-dressed in a beautiful pink sari and a ladies wig/hair piece and artificial flowers and fourteen year old Prasenjit was also cross-dressed in a girls’ salwar kameez and also had a ladies wig on. The boys performed a few Bollywood inspired dances that they wanted to be filmed (see DVD chapter 5) and then performed their simple drama.

The story was that a girl called Meenakshi (pink sari-clad Amal) fell in love with a young boy. They were sitting together on a rock and sweet-talking with each other, when Meenakshi’s mother (played by Prasenjit) and relatives came and furiously yelled at ‘her’. They dragged her away from her beloved and then beat her. Meanwhile, the male relatives and guardians of Meenakshi began to beat her boyfriend to a pulp. He lay unconscious on the rock. Meenakshi protested loudly to her family and then broke away from her home and with a broken heart ran, while singing a song, to the body of her beloved still lying crumpled on the rock. There the film ended.
Drama three ultimately did not get filmed. One day Amal came to me and said that he had another drama in mind that he wanted to be filmed. I asked him to tell me about it and he enthusiastically told me the following story.

One day some children were left at home alone as their parents had to go away on some business. Some evil men came up and began chatting with the children and when they discovered that the parents were absent they kidnapped the children and left the village with them. As they were going along the road, they passed an old woman who asked the men where they were going. The men simply retorted in a rude, sarcastic way to the old woman, (which Amal nicely enacted) and were about to keep going. But this was no ordinary woman, the old lady was Manasa’ Devi (the Goddess of snakes) and now she showed her Manasa’ form as a huge, angry cobra. The kidnappers ran this way and that, to dodge the pursuing snake as she chased them. She thus saved the children who were able to return back to their village home (Amal, 2008).

The above three dramas and some references to the Yuginii drama (described in chapter one) will suffice to start our discussion on some of the ways that children play with gender.

5.3.2 Conceptualising Femininity and Masculinity

In the creation of these dramas, amongst other things, the children were playing with gender stereotypes. On the surface, it seemed to be taken for granted in their video plays that because of their gender, girls are vulnerable to either molestation, or the loss of their honor and in need of special protection by reliable male kin. In these dramas boys are, on the one hand, trustworthy protectors or guardians for girls and on the other, potential aggressors, defilers or romantic lures. In the first film, the boys enacted roles as violent aggressors against the girls, who were playing a carefree game with each other. In the second film too, boys dramatically represented male aggressive prowess, but this time in retaliation, as the upholders of the chastity of a girl and the related honor of her family.

However, the children’s expressions of gender stereotypes were not as straightforward as female-vulnerability versus male-aggression/protection. In the first drama, where a girl was kidnapped, her girlfriends reacted by taking a powerfully active role to rescue and retaliate. In other words, while girls were
initially portrayed as vulnerable to abduction by aggressive males and requiring protection, they did not portray themselves as helpless and the girl actors reveled in their counter attack. There are other play performances where girls play with and distort any too-rigid notions of feminine vulnerability. For instance in the tag game Bahu Chor (bride thief/abduction), which is particularly popular amongst girls, the players on the bride’s team (whose aim is to protect the ‘vulnerable bride’ from being caught by the abductors’ team in her passage from her in-laws to her natal home and back) often appeared to experience great excitement and fun in foiling would be abductors and instead chasing after them and catching them, getting them out. Girls demonstrated in the Yogini Goddess video drama and with extra zest in the kidnapping drama, that while femininity is soft and vulnerable on the one hand, when the need arises, femininity represents the force to be reckoned with.

There are several interesting features about how the children represented male characters and masculinity. While they made a strong point to display the aggressive prowess of males in their dramatic plays, they also readily allowed for conclusions where female characters subordinate an ill-willed masculinity. This occurred in both the kidnapping drama, where girls chased and challenged the kidnappers and successfully rescued the little girl and in the Goddess drama (chpt 1), where Goddess Yogini manifests her triumphant, destructive and protective force against a malicious male character. Another important feature of boys’ dramatic engagement is that along with their readiness to portray masculine aggression, the boys actively and enthusiastically took on feminine roles in their dramas.

Beyond these three video dramas, both performances of masculine aggression (play-fighting) and gender inversions are popular in other play contexts for the boys. I often saw boys playing “Mar-pit” (boxing and wrestling) in and around the village and in essays on their leisure activities quite a few boys mentioned their love of Mar-pit. Other playful expressions of masculine aggression occur during some of the competitive sports that are predominantly played by boys such as chakri (hockey) and football. Hunting is a strictly male only occupation in rural tribal areas such as Jamda, that is a central part of masculine identity and boys
begin practicing these skills with small sized bows and arrows, nets and catapults. It should be noted that it is taboo for girls to touch a bow or arrow.

On the other hand, gender inversion and cross-dressing are not uncommon play activities for boys. Quite a few boys from this village meet up in an abandoned and derelict club-house to choreograph and perform filmy dances to songs that they have memorized and sing. In these dances and also in dramas that the boys create and practice, gender role inversion and cross-dressing are not unusual.

5.4 The Performative Significance of Gender Inversion

The boys expressed comfortable enjoyment and serious fun in their cross-dressing and dramatic gender inversions during the video plays. The only laughably embarrassing hitch occurred when Prasenjit’s wig fell off. Otherwise, the cross dressing/gender inverted roles were entertaining but not at all unusual or embarrassing to those present. The naturalness of children’s gender inversions reflects some common adult and adolescent social performances that occur in various contexts in Jamda society both within Jamda’s scheduled caste Hindu and scheduled tribe communities including: humorous role inversions by Santalı and Ho adolescents and young men during major festivities and carnivals; ‘professional’/theatrical role inversions for male performers of dance, music and theatre; and devotional/sacred identification with Shakti, the Cosmic Energy or force, symbolically represented as femininity or as one or another Goddess, by some male as well as female spiritual practitioners of Tantra and Sarna (Ho/Santhali sacred performances).

I arrived in Jamda during the Makar Sankrant festival and was surprised when, on my first day I came upon large bands of Santali men and adolescents many of whom were dressed up in brightly coloured women’s clothing and ornaments, dancing through their neighboring villages’ streets. Each of the villages that they visited paid them for their entertainment with gifts of rice. On the full moon a few weeks later, the gifted rice was brewed into sacred rice-beer (Handiya) and all the members of the village celebrated with collective dancing and consumption of the sacred Handiya from the gifted rice. I soon became familiar with the practice where some Santali and Ho men dress as women during most weddings and festivals (see video insert, tribal dance at a village sports carnival) in a mood of
playfulness and sometimes quite sober, enjoyment of playing with femininity. I never obtained an explanation of the significance of this type of performance beyond, "It's for fun".

Men's gender role inversion also occurs in the context of participation in traditional arts including dance, drama and music. For instance, Chau dance drama, a martial dance form, is the quintessential cultural performance of Mayurbhanj that was historically performed in and patronized by royal courts of Mayurbhanj, Purulia and Singhbhum districts and by village chiefs. Many of Chau's dramatic stories are taken from the epic tale, the Mahabharata, or from stories about Shiva. Traditionally, male-only Chau dancers perform the roles of both genders and costume themselves accordingly (Reck, 1972). So in the numerous Jamda villages where there are Chau dance-drama troupes, including the village where I stayed, performers (both young boys and older men) are quite accustomed to perform both strong masculinist roles and feminine roles in this context. Village theatre (non-Chau) is also a vital part of life in Jamda. Local drama troupes that exist in many villages and perform during festivals are generally male only and so performers often play both gender roles. Palla singers, who perform at weddings and other social functions, also usually comprise male-only groups, with some members who take on female vocal parts in song cycles.

In sacred or devotional-practice contexts too, some men and boys identify themselves with the divine feminine principle. In chapter three (p. 126), I mentioned how during the Baha festival, some Santhali men became mediums for local or nation-wide Santali goddesses and were worshiped by the village priest as such. In the village where I stayed, the uncle of Manoj becomes the medium for the Goddess Yogini in the annual Yogini Buri festival. During this time he represents the living form of Yogini and is an oracle for pilgrims.

Kirtan (devotional chanting/dance) is another important performance where men may choose to identify themselves with the feminine principle. Kirtan is most often addressed to Krishna and accompanied at times with dance. Kirtan is popular in various Mayurbhanj villages in both scheduled tribal and caste communities possibly because Shri Caetanya Mahaprabhu, the influential fifteenth century reviver of kirtan, resided in Odisha. In one of Jamda's largest Santal dominated villages, Gurucharan, my Santal interpreter pointed out that the Olek
Dharma, a Radha-Krishna devotional cult who hold periodic all night kiirtans, is the most popular Dharma (religious movement) amongst the Santalis there. I attended part of a three day and night continuous kiirtan in Jamda (in this case organized by caste Hindus), where I noticed at least one elderly man dressed in a sari, an outward symbol of his identification with Radha, Lord Krishna’s paramount beloved (see video insert of Radha-Krishna kiirtan in Jamda). Adoration of Krishna through self-identification with Radha is held as the height of devotional expression for any kiirtan bhakta (devotee), male or female. In singing kiirtan the aim is to realize the union of two aspects of the Macrocosmic entity. Krishna and Radha are sometimes represented iconically as one person whose left side of the body is female and right side is male. In summary, some of the boys who comfortably cross dressed and played gender inverted roles in their video dramas (and other every-day playful dramas and dances) did so within a cultural environment where there are multiple and frequent meaningful expressions of male to female gender inversion.

5.4.1 Cosmological Representations of Gender

In two of the children’s dramas, (the chapter one Yogini drama, px and the unfilmed drama of Manasi, px) the children featured divine saviors who were, in both cases, feminine. In the tantrism that pervades Mayurbhanj, the Supreme Entity is an inalienable combination of Shiva, Cosmic Consciousness (symbolically represented as masculine) and Shakti, Cosmic Energy (symbolically feminine). Shiva and Shakti (also known as Prakrti) are thus, two aspects of a singular entity, like a piece of paper having two inalienable sides, or milk and its whiteness. This composite of Shiva and Shakti is Brahma (Cosmic Consciousness), termed Nirguna Brahma (Transcendental or Unmanifest Consciousness) when Shakti is dormant and Shiva is dominant and Saguna Brahma (Manifest Conscious, –the expressed Creation or the Macrocosm) when Shakti’s creative principle is active. The following photo was orchestrated and taken by some of the children who participated in the photo-voice project. The iconic pose that the children enacted represents Shiva dancing on the dormant or subdued body of Shakti.
There are three main discourses that link allegorically gendered cosmological conceptualizations of Shiva and Shakti/Prakrti with human gender discourses. First, all women and girls are conceived of as Shakti and all men and boys are conceived of as Shiva. Theoretically this allegory could, and for some people does, represent an ideal coordinated cooperation between two dissimilar but complementary sexes: Shiva, an ideal masculinity and Shakti, ideal femininity, akin to the fundamental positivity and fundamental negativity of electricity. However this conceptualization is sometimes translated into discourses and practices that suggest that women represent an irrational natural force/blind force that must be brought under the control of a male partner or guardian, who represents rationality/consciousness. Such discourses readily turn into a justification for domination of females by males everywhere from the familial level to the level of community and state organization. Here, females' subordinated rather than coordinated cooperation with male counterparts tends to become the norm.

The second gender discourse recognizes all entities, male, female, asexual and inanimate entities as being both composed of Shiva (consciousness) and motivated/activated by Shakti (energy). This is an, 'as above, so below' conception
that the Macrocosm (Brahma) is the composite of Shiva and Shakti and that microcosms (i.e., unit beings, including human beings) are Macrocosm in miniature. Such discourses acknowledge socially significant bio-psychological differences between males and females but do not consider the differences as being at the core level of characterizing human males as Shiva and human females as Shakti and rather recognise that philosophically attributing maleness to Shiva and femaleness to Shakti in philosophical discourse is purely allegorical. Moreover, there is recognition that both Shiva and Shakti, consciousness and energetic operative principle, are as inseparable as water and its wetness or a sheet of paper or the two sides of a sheet of paper.

A third discourse conceives of all persons (male or female) and non humans as predominantly Shakti dominated, simply because they are creations, and under the dominance, of Shakti’s creative influence. In this discourse the sacred path for each (Shakti dominated) person is towards union with transcendental Shiva, who is covert within them, or in another sense, in whom each person dwells. A popular tale about the 15th century saint Mirabai exemplifies this approach. The mystic-poet-saint Mirabai was devoted to Krishna and adored Him ideationally as her husband. She made a pilgrimage to Vrindavan (Krishna’s childhood area) and while there she wanted to meet Rupa Goswami, an eminent Vaisnavite guru/devotee of Krishna. Receiving the message that Mirabai wished to meet him, he sent a reply through one of his male assistants that he never meets women. Mirabai composed a poem on the spot, as a reply to Rupa Goswami, to the effect that she had been under the impression that there was only one male in Vrindavan (that is Krishna) and that all others were His Radha (feminine beloved) but that Rupa Goswami is revealing a different story.

In terms of social gender power dynamics, the implications of the second and third discourse are fairly neutral. However, as mentioned above, the first conceptual discourse (all males are Shiva, all females are Shakti/Prakrti), while not inevitably problematic in its implications for social gender disparities, has frequently been distorted into a discourse of social practices that sanction male domination of women and girls at the interpersonal and social levels.
5.4.2 The Social Significance of Cosmological Gender Representations and Symbolic Regard for Femininity

The corollary of the idea that all males are Shiva and all females are Shakti goes on to say that women, as shakti, may either be vidya shakti or avidya shakti. Vidya shakti women are considered to be devis (Goddesses) as they embody and assist movement towards Shiva-hood. Avidya shakti women are considered to be danavis (demonesses) or dains (witches) as they embody and motivate others towards materiality or animality and selfish obsessions. Both devis and danavis are symbolically powerful figures. But in both cases women appear not exactly human, as men are. Men are represented as manava, mind preponderant or rational thinking persons; and women, as volatile sentimental forces, forces of nature, either positive, devi or negative, danavi. This serves to cast women as volatile instrumentalities of either men’s spiritual progress or downfall.

These characterizations idealize women’s supra-human power and under-emphasise women’s humanity and rationality, which maximizes the differences between men and women with consequences for social organization. Tribal women in particular are frequently characterized stereotypically as dangerous dains (demonesses or witches) or danaviis in some mainstream Hindu cultural representations (films, myths, legends and everyday tales). Nevertheless, there is a particular form of awe mixed with suspicion of females that is expressed within the Santal community. Many rural Mayurbhanj Santals believe that all Santal women innately possess supernatural knowledge (whether or not they apply it). A Santal myth connected with the struggle between the sexes describes how this came to be.

Once, long ago, a group of men approached their Supreme God Marang Buru and requested Him to teach them divine knowledge so that they could control their womenfolk. He agreed to teach them at a certain place in the middle of the night. But the womenfolk, who overheard this, got their men drunk and eventually all the men fell asleep. The women then disguised themselves in men’s clothing and went to the secret place where Marang Buru taught them esoteric knowledge. The next day, the men went to Marang Buru for their secret lessons and He realized that He had been tricked by the women. The men were distressed that their womenfolk now had the divine knowledge, so Marang Buru made the men expert in the arts of witch-finding and counteracting witchcraft (Archer, 1974: 292-293).
This attitude to women was incidentally exemplified during an interview that I had with Gurucharan Hansda about Mayurbhanj cockfights. In this section of the interview Gurucharan describes how a fighting-cock owner prepares to attend a cockfight:

While setting off, just in the morning, the owner of the cock will tell some male child about his programme and tell them, “so you please stay at home at that time”. And that child will be the one to pick up the cock from the corner and give it to the man. Involving a male child by getting them to bring the cock is considered lucky. Boy children represent luck for the fighting cock owner. While setting off from home the owner will say to every woman, “Don’t look at us or it will be bad luck”. The women never look. In the village road also, they cover the cock so that no women’s eyes will look at it and give it the evil eye, because they believe that some women know witchcraft but not men. For this reason no women ever attend cockfights (Hansda, 2008).

This is a case of symbolic awe for women’s imagined innate psychic/tantric powers that legitimates social control over women’s permitted actions. Of course, it must be noted that in everyday rural Mayurbhanj personal interactions in Santal families and communities, there are immense heterogeneity in how boys, girls, men and women relate with each other and think about each other.

However, socio-culturally characterising women as potential demonesses or witches as in the cock-fighting anecdote, or even as divinities and embodiments of vidya shakti, preserves male authority, even if it attributes to women so-called supra-natural power and innate esoteric knowledge. Women who find themselves accused of witchcraft are frequently those who are already socially marginalized or those treated as antithetical to established social order and male-dominance hierarchies. Not infrequently, accusations of witchcraft against womenfolk in rural communities have been exposed as a manipulative decoy employed by people who want to gain an advantage over a widow who refuses to give up her claim to land (Gupta, 2002, Kelkar, 1991, Oraon, 2003). In a case of witchcraft accusation in a Mayurbhanj Santal village, during my stay in 2008, the accused woman had first hand personal experience of the wrong doing of a certain male and in fear that she would reveal the facts, the male’s family accused her of witchcraft as part of their own diversionary tactics. They said that a child in their family fell sick because this
lady had performed witchcraft and threatened that if their child did not recover they would justifiably kill the accused woman.

In most of the widely documented Santali sacred performances, women have few or no roles at either the household (ancestral spirit worship) or village deity level. Yet Santal women have their own expressions of worship or sacred activity that are not part of dominant and central male sacred acts. Kelkar and Nathan suggest that these expressions could also be taken by males as forms of witchcraft (1991).

5.4.3 How the Children’s Dramas Interact with Symbolic High Regard for Femininity

When the children came out to create their videos, they performed in the late afternoon shadow of Yogini Buri (mountain). The huge rock that looks like a ‘Yogini’, seemed to them to look down at them. In their Yogini drama, the children imagined that she can miraculously appear in human form if she wants to, in the service of her children. In the two cases where divine saviors entered the children’s video-dramatic plots, it was feminine deities who displayed their indomitable force and triumphantly overcame dangerous and evil persons. The children thus conceive of their local goddesses as reliable protective mothers with whom they have every day natural relationships. These relationships save them from ever-present supernatural and mundane dangers. In drama 2, boys demonstrated their own readiness to unselfconsciously take on female roles, replete with costumes. All of these factors within the dramas reflect profound regard for the idealization of femininity that pervades the cultural environment of Jamda villages and is perpetuated imaginatively by school-aged children in their own socio-dramatic creativity.

However, symbolic high regard often coexists with practical disadvantages for women and girls in every-day interactions. During play itself, I sometimes heard boys who became angry with a girl calling her a dain (witch). Such accusations were an ever-present threat that kept girls in their place and were also part of the arsenal used by parents to ensure that girls in particular are inside their home compound before dark. For, "only dains like to move around in the dark". In the next section I will explore some of the nuanced ways that symbolic high regard for
femininity (and consequently females) coexists with practical disadvantages for school aged girls in particular, and also for boys.

5.5 Case Studies of Children’s Every Day Performances

In the preceding section I looked at some ways that a group of children played with gender conceptualizations in the context of creating and performing video dramas. In this section I will introduce some of the children who were participants/associates in the video drama and in whose village I lived during 2008. The following portrayals illustrate some variances in the every-day performances and experiences of some Jamda boys and girls.

Bhavana, Gautama and Sujita

Bhavana was a 14 year old girl who had one brother, Gautama (12 years) and one sister, Sujita (10 years). They lived with their extended family: mother, father, paternal uncle and uncle’s wife and daughter (their cousin, 3 year old Ainjana), grandfather, grandmother and grandfather’s second wife (their step-grandmother). Their family was from the weaving jati (community) but for 10-20 years (with the popularization of commercial synthetic factory cloth) they have ceased their weaving profession and turned to rice cultivation, fuel-wood collection and small scale business as a livelihood. One of their family members was also a government school-teacher, an occupation which provided the family with some basic financial security. Their family was part of the extended kin network into which I was adopted, and so while all children of the village called me ‘auntie’, these children often reminded me that actually I was real auntie to them, not other children (in other words there were some kin obligations and special ties between us).

Bhavana bore many daily responsibilities including chopping firewood, cooking family meals on the wood-fire, carrying kitchen water from the hand-pump, washing laundry at the pond, sweeping the house and yard, folding away the bedding each morning. She would also trek to the hills to cut and head-load fuel-wood from time to time and during the rice season helped her mother with transplanting and weeding in their family plot.
Bhavana told me that she manages to do well at school, in tuition class and in homework in spite of all her domestic and agricultural duties because she knows how to manage her time efficiently. As a busy teenager she rarely joined in with the collective afternoon games that many of her peers played in the village. Occasionally she came along to join in a game of kabadi or hung out chatting with her neighbour and classmate, who had an even heavier burden of domestic chores to complete each day. But if she lingered on the playground, someone would send a message from her home that she needed to go and light the fire and start cooking the evening meal etc.

Bhavana’s younger brother Gautama told me that he doesn’t do any domestic, agricultural or forestry chores. In fact he said that he has never been into the forested hills where his sister would trek for head-loading wood. He said that he occasionally runs errands for the family on his bicycle. His parents encourage him to study hard (in school, tuition, homework) for they have high hopes that he will get a salaried job. He does study but also pursues his recreational passions and hobby.

Gautama was a self-taught electronics technician and basic mechanic. He loved tinkering with things, teaching himself how they operate by pulling them apart and putting them back together. Because of this hobby and his quite fine skills for repairing things, his family affectionately called him “Mistri” which means technician/mechanic, or “Malik” which means Lord or master and family and neighbours would often call on him to fix things.

In the village peer play community Gautama was a quiet leader and a games enthusiast who told me he didn’t like to go for a single day without playing games with his friends. When he arrived on the scene he would motivate everyone in some pursuit or another, or get a game going. Other children seemed happy enough to allow him to take charge of peer play proceedings. I watched one example of his leadership, during the 2008 Saraswati Puja on the day when children take the image of the goddess on a parade and then finally immerse the image in a lake, pond or river. Gautama organized music for the event by riding to a neighboring village and borrowing a sound system. He propped the player on his bicycle, along with a 250 volt inverter, a 12 volt car battery and a large megaphone speaker that he rigged to the front handle-bars. Once he had connected up
everything to blast out the music, the students of his school could joyously dance
d their way from the school, parading through the village to the pond, where they
danced some more before the final immersion.

When I began introducing the children to a digital video camera and still cameras
and said that they could learn how to use them and help me to document their
games and village lives, Gautama seemed to be the one who usually ended up with
the camera in his hand. He had a natural flair for using cameras, and was also was a
technical and electronics enthusiast. Things went smoothly under his collaborative
leadership, but I had an inner tug of war about this. I wanted to ensure that
everyone who wanted to have a go got to use the cameras and that girls had as
much opportunity as the boys. On the other hand, I interestingly noted the
dynamics that happened each time I offered the cameras to everyone to come
forward and use. Invariably, what happened was that Gautama would assume
charge of the cameras. Sometimes he’d whisper, “Auntie, don’t let these little
children use the cameras, they have no sense and will surely break them”. A few
times I made appointments just with girls to give them a go, but otherwise they
were shy about coming forward, or not very interested. Or maybe they found it
comfortable to accept Gautama’s well known skills in technical areas and
confidence in directing a video event that everyone seemed happy to participate in
under his direction. For in both still photography and video, Gautama was creative,
innovative and amiably authoritative.

Sujita is Bhavana and Gautama’s younger sister. Her family calls her Sonia or Sonia
Gandhi as a pet name because her manner is sober and authoritative. Along with
her dignified demeanor, Sujita was simultaneously a spontaneous girl who loved to
play games. She told me frankly that she is not into housework or any domestic
chores and just likes to play and study (in that order). I watched her gracefully and
easily win an all girls competition at her school’s annual sports competition. She
joined in most of the team games with the boys and girls of her village, or hung out
with girl friends or her siblings for board games etc (see chpt 3).

One day Sujita and her friend Sambodhi sat beside the well with me and recounted
their daily programmes. Sambodhi had an even heavier domestic workload than
Bhavana. Sujita said that she gets up, has a wash and then eats a light snack and
then her tutor comes to teach her and her brother and sister for about an hour.
After that she goes to the village pond and has her bath. Then comes home and eats rice and goes to school by 10 am and stays there until 4pm. Then she comes home and eats something and then goes straight out to play in the village with her friends. Then she comes in and eats dinner and sleeps.

I asked Sujita, “who makes your bed in the morning and washes your clothes”? She said “My elder sister folds the bedding because we sleep together and my mummy and sometimes daddy wash my clothes at the pond”. Although Sujita was comparatively free to play and study while I was there, late in 2008 her elder sister, Bhavana left home to live in a girl’s high school hostel. It is predictable that Sujita may start carrying out some of the domestic duties that her sister used to perform.

Lalit and Suchi

Lalit was about 12 years old in 2008. He has two sisters, Suchi (10 years) and Bina (7) and one brother, Bika’sh (8). He and his siblings live in a small lean-to hut attached to the side of a neighbor’s dwelling. When I visited their home, Lalit’s mother began weeping and told me the details about when, two years earlier, her eldest daughter (then 14 years old) died because they had no money for medicine when she fell sick with fever. Although I didn’t gather full details of the family’s economic situation, it was apparent that they were one of the poorest families in the village and had very few facilities. Their hut was so small that there wasn’t room for the six family members to sleep inside. I could not see evidence of sufficient bedding for the whole family and the children’s clothes were comparatively worn. Perhaps due to incapacity to afford soap, I noticed that the children suffered terrible summer sores all over their body.

Lalit goes to school but not to tuition classes due to family poverty. However he was a regular participant in peer games and had a particular skill in bowling, which he put to use in the game palish. He also loved the boys’ games chakri, football, cricket and mar-pit (wrestling/boxing).

Suchi carries out most of the domestic duties of the household: cooking, cleaning, laundering, carrying water, cutting wood and so on. I soon found out that she is virtually the sole caretaker of the household. As a result of her domestic workload, she rarely attends school and is still illiterate. Although she is 10 years old
whenever she does attend school, she is put with the grade one or two students, in spite of the fact that she is an extremely mature minded girl. Suchi never seemed to join in with the children's regular peer games. Occasionally she would stop by during a game and watch for a while and then continue on her way, either to the well to fetch water or to get on with one or another household task.

5.5.1 Enacting Gender Variances

The every-day roles enacted by the children profiled here reflect some of the gender variances highlighted in this chapter. While Lalit and Gautama experience differences in socio-economic status within the village both boys perform their gender roles as sons/brothers within their families in similar ways. They both eat the food prepared by their sisters or mothers and drink water hauled home by their sisters or mothers. The implications of these seemingly insignificant performances are in fact of major significance in labor-intensive rural contexts, for here begins the play of symbolic regard and practical socio-economic disadvantage for girls/women.

There is only one tube well in their village of over fifty households. So it is time consuming for the sisters of Gautama and Lalit to line up at the well to fill buckets and pitchers and then head-load the water home over some distance. Fortunately in this village the distance from most homes to the tube well is not more than a few hundred metres. In a nearby village however, the tube well water is unfit for human consumption and village women and girls walk one or two kilometers to the next village to collect their household water. In efforts to avoid angering the villagers of that village many girls leave home at 3 or 4 am to pump their water before those villagers have arisen.

Cooking meals on a wood-fire stove means keeping a ready stock of firewood, which again is an exhausting and time-consuming task generally performed by Gautama and Lalit's sisters Bhavana and Suchi and older female relatives. Cooking rice is not a straight-forward job. Every few weeks a portion of the annual store of husked rice (dhan) is boiled, then spread in the sun until dry, then women or girls gather it into a basket or sack and carry it on their heads to the mill to be de-husked. At cooking time, the de-husked rice is winnowed to remove any remaining stones or chaff and then washed several times (with hauled water from the tube
well) and set on the fire to boil. Cleaning the pots and dishes after meals is also
time consuming especially as it is the practice of women and girls to scrub their
fire-blackened pots until they shine like new, only to place them back on the fire a
little later for cooking the next meal, blackening them again.

By not participating in any of these 'menial tasks' of fundamental life sustaining
necessity, that are generally considered to be female duties, Gautama and Lalita are
comparatively freer than their sisters to attend to their school studies and to play.
Gautama had free time to pursue his hobby of electronics/mechanics, which was
also considered to be a gender appropriate activity for him. They also develop
reliance on their female kin. The girls and women in turn develop strong identities
as carers and nurturers. (I emphasise 'strong' because of the stamina required for
all of these domestic tasks). Most boys carried the sense that they were
responsible for the security/guardianship of their sisters and that in due course
this would involve bearing overall responsibility for the security of their family.
However in the practical sense of work-loads, every day duties consume more of
girls' time than boys, as these random case studies of several children illustrate.

It is well known that gender interfaces with other social markers such as the
economic status of the family and the family culture. Unlike Gautama, Lalit did not
receive out of school tuition, nor did he have a conducive home environment for
study. His family was not dominant and Lalit didn't have the clothing to boost his
self-confidence that Gautama had. In this respect, Gautama's younger sister Sujita
had more social advantage and confidence than Lalit (and his sister). One of the
things that struck me most about Sujita was her obvious effort to transform local
meanings of femininity. As the baby of the family, Sujita, at the time I was there,
was relatively unburdened by domestic chores, unlike her elder sister and some of
her village girl friends and Lalit's sister. She was actively forming her own identity
as a modern girl for whom rural, agricultural and even domestic work (cooking
and cleaning etc) are not priorities and for whom school, study and recreation are.
She was managing to build up this self-image, it has to be acknowledged, partly
because of the presence of her elder sister, who worked hard and the support of
her parents who were comparatively privileged by village standards and had
educational aspirations for all of their children. I was not present to see whether
Sujita ended up having to take on some of the chores that her elder sister
performed after Bhavana left home to enter a girls’ hostel. However Sujita was adamant that she would also soon enter a hostel and she made it clear that she intended to study hard and further her education. She is one of the few girls in the village who accesses private tuition and she was diligent with study.

However in a village of over fifty households, Sujita was rather atypical. Most girls had a higher level of demand on their time from parents who needed help in domestic and agricultural work. There were a number of girls who, like Suchi, were so occupied with domestic chores that they rarely, and some, never, attended school and then rarely joined in the village games of the school-going children of the village. While there are of course, boys who also drop out of school for agricultural or other work, proportionally the number of girls is greater. As previously mentioned this was strikingly evident when I carried out the diary and essay program in a local elementary and high school. One day I was chatting with my kin cousin when Vanii, a girl of about 12 years old, came and joined us. I asked her, “Aren’t you going to school today”? My cousin replied, “She’s never been to school”. Then she added, “That doesn’t matter. This girl is so capable at all the tasks that a village married woman must perform that whether she can read or write or not makes no difference”. She then detailed an impressively long list of local agricultural and domestic skills, including culinary skills that Vanii had. The expectations of girls are changing. Sujita typifies that change. But the village world still largely relies on the diverse kinds of tasks performed by married women that Vanii (a non-school-going girl) was already a master of. Girls are in between new state innovations in implementation of elementary schooling and the fact that much of the rural economy (at the block and household levels) depends upon the labor intensive output of women and girls.

5.6 Children, Gender Roles and Transformations

Butler speaks of gender as a performative process that has a history that exists beyond the subject who enacts those conventions. “The act that one performs is, in a sense, an act which has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (Butler, 1988: 272). Hence, says Butler, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again (1988: 272). As much as I have emphasized the ways that the children in this
chapter participated in the continuity of gender ‘scripts’, I must also emphasize their active participation in gender script transformation, as I started to, when alluding to Sujita.

As South Asian historical and political-economic gender scholarship attests, gender in South Asia (and elsewhere) never was a static/fixed cultural phenomenon, entailing unchanging social expectations. I showed continuities between children’s creative imaginative expressions in their dramas and the gender conceptualization underpinning the cultural paradigms and social worlds that they inhabit. However those paradigms and social institutions and economic roles are changing and children themselves are participants in rapid socio-economic transformation occurring through schooling, development initiatives, political processes, media and marketing. These transformations are often linked to projects whose direct aim is to actively change gender practices. These include women’s self help groups/cooperatives and quotas for women in panchayat elections.

Schooling is a primary site of socio-economic transformation, where rural children negotiate transformation through their own bodies, minds and activities. Through increased State emphasis on remote rural girls’ schooling, girls like Sujita are reconsidering their gender roles and forming new identities and models for themselves in their own minds. It was all too apparent though that the actual facilities of schools in the rural areas still lag well behind the hopes of would-be young rural female students. There are real initiatives being taken by the state and central government to improve girls’ access to schools and hostels in Mayurbhanj District. These include free uniforms only for girl students, some special monetary incentives for families to send their girls to school, providing free bicycles to girls who enroll in matriculation college and special emphasis on constructing new girls’ hostels. But the lags, loopholes and obstacles in making school attractive and possible for rural girls are still numerous. Girls such as Suchi (and Bhavana) negotiate these obstacles every day.

Through play too, children make contact with the essence of transformation and innovation. One of the things that I felt quite strongly while watching the children performing dramas (and playing in general) was the unpredictability of their quick-silver fluidity. Children were morphing from one thing into another, or one gendered person or narrative possibility into another as they went along. This was
occurring individually, collectively and chaotically to an extent that is impossible to capture on camera because there were things happening in ever changing directions: boys becoming girls, or fleetingly goddesses; boys becoming aggressive and then defeated; vulnerable girls becoming aggressive and triumphant; children leaping out of character to direct another child, or into another character just to try it out. All of these fleeting scenarios revealed possibilities of identification, shared internally and collectively just outside the normal space of village gender relations that even the littlest children are already well aware of and outside of the sacred or social practices that children were making oblique references to. Most certainly their mimetic play is not a mere replication of adult performances around them because children’s play (their home-spun dramas, their playful experimentation with a video camera etc), is not the same category of performance as any of the adult performances that are the grist for the mill of their play. The children drew on contemporary Bollywood film, local fears and dangerous and exciting possibilities and their own hoary mountain Goddess, blending and reinterpreting, renewing and transforming gender meanings. If there is a turbulent confluence of traditional conceptual gender symbolism and new gender meanings, it was here, in the chaotic unpredictability of the play of these children.

5.7 Negotiating South Asian Gender Conceptualizations Amidst Transformation

Amidst the transformation of gender conceptualizations, a question that has fomented South Asian feminist scholarly debate is whether associating womanhood with divinity may be turned to contemporary South Asian feminist advantage for women and girls on the level of social practices related to women’s cultural identity. In other words, is the gender paradox (high symbolic regard for females coexisting with social disadvantages for females) discussed in this chapter inevitable? As mentioned in the introduction, some South Asian gender scholars and eco-feminist scholars, such as Vandana Shiva (Mies and Shiva, 1993, Shiva, 1989), have carved a niche of a distinctive South Asian feminist scholarship that draws strength and inspiration for women’s identity from Shakti/Prakrti conceptualizations and from Hindu Goddesses.

Rajan (1998) considers the question, “Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist”? by which she means to ask whether the Goddess is a useful symbol of a distinctive Indian
form of feminism. In contrast to Shiva, she concludes that such a form of feminism runs the risk of a) excluding South Asian women from minority communities who do not relate to Hindu Goddesses as personifications of their own feminine identity and b) strengthens the political reach of right wing Hindu nationalists organizations that tend to feed on feminist rhetoric to build their ranks while simultaneously retaining a firm commitment to patriarchal social institutions (from the family to the organizations and to the level of State). She points out that Hindu Goddesses are ultimately accessible only through male Brahmin priests (Rajan, 1998).

However she notes that the rural village Tantrik Goddesses (as described in this chapter) are democratic in the sense that they are of and for the people without any concerns for caste, class or gender. In summary, Rajan does not find Brahminical Hindu Goddesses a useful symbol for South Asian feminists and considers that for South Asian feminist theorists, who by and large do not feel the sort of innate identification with Goddesses that is prevalent for residents in many remote rural regions, to advocate the promotion of the Goddess as a symbol of South Asian feminism is literally ‘bad faith’ (1998).

Philosopher of science, Meera Nanda (Nanda, 2003) too suggests that cultural relativist and eco-feminist alliances with Hindu conceptual paradigms strengthen the revival of a Brahminical order that she sees as primarily serving the interests of authoritarian Hindu nationalists. Her alternative for feminism is to promote a secular, science-based, liberal-democratic India that renounces prior conceptual commitments. Thus there is a scholarly debate about the pros and cons of drawing on cosmological and sacred conceptualizations of the Divine Feminine as a centrepiece of a distinctive South Asian feminism.

Of course it is one thing for theorists to debate whether reference to goddesses is useful or harmful for framing a distinctive South Asian approach to feminist theory and reinvigorating women’s contemporary social status, and another thing to discount or ignore the lived significance of symbolic high regard for women and girls linked to divinities and the paradoxical disadvantages for women and girls in some of these contexts, particularly in rural communities such as Mayurbhanj. The children’s dramatic creations narrated in this chapter demonstrated that goddesses and other symbolically potent representations of highly regarded
femininity have an important place in rural Mayurbhanj children’s imaginations. Further, these representations are part of and influence the every-day expectations of girls’ and women’s behaviors and dispositions. As Padma Anagol points out, theorizing about women and girls should involve moving women and girls to the centre of the discussion to look at what they are saying and doing in relation to dominant discourses and debates (Anagol, 2005).

The normality of male to female role inversions and the gender paradox were part of what stood out to me when I participated in and observed rural children’s peer play and non-play daily activities in the village over my months there. I have suggested that boys’ and men’s readiness to self identify with femininity is partially attributable to the conceptual paradigm in which femininity and Shakti – Cosmic Energy/the Creative Principle are considered interchangeable, and that males readily identify themselves with this Principle. As I described, there are several approaches to the Shiva-Shakti paradigm which are not translated into male domination of women in the social sphere, especially those that see Shiva and Shakti in both males and females. The notion that all human females are quintessentially Shakti (and all males are Shiva) while not automatically suggestive of a social requirement for male control of females (it may legitimate coordinated cooperation between different but complementary genders, rather than females’ subordinated cooperation) has too often been converted or manipulated into a social-organization model which paradigmatically supports men’s social and economic control of women because it characterizes women and girls as irrational forces of nature or blind, sentimental forces. Similarly the radical distinction between males and females, when women alone are symbolically represented as metaphysical may at times be employed to unnecessarily ‘other’ women from the human social sphere and be used as an explanation for their exclusion from participation in social decision-making 13.

My intention in the discussion of this chapter is to enter into a dialogue about the ‘lived’ social impact of paradigmatic characterizations of gender for both girls and boys but particularly noting ways that they govern rural girls’ options and modes of expression. All paradigmatic and symbolic characterizations of gender have

13 It also unnecessarily separates the spiritual from the mundane or social sphere and from maleness/masculinity.
social, political, economic and cultural correlates for living actors' gender identities (from Mayurbhanj village icons of the sacred feminine to global consumerist icons of commoditized-sexualized feminine). Children negotiate and enact these in their play and non-play activities. Their enactments are not only sense-making about and replications of pre-existing paradigms, they are at the interface of inevitable transformations of these social structures and paradigms.
Chapter 6  Children, Ilinx Play and the Sacred

Tuesday is the day for worship of Goddess Tarini in Odisha. One Tuesday my adopted sister took me with her to consult with Tarini Ma (via a local medium). Her young son Manoj had stopped eating and she felt this may have been caused by sorcery. We entered the thatched, mud brick building where participants gather for weekly Tarini puja and sat on the floor made of cow-dung plaster. At one end of the room was a doorway into an ante-room where a (tantrik) priest, a relative of the medium, was making offerings to colourful poster images of Lord Jaganath and Goddess Tarini bedecked with red cloth and flowers and oil lamps. Incense wafted fragrantly through the room.

Soon the medium came and sat beside him on a low wooden seat of nails. She was dressed in the red-bordered rough hand-woven cotton sari that local women often wear and her hair was loose. Holding a sword aloft in her right hand and with closed eyes, she began to briskly twist her upper body and head left and right with a rhythmic movement similar to the movement of a central agitator in a top-loader washing machine that spins first anticlockwise, then clockwise and so on. Later she kept the sword beside her and flapped her right hand in the air back and forth in synchronisation with the movement of her body as it turned from side to side. At times the congregation sat silently, at other times the room reverberated with the clanging sound of someone continually beating a metal gong-like plate and the priest ringing a bell – sounds that overwhelmed our auditory senses. All the while the medium swished until she and the audience sensed that the divinity of Goddess Tarini had ‘arrived’, entering her bodily frame. Then the visitors began to approach her for blessings or to whisper their problems and to receive her blessings and responses. My adopted sister said she believes this medium is currently the most powerful and reliable medium in the area. Eventually, she approached ‘Tarini Ma’ and whispered her problems and the medium advised her in a low voice. My sister called her son and Manoj came forward and prostrated himself in front of the medium who stroked his back and spoke a few more words to him.

At the end of the consultations, the room reverberated with the clanging and ringing again while the priest offered arati (a worship with a sacred camphor flame burning on a brass plate) to the images of the Goddess and Gods and to the
medium. Finally the ringing stopped, the puja ended and the medium left the room. One by one people wandered outside into the courtyard surrounded by the cluster of dwellings where the extended family of this medium live. People milled around chatting, waiting to receive ‘prasad’ (blessed foods that were offerings in the puja) and lingering in the shared experience of the atmosphere of the highly charged puja.

Dinesh is the medium’s ten-year-old nephew. After bathing early each Tuesday morning he gathers flowers and threads a beautiful garland for Goddess Tarini, which his aunt will wear when she enters her state of mediumship. He then prepares ‘alpana’ (auspicious designs hand-painted on the earth with rice powder paint) in front of the doorway into the puja room and the base of a sacred tulsi plant to welcome and honour the Gods/Goddesses. Relatives told me that he is one of the main devotional forces behind the puja gatherings at their home, establishing the auspicious environment for the puja and for his aunt’s mediumship through his devotional artistic touches. Another person added, "You should have seen the decorations he prepared for Maha Shiva Ratri festival this year. Nothing like it in the whole block”.

Dinesh was not the only young person interested in the weekly Tarini Puja. In fact about one third of the visitors were children, a number of whom had come without their parents. Young school aged children entered carrying baskets of offerings (flowers, coconut, fruit) for the goddess and were active participants in the puja in various ways, including asking questions from the medium and receiving blessings, advice and protection against avidya tantric attacks. While not all children were so keen (Manoj was one of those children who was cheekily disinterested and restless to go home or play outside), Dinesh’s participation in sacred performances illustrates many young people’s common devotional expressions and keenness to develop their own personal relationships with the divine in various forms. Often when I visited a home for the first time, children would take me to their puja area and show me the deities that they worship at home. Even when we would go for walks, some children would salute divinities whose images are located in the local environment as we passed.

This chapter is about a particular nexus between children, play and ‘sacred performances’. Dinesh illustrates children’s devotional interest in the sacred
domain. But his careful puja preparations and other children's attentive involvement with the process of medium-ship of Tarini Ma would not be appropriately conveyed by the terms 'play' or 'playful'.

So what is the connection between play/playfulness and sacred performances? In many traditions play and playfulness are appropriate religious expressions. In the Indian context there are connections on the conceptual level and on the level of cultural practices. The concept of 'liila' or Cosmic Play/Divine play is prevalent throughout South Asia. Vedic and Tantric texts, songs, stories and poetry in far-flung locations including Mayurbhanj are replete with the idea that the entire cosmos is an ever changing creative play in the imagination of an all encompassing and transcendent Cosmic Consciousness. The idea that deities are playful is also well represented, as for example in legendary stories of Krishna's childhood that are so prevalent in Odisha. An obvious connection between play/playfulness and sacred practices on the level of cultural practices is apparent during various annual sacred festivals. Examples are the wild play with coloured powders and coloured water during Holi, firecracker-play during Diwali, the playful and raucous parade with the Goddess Saraswati image during the Saraswati Puja immersion-ceremony and play in the fair-ground associated with the Ratha Yatra (Odisha's Jaganath Chariot festival) where participants ride on ferris wheels, roundabouts and other amusement rides. It should be noted however, that most of these playful forms are not exclusively children's playful practices. The topic of a connection between play, playfulness and sacred festivals in Mayurbhanj is vast in scope but this chapter will narrow its focus solely to a particular form of sacred performance and a related form of children's play: vertigo performances.

I am referring to a particular class of children's play and a related class of sacred performance that Caillois calls 'ilinx', derived from a Greek word for 'whirlpool'. Inlinx is the fourth and final play form in Caillois's cultural schema of human play: mimesis, make believe/pretend play (see chapter one); agon, competitive games; alea, games of chance/luck (agon and alea in Mayurbhanj are described in chapter three). Inlinx refers to the intentional pursuit of vertigo to destroy the stability of perception and inflict a voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In ilinx, players and sacred performers willingly surrender to a self-induced shock or seizure that brusquely destroys everyday reality (Caillois, 2001: 23).
Caillois links childhood dizzy-making play with ilinx or vertigo sought in sacred contexts. One may ask ‘how can a swing and other vertigo-inducing artifices and practices be a means of religious experience’? Caillois reminds us of whirling dervishes who seek ecstatic states of altered reality by whirling with ever accelerating movements to accelerating drum-beats, with resulting paroxysms of contagious and shared rotation (2001: 23). Dambarudhar’s aunt used specific ‘techniques du corps’ (following Mauss) to induce and remain in a state of ‘divine possession’. These involved an intentional shake-up of her normal motor-sensory equilibrium and normal perceptions. Children’s vertigo play has similar motivations. Think of the game where a pair of children hold onto each other by the hands or arms and then spin themselves around and around until they’re so dizzy that they either stagger in amazement as the world apparently spins around them, or fall to the ground to watch the sky spinning around. Other forms of playful ilinx come from swings, rocking, speed (sliding or racing down hill), tumultuous somersaulting and cart-wheeling (going upside down), balancing, being projected into space, movement on a mobile platform (where a person remains comparatively stationary but moves never the less), finding extraordinary heights and angles from which to observe their space and so on.

This chapter then, is concerned with the link between embodied experiences of vertigo/ilinx in Jamda children’s play and in Jamda sacred performances. It explores the diverse social significances of ilinx as a performance. What does it mean for the child and for others when a child engages in ilinx play? What does ilinx mean for performers in sacred contexts? What are the similarities and differences? In exploring these questions my main reference is the work of Gell (1980) on vertigo in Muria religious practice. Gell, following Deikman (1966), argues that the pursuit of religious vertigo in dance, swinging, possession and trance is as a mode of de-automatized sensori-motor integration and consequent achievement of altered states of consciousness (which is the state of Muria divinities). While childhood ilinx play is not his subject, Gell suggests that here too, the automatic process of equilibroceptive activity and proprioceptive activity is abstracted to ‘savour’ the specific experiences of balance and of gravity and so on. In Ilinx and swinging performances (both playful and sacred forms) there is a surrender to the loss of normal equilibrium which induces modified sensori-motor and mental states which may be invested with religious significance. So the swing,
for example, is an artefact, use of which induces altered mental states: gentle rocking induces peaceful repose and soft delight; and vigorous motions induce exhilaration, terror, ecstasy (Gell, 1980).

This thesis explores children’s play as an enactment that lies somewhere in between: a) traditional socialization play models that treat children’s play as mimicry of existing adult social structures and cultural paradigms, or instinctive ‘practice’ for future participation in those structures and paradigms; and b) a transformative model that treats children’s play as a significant site and practice of social and cultural change. My ethnographic accounts of children’s play in Mayurbhanj illustrate ways that children participate in both receptive continuity and active transformation. An underlying theme is that children at play interact with the paradigms and structures around them and these become part of the pabulum of their play. Their play and playful interactions are dynamic, live interactions that both perpetuate and change paradigms and structures. This chapter relates to this theme in the following way: children are engaging ‘techniques du corps’ to experience ilinx. These childhood experiences of ilinx are crucial for children to understand at an embodied and psychological level and later to both perpetuate and innovate adult models of religious/sacred ilinx.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. Section two outlines some expressions of children’s every-day ilinx play. Section three describes some expressions of ilinx in sacred performances. Section four discusses the structural link between the performances of section two and three, the social significance of children’s ilinx play and the relation of this chapter to the overall thesis.

6.1 Children’s Every-day Ilinx Play

What is the lonely impulse of delight behind the fact that babies love to be rocked and children love swings, roundabouts and riding ponies etc? I believe the link between input-output modulation and the basic reality sense will not turn out to be an illusory one (Gell, 1980).

In 2008 I observed Jamda children’s ilinx play in many shapes and forms. Some expressions were fleeting instants, such as when Sanjit or Amar did a spontaneous hand-stand or cart-wheel in the middle of a completely different organised team game. Other incidents were prolonged and intentional experiences such as when
Baedya picked up a smaller child, Manoj and gave him a whizzy-dizzy spin. Here are a few examples of Jamda children’s dizzying, balance-challenging, gravity defying play.

6.1.1 Apparatuses of ilinx

During the July 2008 rainy season, a heavy storm brought a tree down in a field adjacent to the house where I stayed. The next day I heard excited shouts of children as they rode the springy branches of the fallen tree as if riding a horse. I went over and found children balancing on the trunk and branches, hanging upside down and swinging from some branches and bouncing up and down on others. The fallen tree was a play magnet for the children of the village during the period it was left there. Trees are important play apparatuses in all the villages and various children told me that they have a number of popular tree-climbing games in their village games repertoire. I observed that quite a few boys were particularly agile and fearless tree climbers and could scale quite high. From the height of tree-tops children discovered novel perspectives on their world and the exquisite joy of balance.

As is common the world over, swings are popular in Mayurbhanj, particularly among young people. A number of schools have metal swing sets. However, their size is suited only for younger children up to about seven years old. In Jamda villages I rarely noticed permanent swings. Most village swings are temporarily erected during the annual swing festival, Raja Sankrant, and are specifically and spiritually associated with Raja. But children do frequently swing from branches and vines.

Another tool for balance play is the bicycle, which apart from being the dominant rural mode of transport is also a mode of balance play (see figure 1, p 15). One day I asked my twelve year old adopted nephew, Gautama about his own most memorable life experiences and he said that a memory that sticks out for him was when he was flying down hill on a bicycle and he crashed and fell off and had to be taken to the Jamda Health Centre where he had stitches. Within the village, apart from bicycles, children occasionally ride on bullocks, buffaloes or ploughs during the ploughing season.
6.1.2 Ilinx in games

Ilinx is incorporated into several competitive games, sometimes incidentally (as described above when children perform sudden handstands or spin around while waiting for game action) and sometimes by nature of the game itself. For instance, one day I was sitting on one of the large granite grave-stones in a Ho village. These massive rocks are collectively dragged down from the hills to place over the graves of deceased relatives. The particular stone I was looking at was so large that I couldn’t imagine how it could have been possible to bring it without heavy earth lifting machinery. Some villagers told me that men from twelve villages had come together to haul this particular stone. They said that the size of the stone reflects the respect and community importance of the person buried there. Engraved on one stone was a Das Pachish game board and some locals began to teach me the rules of the game and said that they like to play it here, sitting on the grave. When I was about to leave, some younger children asked whether I would like to know what game they like to play on the grave stones. They then taught me their gravestone ‘chur’ (chasey). After going through their special pre-game ritual which is the decider of who is “it” (a variant of the “rock, paper, scissors” decider), the game started and the person who was “it” began to chase everyone. Each player had to leap from gravestone to grave-stone without touching the ground in between to avoid being caught. If anyone got caught by ‘it’ then they immediately became the new chaser (‘it’). If anyone stumbled and slipped off the gravestones to touch the ground they immediately became ‘it’ and had to chase everyone until they tagged someone who became the next ‘it’. The children shrieked and leapt nimbly from stone to stone at mercurial speed constantly avoiding the chaser, or doing the chasing. The constant leaping kept the children regularly in the air, which created a mood of exhilaration amongst them.

While this game posed a challenge for players to negotiat their balance, chasey games on ground level too can become dizzying as players follow circuitous chasey paths. Pond games are another form of ilinx competitive play, tumultuous and disorienting. In summer, children tend to spend a long time in the water and have a good repertoire of water games. In these games children somersault and duck and weave in and under the water.
6.1.3 Ilinx through dance

Many if not most of the children in Mayurbhanj incorporated dance into their repertoire of peer play activities from time to time. Dance is a central part of Santal and Ho village life and every village has an ‘akara’, dancing ground. The typical village dance form is the circle dance with lines of dancers with linked arms who dance for long periods, all night during various festivals. This circle dance is another form of vertigo inducing experience. In their everyday play, children frequently incorporate various types of dance including playful renditions of chau dance, tribal dance and Bollywood dance.

6.1.4 Ilinx through social and emotional turbulence

Sometimes I observed hyperactive tumultuous turbulence in the behaviour and collective mood of children’s competitive play and dramatic play. Once I was with a group of children who were heatedly arguing and shouting at each other while in the process of negotiating about creating a drama together. It seemed no one could agree on what they were going to do and children began to break off to do their own thing. Some were re-incorporated by someone who wanted them to have roles in his version of the drama. Others formed little side groups and continued to do their own thing in parallel, which added to the chaotic and hectic visual, auditory and emotional atmosphere. As an observer, but not participant, part of me longed to go back to my room for some quiet. It’s not unusual for adults to experience an inner discomfort and, for some, moral panic at the tumultuous disorderliness and apparent anarchy of some children’s play. Sutton Smith speaks of the impulse of many adults and adult-centred social institutions to attempt to control this type of frenetic childish activity by minutely structuring children’s leisure times with organized (and often adult supervised) activities.

Later, when thinking about the above frenetically charged and chaotic atmosphere, I optimistically drew connections with play-chaos/clashes and biodynamic/homoeopathic theories of dynamization. In dynamization, a catalytic substance is added to a carrier substance (pure water or alcohol) and then the medicine is subject to succussion (shaking up) which induces a chaotic, frictional agitation of the carrier which is said to change the carrier’s structure and make it a potent carrier of the added substance. Hahnemann created his theory of
dynamization through ‘sucussion’ (shaking up to induce chaos) by observing the positive value of clash, agitation, chaos and friction, in contrast to the more widespread positive evaluation of ordered/orderly movement. He cited the necessary pressing and friction in extracting scent or essence from a botanical substance, friction that produces fire, the friction accompanying reproductive activity as evidence of this value. The physical utility of friction and clash no doubt has some social and mental parallel in the mental tumult and interactive chaos prior to creative production (writing, musical or dramatic productions, scientific theorising etc). Dinesh’s aunt (like other mediums that I observed) entered her state of medium-ship through self-imposed physical agitation of vigorous and dizzying swishing side to side motions. She also entered this state through a shake-up of her emotional and personal identity on the psychic level that displaced her normal sense of self and created a space for Goddess Tarini to ‘inhabit’ her. The children I refer to above were a frenetic, agitated, clashing group displacing their own personal roles in relation to each other in the creation of a make-believe drama in which they would each be inhabited by new make-believe roles -that were in the chaotic process of being defined.

These are just a few examples of ilinx in the village play of Jamda children through: play with apparatuses such as trees and bicycles; discrete bodily actions such as spinning, turning upside-down, swinging, balancing; ilinx in games; and ilinx in creative/dramatic social interactions. Now let us turn to cultural performances of ilinx in sacred contexts.

6.2 Ilinx in Sacred Performances

It is possible to find elements of ilinx in numerous Mayurbhanj sacred performances such as in the circular dances of Ho and Santhali communities that are part of most sacred festivals. Medium-ship of divinities is prevalent throughout Mayurbhanj villages amongst Ho, Santali and Scheduled Caste Hindu communities. The case of Dambarudhar’s aunt described above illustrates the ilinx-inducing practices that most mediums follow in one form or another. These rely on ‘techniques du corps’, often involving vigorous shaking and trembling, combined with re-ordering of ordinary thought processes and personality. This section will concentrate on just two examples of Mayurbhanj festivals that involve ilinx, both of which centre around the performance of swinging: Raja Sankranti, the joyous
swing festival, whose main performers are girls and young women and Uda Yatra, the awesome ordeal of hook swinging from great heights as a devotion to Shiva. In Uda yatra the main performers of hook swinging are men and occasionally adolescent boys.

### 6.2.1 Raja Sankranti

Raja Sankranti is the Odishan swing festival held on the first day of the month of Asar (the lunar month from mid June to mid July). The festival marks the start of the agricultural year, when the first showers of the monsoon will soon start to drench the parched soil to make it ready for productivity (rice cultivation) after the scorching heat of summer. The festival, which lasts for three days, symbolically represents the menstruation period of Mother Earth. Since it is manifestly understood in this way, during Raja people aim to give as much rest to Mother earth as possible. They suspend all agricultural activities and don’t dig or disturb the earth in any way or even walk barefoot on the earth. They also avoid grinding grains, tearing, cutting and cooking.

The heart of Raja Sankranti is the feminine performance of swinging on specially set up swings. Some Jamda residents told me that the swinging is to fan Mother Earth, to cool her from the intense heat during her menses. However when I asked my adopted sister and nieces about the reason for swinging during Raja, they said the swinging doesn’t mean anything, it is just a time for fun and merriment. While swinging back and forth, girls sing impromptu songs and rhymes, often made up on the spot. The songs may be romantic love songs, comical, esoteric, natural or on other local folk themes and they are often completely nonsensical and humorous. Most songs are forgotten as soon as they’re sung. Some become popular and can be purchased on little pamphlets around Raja Sankranti time.

Raja Sankranti is a fertility festival and so is above all a festival of unmarried girls, who are supposed to observe some of the restrictions prescribed for a menstruating woman during the three days. On the first day they rise early and bathe in a river or pond. For the next two days bathing and dressing the hair is prohibited. During Raja girls in particular (and other family members) wear their good clothes and decorations and eat pre-prepared cakes called ‘pitha’ made with ground rice flour and gur (hardened molasses). As agricultural work is suspended
during Raja Sankranti, the whole family and community participate in the celebration (not just unmarried girls) before the difficulties of the monsoon starts and everyone has months of full exertion in rice cultivation work up until harvest.

The rains came earlier than usual in Jamda in 2008 and it poured during Raja Sankranti. Children and young women could only go out and celebrate swinging during breaks in the rain. Unfortunately for me, I was absent from the village in mid June 2008 and simply heard reports about how the festival unfolded from my adopted nieces and nephews when I returned a week later. They said a few excellent swings were erected around the village where I stayed. They had gone out for swinging and singing a few times even though it had been a low key event that year due to the rain. Moreover, they explained that not all families in their area observe this festival. Although the swings had already been dismantled by the time I returned, some children who had cameras with them for the photo-voice project took a few photos (see figures 13 & 14). As the swings have a specific sacred connotation to do with Raja, they are not retained as swings of secular enjoyment when Raja is over.

Figure 13  Children’s “photo-voice” photo: Raja Sankranti, Mayurbhanj 2008 (a)
6.2.2 Uda Yatra Swing Festival

Uda Yatra is a major local festival held in mid April in Jamda and other Blocks of Mayurbhanj District (Uda mean flying; yatra means festival) celebrated by the Ho and Santal communities and the Hindu community. It is a Shiva festival similar to the better known “Gajan” or Charak festival held in Purulia District of West Bengal. One of the central performances of this festival is for key participants (‘Bhaktas’, devotees) to swing and rotate from a ten metre tall pole by hooks that have been pierced through their backs. This devotional practice had been banned by the government due to the dangers for participants. In Jamda the festival continues nevertheless, slightly transformed. Jamini Kanta Bage, Jamda Ho Priest and secretary of the Jamda Uda Yatra Committee gave me the following interview in March 2008. During the interview my research assistant/interpreter Gurucharan translated my questions into Ho and translated Jamini Bage’s responses into English.

Jamini Kanta Bage: The Jamda Uda was started by my ancestors 70-80 years ago, although it was stopped for some years. Humans and divine beings were very close and honest during those days. This place was then full of thick jungles and forest. One of my grandfathers possessed divine power. Every year he used to perform the Uda puja for the well being of our family and the whole ‘pir’ (an earlier period geo-political unit roughly akin to today’s “Block”). His priestly family used to receive some amount of money as a donation from every village to meet the expenses. Even R5 was
much more during those days. However, they stopped Uda for some years. During this period of time my family suffered greatly. Our house broke and our family members fell sick. My father used to see fierce animals like snakes and tigers in his dreams every night. He used to see these animals entering our house in his dreams. It continued for two years, which he considered as the omen of some forthcoming troubles or disaster. He consulted astrologers and Tantriks. All of them told him the same thing: that he must start Uda Puja again, because it was the wish of the gods and goddesses. He gathered the villagers and consulted them and requested them for their support as the Pir system was no more by that time. All agreed and thus the Jamda Uda was restarted 30 years back by my father.

We are two brothers. Naturally my elder brother is the successor of my father as the priest. But as he has joined the Indian Air Force he might not be able to be here at the time of the puja. So, he handed over the priesthood into my hands after my father's death. We have an Uda Puja committee which helps me to organise it. I have to continue it otherwise people would blame us as the unworthy sons of a great father. My elder brother helps me from time to time.

It is a big question that by whom this puja is being performed. As I told you, this country was covered by jungles and forests with Adivasi people like Hos and Santhalis as its oldest inhabitants. The main puja is offered by the Adivasis. The Dehuri (the Village Priest) of the Ho people offers/conducts the puja. I also call a Brahmin to purify the wooden pole of Uda because the caste and general Hindu people must think themselves to be involved otherwise some bad complex can grow up in their minds. The Dehuri is a relative of mine from this village. He is the son of my father's elder brother. One cousin from Angapada, a village 20 kilometres south of Jasipur, comes here to help the Dehuri. I just supervise both of them to offer puja as I have a lot of duties on that day. I have to see to everything as the head of the puja committee.

The Uda date is fixed according to the calendar and nowadays it is observed on the same date as other Uda Yatras in Rairangpur and Thakurmanda. The main day is the end of the lunar month of Chait (mid March to mid April) and the beginning of the month Baishakh (mid April to Mid May) which some people observe as the local new year's day. Every year it comes on the 13th or 14th of April. But the February of this year (2008) was 29 days so the Uda of this year will be one day before its usual date. It is on the 13th of April this year. I, on behalf of the Puja committee, invite both you and your mum as the chief guests. You can watch everything with your own eyes and tell your countrymen about our spiritual aspects (Yamini Kanta Bage, 2008, translated by Gurucharan Hansda).
Traditionally Jamda’s Uda Yatra involved a number of minor ceremonies and sacrifices (attended by a select few male leaders, priests –I was not invited to these ceremonies) and a major ceremony attended widely by the public. During the central ceremony a select few devotees have iron hooks pierced into the skin on their backs which are then attached to a sort of high rotating swing so that the devotees will ‘fly’ on the ten-metre high swing hanging by the skin of their backs. At the top of the consecrated ten metre high Uda pole is an attachment that is like a wooden wheel with a long wooden horizontal arm/pole extended from it. The devotees are (one person at a time) hooked onto the extended horizontal arm with the hooks that pierce their back. The horizontal pole also has a rope dangling from it that reaches down to the ground. On the ground there is giddying excitement and fervor as the crowds of devotees who catch hold of the rope run with it anticlockwise around and around in a circle at the base of the pole and make the hooked-devotee ‘fly’ above them. As they run they roar out cries to Shiva and some men dance tandava (Shiva’s dance) around in circles.

In 2008 the Jamda Uda Yatra had several modifications to this sacred process. Firstly, as the hook swinging festival in the above described form has been outlawed due to its inherent dangers, the swing devotees had to be tied onto the ten-metre high horizontal swing rather than to simply hang from the flesh of their pierced backs via the iron hooks. The devotees do still undergo piercing of the back with the iron hooks but at the top of the pole their hooks are supported with long cloths that brace and tie the devotees onto the high swing.

The second modification was a special performance peculiar to the Jamda Uda Yatra. For the last thirty years a Shiva tantric from West Bengal performs an extraordinary devotional feat during Jamda’s Uda Yatra where he pulls a number of bullock carts, loaded with men, from the road near the consecrated Uda pole and the priest’s house all the way to the Jamda Shiva temple. The distance is approximately half a kilometer. The Shiva devotee did not pull the bullock carts using his arms. Rather he had two iron hooks inserted into his back and the hooks were attached to ropes which were attached to the first bullock cart onto which more carts were attached like railway carriages. In 2008 the tantric who performs this ritual annually was almost seventy years old and he pulled three loaded bullock carts. In his younger years he had pulled up to seven such joined carts, all
loaded with men. The bullock-cart wheels were wooden and not smooth, the road too was partly unsealed and wholly rough and pot-holed, which would have added to the difficulty of pulling the carts. My own participation in the 2008 festival filled me with wonder at the power of the small, slight, tantric Shiva devotee as he pulled the three loaded bullock carts by the skin of his back over the long stretch of rough road, a feat that I imagine an Olympic weight lifter could not match even using his arms, let alone the skin of his back.

In the mid afternoon of the 13th April 2008, the sweltering heat of the mid-summer day became particularly humid with gathering clouds. In the Jamda block headquarters several ceremonies were taking place in the middle of the main street of the village. One of the ceremonies was the consecration of the rotating wheel that is attached to the top of the uda pole. The wheel was covered with a red cloth and a man was placed under it, so that his body was covered like a corpse. Then the wheel was spun around and around while being carried on the shoulders of a band of devotees down the road towards the field where the Uda pole was erected. As the wheel was carried, men and boys cried out calls to Shiva.

The next ceremony involved the bullock cart tantric who performed an unostentatious puja to the earth and to the road upon which he would pull the bullock carts. He uttered mantras and took out red powder from a packet tucked into his lungi and anointed a pattern of red dots onto the earth on the road and offered incense. Then he removed his shirt and knelt forward with his back exposed and his hands resting on the ground. Two tantrics from the blacksmith community inserted the large iron hooks into his back while onlookers broke into cries to Shiva \(^{14}\). His back was covered with the scars of insertions of hooks from previous Udas. The other tantrics attached rope to the hooks, which were then coiled around his shoulders. The bullock-cart tantric sat up, unfazed by his surgical ordeal and conversed briefly with the Uda Yatra main organizer and a few other men. Shortly after this several other devotees who were to swing from the Uda pole had smaller hooks inserted into their backs. Minor ceremonies involved people who had pierced their arms to allow a string to pass through. The string

\(^{14}\) Only members of the blacksmith jati are held to possess the esoteric tantric knowledge that allows them to perform this particular ritual.
bound several dancers together in a mock imitation of being the ones who, like a bullock, will pull a vehicle.

After the hook insertion ceremonies were over the crowds moved en masse towards the location where the three adjoined bullock carts were lined up. The procession towards the bullock carts was accompanied with cries to Shiva, beating of drums and clanging of cymbals and some people dancing their way. Soon the carts were loaded with men. However in this instance (2008) for the first time in Jamda’s history of this ritual, one cart was allowed to carry several women including the Santali woman elected Block Chairman (and myself as a guest). Finally, after the bullock cart tantric fed the eager crowd with ‘prasad’ (blessed sweets) the moment arrived and he was appropriately hitched and began to pull the carts along the road.

He had drawn the carts no more than a few metres when suddenly awesome flashes of streak lightning lit up the sky and the sky reverberated with roaring thunder (one of Shiva’s names is Shubha Vajradhara – benevolent wielder of the thunderbolt/lightning bolt). The violent electric storm brought both fear and excitement into the crowds who also roared out more calls to Shiva and beat the drums harder. Soon out of nowhere a wind whipped up and the clouds opened to pour down rain upon the gathering. This freak storm in the middle of summer that coincided with the moment the Shiva tantric began pulling the carts seemed cosmically orchestrated. From that moment onwards he drew the carts amidst driving rain and lightning and thunder all the way to the Shiva temple. At the temple, the tantric was unhitched and he went in and fell prostrate in front of the image of Shiva.

The procession crowd then dashed back to the field where the Uda pole was erected in the driving rain. When the crowd surrounded the pole, there was first a brief puja and offering to the late father of the current Jamda Ho Dehuri (priest) who had revived Uda Yatra and then the Uda organizer and the devotees who were to swing began to ascend the pole. Only one devotee would swing at a time and at the top he was attached and tied onto the high swing by Jamini Bage. Each man was bedecked with thick wreaths of frangipani garlands. And when he was swung around he would shower down frangipani flowers on those below who would devotionally receive them as divine Prasad (sacred remnants of divine offerings).
The electricity in the atmosphere from the storm combined with the electricity and frenzy of some of the crowd who ran around in circles at the circumference of the pole swing beneath the 'flying' swinger. Observing the vertiginous flight of the bhaktas swinging from the high pole generated sympathetic awe and sense of strangeness amongst the spectators. A number of men danced a tandava like dance around in circles at the circumference of the pole area and the atmosphere among the crowd intensified. While some people had umbrellas or sheltered under nearby trees, the majority of people at the Uda pole simply got drenched as the storm-cloud darkened late afternoon rapidly turned to twilight (see DVD chapter 6).

When the ceremony concluded after dark, many people made their way to a huge tent in a nearby field, where there was a drama and cultural performance competition. This program went on all night long and many villagers who had come from distant villages stayed the night in the tent. For several days more, Uda Yatra cultural programs were held in the tent and the performances were amplified through sound systems.

Raja Sankrant and Uda Yatra are obviously two different types of sacred swing festival. In Raja (a Mother Earth festival) which is held at home in the village, any and all girls and young women who want to swing have their own bodily experience of vertigo and 'flight' against gravity. They also experience a sort of moral vertigo as all kinds of carefree, sometimes nonsensical, impromptu made-up songs come out of the mouths of those who swing. Uda Yatra (a Father Shiva festival) is located in the Block headquarters and thousands of villagers walk or cycle from far flung villages of the Block to attend. Many will sleep the night in the drama performance tent (or stay up all night to watch the performances). Although the crowds at Uda are massive, the number of people who actually swung from the hooks was limited to about 5-10 men who had gone through days of preparation at the Dehuri (priest's) home. The trance states of the hook swingers and the extraordinary motor capacities of the tantric who pulls the bullock carts affected the crowds of participants who experience a collective altered mood produced by witnessing the events unfolding throughout the afternoon/evening.
6.3 Structural Relation Between Children's Ilinx Play and Sacred Ilinx Play

How can we compare Jamda children's every-day ilinx play with the sacred ilinx performances described in this chapter: Raja Sankranti, Uda Yatra and mediumship? As mentioned above, Gell suggests that the structural relation between sacred or secular swinging, other vertigo inducing children's play forms and the experience of altered states of consciousness related to sacred trance/mediumship-induction lies in the fact that all are cultural practices that de-automatize the equilibroceptive and proprioceptive activity of the vestibular system which is embedded in normal activity (Gell, 1980).

Automatization refers to the integration of the somatic systems and mental processes involved in an action. That is to say, with increasing practice of any action (e.g., riding a bicycle, reading, walking upright) the intermediate steps disappear from consciousness and the action becomes automatic. De-automatization is the undoing of automatization. It is, as it were, a shake-up which can be followed by an advance or retreat in the level of organization (Deikman, 1966). In ilinx performances performers isolate and focus attention on (de-automatize) the equilibroceptive and proprioceptive functions of the vestibular apparatus. This is what children do when they playfully spin, balance, cart-wheel or swing. It is also what Dambarudhar's aunt does when she agitates herself from side to side. So, Gell suggests, the structural relation between children's ilinx play (swinging, turning upside down, spinning etc) and certain vertigo inducing sacred performance is based on the fact that both are contextually diverse cultural practices that de-automatize what the brain had trained into automatic functioning of the vestibular system.

The vestibular system, located in the inner ear and containing an important fluid, has a number of important functions: it regulates the equilibrium sense; it is the modulator of sensory input-motor output (when sensory input is predominant, the vestibular system decreases motor output and when motor output is predominant the vestibular system decreases sensory input); it maintains perceptual constancies of size and direction during self induced changes in posture and position in space; it is linked with ocular muscles and with the proprioceptive part of the brain that controls the sense of the parts of one's own body and their
relative size, relation and distance to each other, one's sense of self-proportion. Automatization of proprioception allows one to perform actions like eating without the need to watch what one's hands are doing or where they are going. The vestibular system also allows differentiation between internally and externally generated stimuli. It may turn out to be the hand behind all the other senses (Angelaki and Cullen, 2008).

The Vestibular system is profoundly important in producing our sense of reality and stabilising our own self-world relationship.

All living organisms monitor their environment and an important aspect of that environment is gravity and the orientation of the body with respect to gravity. In addition, animals that locomote must be able to adjust their orientation with respect to self generated movements, as well as forces that are exerted upon them from the outside world. The vestibular system performs these essential tasks (Gray, 1997).

When the functioning of the vestibular system is disrupted it disrupts normal intentionality – which is at the heart of the sense of self-hood. This gap between intentions and sensory/motor occurrences leads to a feeling of strangeness, a different perception of our sensory reality or an altered state of consciousness, which may in some contexts be considered mystical experiences (Deikman, 1966).

A mystical experience involves an unusual state of consciousness. Deikman offered the theory of deautomatization of the vestibular system as an alternative psychological/cognitive explanation to the dominant psychological explanations of mystic experiences. These dominant cognitive explanations describe such experiences as regression to early infant-mother relationship, withdrawal of libido from the external world to be reinvested in ego until intra uterine narcissism is achieved, or up to the pure narcissism of the sperm.

Deikman suggested that mystical experiences are brought about by the deautomatization of hierarchically ordered structures of perception and cognition, structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goals of the individual: biological survival of the organism and psychological survival of the personality. Under special conditions systems of automatic selection are intentionally set aside or break down in favour of alternate modes of consciousness, whose stimulus-processing may be less efficient from a
biological point of view but whose very inefficiency may permit the experience of aspects of the real world formerly excluded or ignored (1966). The extent to which such a shift takes place depends on the motivation of the individual, his particular neuro-physiological state and the environmental and social conditions encouraging or discouraging such a state.

Deikman (1966) outlines three sorts of mystical experience: untrained sensate, experiences that result from unusual encounters with nature or drugs; trained sensate experiences that may be bio-psychologically similar to untrained sensate ones, but which occur by intentional practices within the framework of a cognitive paradigm of a particular spiritual or religious order; trans-sensate, experiences that ultimately supersede the senses, known in Sanskrit as ‘samadhi’ or absorption.

Gell describes three routes to ‘trance-induction’ that involve deautomatization of vestibular functions. The first is passive sensory withdrawal or suppression of external stimuli and focus on a meditative object. Here, mind-stuff is bound to a fixed place. Such a focus is contemplative, which means it involves non-analytic apprehension of an object. Discursive thought is banished as it interferes with direct contact that yields essential knowledge of percept alone. The second route is active hyper-arousal through sensory overload, such as rhythmic stimulation with light or sound or overbreathing. The third is deautomatization, which comes about in patterns of motor activity such as voluntary trembling/shaking or sustained rigidification of parts of the body (i.e., limbs or neck) that ultimately result in involuntary trembling. Gell suggests that all of these ‘techniques du corps’ induce trance by transforming the normal sensory input-motor output modulation function of the vestibular system and input-output modulation is related to the self-world reality sense (1980: 233-234).

Now let us consider the utility and limitations of Gell and Deikman's theory of de-automatization of the vestibular functions for an inter-cultural understanding of Mayurbhanj performances of ilinx/vertigo play in children’s play and in sacred contexts, and their relationship to each other. The theory successfully draws attention to the embodied experiential nature of such ilinx performances as swinging from great heights as a form of surrender in Uda Yatra and swinging and singing made up songs that are not automatically known in Raja Sankranta. Both of these acts disrupt one’s ordinary and automatic equilbroceptive functions. The
theory also suggests a bio-psychological link between secular vertigo play ‘impulses of delight’ and experiential states that may be described as mystical or sacred. It indicates that behind both sacred and playful vertigo performances may be the same longing to test the boundaries of every-day experience in pursuit of mysterious, or not ordinarily apparent states of consciousness. This suggests the possibility that even though a child engaging in playful ilinx is not considered to be carrying out a sacred or devotional performance in the same way as, for example, a child participating in a Tarini puja is, the child in ilinx play is experiencing something that (perhaps subconsciously) makes ilinx in sacred contexts understandable. That is, while only sacred vertigo practices are imbued with institutional religious significance there is perhaps an experiential dimension of children’s vertigo play that links it with other cultural phenomena. Perhaps it is a part of how children seek to engage with normal and paranormal states and to experience for themselves the possibility of alternative self-world experiences.

Now to the limitations of Gell and Deikman’s de-automatization theory. Of course what is immediately lost in reducing cultural phenomena of Mayurbhanj ilinx performance to bio-psychological explanations is appreciation of important cultural paradigms and intentions that inform these phenomena. Whirling kiirtan dances, for example, involve another collectively shared powerful ingredient: devotion or magnetic longing for the Great. There is a clear distinction between sacred and secular swinging. Neither the Raja Sankrant swings nor the Uda pole roundabout swing are left up for the enjoyment of swinging in contexts outside the sacred festivals. Thus there are important varying intentions and cultural meanings that distinguish ilinx in children’s play and in sacred performances. These intentions have a different kind of force and generate a different kind of experience. There is something unique about the peer cultural-context of children spinning under water in a pond game no less than there is contextual meaning in mediums trembling during their trance state as they ideate upon their beloved deity. Something else happens after a person breaks out of routinized sensory-motor functioning as a result of trained sensate de-automatization of vestibular functions. Neither what happens next, nor the associated cultural meaning, is sufficiently explained through the de-automatization of vestibular theory. The inexplicable capacity of the bullock-cart Shiva devotee to haul three cartloads with the skin on his back is a case in point. In fact, the reason for an experience of
exhilaration in a child who balances on a high tree branch in a tree game is another case in point.

What does it mean when a Jamda child engages in ilinx play? For the child this is an experience of mild delight or intense exhilaration (or terror). And what does it mean for others? Just as crowds of spectators entered a heightened mood watching the Uda pole devotees ‘fly’ from the Uda pole, watching a child involved in ilinx play, whether balancing, spinning or cart-wheeling, generally provokes a sympathetic experience of ilinx and delight in the onlookers. Although children’s ilinx occupies a different space to sacred ilinx and is not culturally expected or intended to project the child player into ‘trans-sensate’ states as sacred ilinx practices are expected to, children’s ilinx play is a zone of risk, danger, the unknown, a shock to ordinary sensory-motor loops that allows for a novel experience, exhilaration and shared joy. Crowds tend to gather as onlookers are immediately attracted to balancing, gravity defying and topsy-turvy performances; such performances (i.e., coming across a child who is moving high in a tree) are exciting shared, social moments. Observing these phenomena induces sympathetic sensations in the onlookers, which in some cases leads to profound experiences in the onlookers either as individuals or as a collective.

This thesis is concerned with the ways that children at play interact with cultural contexts, the ways play is informed and shaped by socio-cultural contexts and contributes to transformation of contexts. Jamda children’s ilinx play occurs in a context where sacred performances of ilinx are common. It does not replicate sacred ilinx performances; the two forms are culturally discrete. However it is plausible that childhood experiences of ilinx inform children’s embodied understanding of sacred ilinx, especially when boundaries of sacred and secular are blurred as in the Raja Sankranti swing festival. In cases of such forms of sacred ilinx as trance-induction (Dinesh’s aunt), or the hook swinging, children’s secular playful ilinx may facilitate children’s own i) sense-making about ii) participation in iii) and innovation of ilinx as a sacred phenomenon.
Chapter 7  Children, Play and Schools

Schools are conspicuous in village landscapes with pink walls, sky-blue gates and buildings that are often the largest and most visible. Prior to attending school, children’s identifications and playful sense-making are bound up with family and the village community. Schooling is a site where children negotiate new identification with students from other communities and with their block, district, state and nation. School is also a space where students navigate imagined futures for themselves that are in part, responses to state macro-economic socialization projects. Schools are part of a continuum of spaces between home and more public spaces for, although enclosed, they are neither shut off from the social space of the villages nor from state and other political-pedagogical projects. Each school is a unique interface: autonomous, different, endowed with state legitimacy and authority, yet also re-appropriated, inhabited and shaped by social actors, teachers, children and to a lesser extent, parents (Benei, 2008: 22).

This thesis not only explores children's play as a discrete cultural performance, it uses play as a lens through which to view significant domains of children's life-worlds. School is increasingly central in the organization of rural childhood and this chapter looks at schools through a play lens, keeping children’s/students’ experiences at the centre. It looks at children's aims and motivations in relation to a shift that is currently taking place in the remote rural areas with unsurpassed emphasis on universal elementary education. Section one summarizes some key historical and topical issues concerning schooling and education in India, particularly as they relate to rural students from ST and SC communities. Section two offers some descriptions of Jamda Block’s schools based on a) conversations with teachers and students and b) my own subjective impressions during visits to schools. Section three brings some of the every-day experiences and perspectives of school students to the fore, as represented in seven-day diaries and essays that a group of students wrote as part of their participation in this research. With the prior three sections as background, section four discusses children’s play in the school context. It contrasts the pedagogies of the classroom, which tend to rely on the transmission of text-book information and teacher-centred learning strategies – despite the widespread absences of teachers in rural schools with some of the
children's enactive innovation, creativity and sense making in peer play outside of the classroom.

### 7.1 Indian Education Shifts

India is currently in the grip of an unprecedented transformation of state delivery of education. In April 2010, the 2009 compulsory education Act (2009) became law. It made the state legally accountable to provide elementary education to all children between the ages of six and fourteen years. The Act represents part of a much welcomed radical shift in state commitment to universal elementary education that coincides with macro-economic engineering related to India's liberalization. To contextualise this shift I will revisit some earlier summations about the state's commitment to mass or universal education.

In the early 1990s, Weiner (1991) noted a vast gap between official rhetoric on the importance of mass education and policy and actual implementation. He argued that notwithstanding the rhetoric, India's policy makers had not regarded mass education as essential to India's modernization. Instead they put resources into elite government schools, state-aided private schools and tertiary institutions, creating a minority educated class capable of managing a modern enclave economy (1991).

Citing comparative schooling successes in most African countries and China, Weiner argued that India's low per capita income was less relevant as an explanation for India's educational status than belief systems. He suggested that the dominant Indian position rests on deeply held beliefs about social order and the respective roles of upper and lower social strata where there is a division between people who work with their minds and rule and people who work with their hands and are ruled (1991).

Although they are linked to the caste system, Weiner suggested that even many of those who profess to be secular are imbued with values of social status that are deeply embedded in Indian culture. Thus, in India, education has largely been an instrument for differentiation by separating children according to social class and caste. Weiner concluded that due to these beliefs many administrators of the education system are remarkably indifferent to the low enrolment and high drop out rates among the lowest social classes (1991).
In his ethnography of Indian modernity and elite schools, Srivastava too (1998) underscored a concern that the post-colonial state has been disproportionately engaged with an elite educational minority in the construction of a post-colonial national identity within an enclave urban modernity. He argued that an elite public dialogue of Indian modernity, rationality and metropolitanism monopolises the representation of Indian citizenship—which excludes and marginalizes the majority of the population (1998).

Schools such as Doon have produced several generations of a post-Independence middle class steeped in the boys' own tales of the all-conquering, modernist male hero, astride the white steed of Development Theory, the guardian of the free market and the bridge builder between a progressive West and a recalcitrantly regressive India (Srivastava, 1998:).

In brief, Weiner and Srivastava's summaries of educational neglect and the consequent marginalization of uneducated populations in dominant national discourse has resonance in scheduled tribe and scheduled caste dominated districts such as Mayurbhanj.

In contrast to these earlier (1990s) critiques, economist and child rights activist, D.P. Chaudhry (2010) offered an optimistic perspective on the current shift towards compulsory provision of universal education that coincides with India's new millennium liberal economic transformations. He pointed out that all previous educational laws were merely directive principles, which only had soft power, whereas the 2009 Compulsory Education Act now holds the state legally accountable to guarantee universal schooling availability to all children (Chaudhry, 2010).

7.1.1 Map of Recent Education Initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>National policy on education announced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Sarva Shikshha Abhiyan - SSA (Education for All Program) rolled out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>86th Amendment of the Indian Constitution making elementary school education a right.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2009 Operational requirements of the 86th amendment are formalized in the Rights of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009

2010 On April 1st the 2009 Act becomes a law

(Chaudhry, 2010)

From 2001 the Central Government paved the way for the 2009 Act through the Education for All Program, (Sarva Shikshya Abhiyan-SSA) which increasingly directed resources into rural schools, education for girls, ST and SC students and below poverty line (BPL) students. In India poverty is particularly measured in terms of nutritional poverty, which is technically absolute poverty (Chaudhry 2010). As was often evident in Mayurbhanj, nutritional poverty severely hinders children’s active learning capacity. No one can think clearly on an empty stomach and therefore hunger and malnutrition makes children more prone to dropping out of school. To address this, SSA programs include: free midday meals, free text books, free uniforms for girls and free hostel admission for STs, some SCs and BPL children in rural areas such as in rural Mayurbhanj.

7.2 Schools in Rural Mayurbhanj

The changes in administrative approach have already begun a transformation in Mayurbhanj rural villages in which children are a central focus. As of the 2001 Census, the district literacy level for the general population was 52.43%. The female literacy level was 38.25% (Commissioner, 2001). In the 2011 Census the literacy level had already risen to 63.98%, with 74.92% male literacy and 53.18% female literacy (Commissioner, 2011). Outside of towns, the literacy levels in remote rural villages were lower than these district averages. Many of the parents of the children who are now in school did not attend school themselves, or attended for only a few years. In 2008, more rural/village children are enrolling and poorer families are encouraged by the midday meals program, free text books, free uniforms for girls and for some students, free hostel accommodation. Upon first sight, schools are visibly transforming with the construction of new buildings in many village schools.
In spite of these initiatives and the fact that schooling is now becoming the dominant occupation for Mayurbhanj children, there are still major obstacles to servicing the education aspirations of rural students. The following anecdotes draw on 2008 conversations with teachers and principals and my own preliminary observations while I was a visitor in several Mayurbhanj schools.

7.2.1 Schools

School A

Pink boundary walls and buildings and a sky blue iron double entrance gate. These are the uniform colours of all Odishan state schools. Hand-painted directly onto School A’s pink boundary wall is a billboard with a smiling child in school uniform riding a flying pencil that symbolically doubles as a rocket. The image suggests to passers-by that school children will fly into the space age/modernity through participation in schools.

School A has 200 primary students (classes I-VII) who come from several surrounding villages. Ninety percent of the students were from rice farming/forest collector families, some of whom were SC and most of whom were ST. As this school is in a rather remote village with surrounding open fields. There is no rear boundary wall and beyond the classrooms children can roam out onto a large play field with bush beyond it. The school has a small slide and swing set, sized only for small children (5 to 6/7 year olds only). There were a few items of sports equipment such as football and cricket set. During the school’s recreation periods football was obviously the most popular game but generally it was only played by boys.

The classrooms each have a blackboard painted on the front wall and rows of wooden benches/desks. Each long bench and attached desk seats about four or five children. The wooden shutter windows are left open to let in light and air through the metal grills. The school has no electricity, so no fans are available. The walls and floor are roughened by years of monsoons and traffic of students. There were no latrines in the school during 2008 and children would go out into the fields to go to the toilet. The school did not have a water source inside its boundary but there was a public tube well/hand pump outside the boundary wall where students wash and drink water.
Like all remote rural state schools, the school provided a midday meal for the primary school students (not high school students) which consisted of rice (occasionally accompanied by dal (legumes)) with the addition of a boiled egg per child on Wednesdays and Fridays. Much of the midday break for the students was taken up with the process of midday meal (washing hands and rinsing plate, lining up, waiting to be served, eating, then taking their plate back outside to the hand pump and lining up to wash plate and hands) which left little time for free play during the lunch hour.

Following is a translation of a discussion I had with the acting headmaster of the primary school. There had been no headmaster for some months.

There are serious problems of staff shortage in this school. I myself was only an assistant teacher but I have had to assume the role of acting headmaster because there is currently no principal here. I am the only full time paid teacher for 200 children. There are four volunteer staff who are local villagers who work without any pay at all, which is the pathetic situation here. Because of my acting principal role I am so swamped with administrative duties that it is hard for me to manage actual teaching work as well. My other problem is that although I have to go through bureaucratic red tape to get even a day’s paid leave there are some government appointed qualified teaching staff who may be being paid but who do not turn up to teach. I don’t even have an office and I have to do all my administrative duties from a tiny and crowded store-room.

When I asked the acting principal about the best qualities of this school, he said that his students are the best quality of his school, very obedient, well behaved and diligent. I had ongoing discussions with a number of students of this school (as it was the local school in the village where I resided and where children from my adopted family attended) and many of them had a positive attitude to school, sense of ownership/involvement or attachment to the place of their school and like school students in most places, being a student was an important part of their own self-identification.

School B

School B was a government primary school with 120 students and an attached hostel in the same school compound. The hostel was set up as an ST girls’ hostel
but in 2008 it accommodated 100 ST girls (Santhali and Ho) and 40 boys. Some of the hostel students went to other nearby schools.

Here follows a discussion with the headmaster of the school.

To teach 120 students the government has engaged three paid teaching staff including me. I’m both the headmaster and teacher. However the other two teachers have never arrived to actually do their work. I have been here for 8 years. There are four NGO unqualified volunteers who each help me out from time to time as assistant teachers (Ho and Santali volunteers). They are all from this very village. A local women’s Self Help Group comes in to cook and serve the daily midday meal. The hostel cook serves a midday meal and a night meal to those students who are from the hostel.

I have been posted at this school for 8 years and I live in the school compound. We all face many problems here, especially because of our acute staff shortage and because some government appointed staff have never showed up to do their duties. As this is a malaria area no one wants to come here. Malaria and typhoid are rife here and all of my students and I suffer from malaria all year round. We have no electricity. Our drinking water has to be carried by the students from 1 kilometre away. Everyone (myself included) has to bathe in the nearby village pond which involves health risks and students go to the field for latrine.

Our students are very good in sports and participate in the District subdivision sports competitions where they often win prizes. Our cultural activities include singing and Ganesh and Saraswati Puja and an annual sports carnival.

On the day that I spent in the school there was only one assistant teacher present along with the headmaster and about 120 students. There were no desks or chairs in the classrooms and students sat on the floor. The students recited texts aloud from their own text books, which they were memorizing in sing-song voices rote style. Occasionally the assistant teacher brandished a long cane threateningly if the noise level in the class room became too loud, or if students engaged in conversations with friends.

One day I chatted with a boy whose home is quite close to this school. It was a school day but he was out playing on the village road outside the school.
Me: How come you’re not inside the school?

Response: This isn’t my school. I go to xxx school. (He gave the name of another school that is about 1-2 kilometres from his home).

Me: But that school’s so far from your home, why do you go there and not here?

Response: My parents send me to that school because they have a teacher for every class there. You can’t learn properly in this school.

Me: Then how come you’re not at your school today?

Response: My parents needed my help pressing oil today, so I stayed home.

Apart from reflecting the fluid relationship that children and their families have to negotiating children’s essential contributions to family production activities and schooling, this conversation revealed some local village perceptions about the problems of learning when teachers are absent.

I should mention that later in 2008 construction work began to burgeon in this school on a much needed upgrade to the hostel facilities. Various headmasters told me that the headmaster/teacher-in-charge is deputed by the state to act as contractor/construction supervisor for building expansions within their school. This huge responsibility frequently supersedes their role as educator. As construction is due to go on for a few years in many schools across Mayurbhanj, this means several years of construction supervision for the limited teachers in the schools, distracting them even further from teaching. No one opposes the much needed infrastructural improvements that new buildings will provide, but many teachers and headmasters and students expressed deep dissatisfaction about staff shortages and acknowledged that this seriously impacts on the learning environment of their students.

School C

School C is a small state government primary school with 53 students enrolled in 2008. The school was in a Santal village. The headmaster-cum-sole teacher was also a Santali man who had taught in various rural schools for over ten years. He told me that in his first hand experience, the same teacher shortage problem exists
all over Odisha’s rural areas. He explained some of his own difficulties of managing to teach students who range from class I to VII as well attending to all of his school administration and building contractor duties. I asked him about the language used in school and he told me that in his school he uses and teaches both Odiya and Santali languages.

School D

School D is a state primary school situated in one of the Jamda’s remote mountain villages. There are thirty five homes in the village and almost all residents are from the Ho community. There are only 30 students enrolled and less than half attend regularly due partly to the irregularity of the school itself. The school building is a dilapidated single room of about 3 x 6 metres with a broken door half hanging off. There is a severely cracked blackboard painted on the wall and nothing else in the room. The floor, when we visited, was cracked and un-swept. Children sat down on the bare concrete. School books are provided by the Panchayat office.

The untrained, unpaid volunteer teacher who was present was a young man of about 20 years old. He walks through the forest and up the mountain each day from his village on the plains about six kilometers away. He told us that there is a salaried government appointed teacher for this school who only infrequently turns up, because it is too difficult to reach the village from his own home. The volunteer began coming to the school in late 2007, which various parents and children from the village told me they greatly appreciate. The students all demonstrated great affection for the volunteer teacher as before 2007 they had, for all practical purposes, no school. This volunteer is himself a Ho educated young man, from a Kolhan NGO which aims to educationally uplift children from underprivileged Ho and Santhali communities.

7.2.1.1 Jamda state and private schools

There is a lot of visible activity taking place in state schools in rural areas such as Jamda as a result of the Government’s Education for All program. The construction of new school and hostel buildings and implementation of midday meals by local Panchayat elected bodies is generating local economic activity. Distribution of free text books, girls’ school uniforms and incentives to attract students to enrol in hostels as well as school is resulting in unprecedented levels of state school
enrolment. However teacher absenteeism is the greatest challenge that Jamda state school teachers, students and parents face. Staff shortages place a great burden on the few teachers who are present and committed to their teaching roles in rural schools. Teaching is at the heart of the school experience and so the teacher absence problem has a serious impact on the quality of experience of children who spend time in state schools. The lack of quality classroom teaching places an extra burden on students to attend private tuition, which lessens the time students have for other creative leisure pursuits and free time with peers. Many parents told me that unless they send their children to private tuition classes, they will not pass their exams because they are not getting sufficient teacher guidance at school. Those parents who cannot financially afford to send their children for private tuition, or who cannot afford to send their children because of time factor (their children perform other domestic duties after school or before school) fear that their children hardly benefit from attending school.

The vacuum created by teacher absences in state schools was partially filled by private schools and volunteer organizations. Although private schools do not provide the free services of state schools (free admission, meals, text books and uniforms etc) they tended to have better teacher-student ratios and teachers were more diligent in classroom teaching, which was quite apparent from visits to various schools. As a result of more effective school lessons, the private school students generally do not have to attend out-of-school-hours tuition to supplement their school classes. Private schools also employed more female teachers, whereas it was rare to see a female teacher in the state schools.

Most private schools (in any location) have their own complex pedagogical-cum-cultural/political projects. In Jamda the two largest private elementary schools are the Saraswati Shishu Mandir school (temple of Saraswati's children) run by the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS), a right wing Hindu nationalist organization. This school is one of 10 000 RSS-run Shishu Mandir schools across India, which aim to inculcate in students a common Hindu identity as the underlying essence of Indian history and citizenship. Operating in ST and SC dominated rural areas such as Mayurbhanj, the schools actively incorporate 'tribals' as Hindus. Various commentators have problematized the Hindu nationalist under-pinnings of the RSS schools. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to enter that debate here. On the
level of every-day school and classroom management, the Shishu Mandir school appeared to be one of the better organized schools in Jamda, with a teacher for every class in regular attendance. Various parents told me that the school had a good reputation for students’ academic success. Staff from this school told me that none of the students from this school attended private tuition after school, as they didn’t need to: the classes were instructive enough.

The other main private school was the Kolhan English Medium School, run by a tribal NGO (also called ‘Kolhan’, which refers to the Ho people of Singhbhum). This was an autonomous school run by and primarily for Ho and Santal students where Ho and Santal culture and languages, dancing and festivals are a part of the school culture. The school also prioritizes students’ fluency in English more than most local state schools do. This school, like the Shishu Mandir, school had a higher ratio of teachers to students and consequently comparatively good academic successes for its students. However, it obviously lacked the economic backing of the Shishu Mandir School and was in smaller more overcrowded premises.

Volunteers from private NGOs or Hindu nationalist organizations also often come forward to serve in state schools, to fill the lacuna of government teaching staff. For instance, in School D the frequent absence of the appointed government teacher was filled by a Kolhan NGO unpaid volunteer committed to advancement of the Ho community through child education. In some other state schools, the volunteers who fill the gaps have visibly more Hindu nationalist pedagogical projects in their voluntary school-work. As one such volunteer teacher expressed the situation to me, “We are here to bring the light of education to this dark and backward place”.

Despite state school teacher absences, a growing number of rural Mayurbhanj students demonstrate a great commitment to attending school. My adopted-kin father, who was also a school principal, said that in his own school his students have more enthusiasm than any of the teachers. They make sacrifices to come to school, often walking long distances, but it is frequently discouraging for them when they arrive to find that there will be no class as there are no teachers. Even then, they are sometimes assigned a textbook task by an assistant and they will stay there and do their study.
7.3 Student Experiences and Perspectives

Beyond the concrete buildings of rural classrooms, the summations of teachers and the educational master projects of state and private organizations, what does school mean for rural children? What are some of the everyday routines and experiences of students who go to school? And what are their own motivations for going to school?

To find answers to these questions I carried out a project in July 2008, asking 60 students from various villages but from a single upper primary and high school to write some essays and to maintain a 7 day, 24 hour diary of their activities. The diary-writers were asked to write about their activities during various blocks of time throughout the day for 7 days: 12-5am, 5-7am, 7-9am, 9am-12noon, 12-3pm, 3-6pm, 6-9pm, 9pm-12 midnight. Students wrote in Odiya. After collecting the diaries and essays from participating students, my interpreter, Gurucharan Hansda, helped with transcription and translation into English and we also enlisted some of his college level English students to assist with this work. In some cases I have edited the grammar of Gurucharan’s English students’ translations to make the English understandable. I was later assisted in this task by an Odiya speaking Masters student at ANU, who viewed the original Odiya script documents. This section will reflect on some of these students’ diary entries and also on some of their short essays and notes on the subjects of play and work.

Initially I planned to conduct the diary writing and essay project with primary school students between classes IV and VII. However, when I spoke with some students and teachers from these classes very few students felt capable (in terms of their own literacy standards) of participating. Teachers also doubted their students’ capacity, even though I said that they could write as simply as they liked (in Odiya). This provided an indication of the low literacy capabilities of students in these classes. Eventually I turned to students in upper classes, mainly students from standards VII to X and managed to get almost 60 students who agreed to participate. But few girls remain in school up to these upper levels and consequently out of the 58 students who returned diaries to me, only 8 were girls. While in one sense this meant that girls’ voices were under-represented, their absence itself speaks eloquently about the situation, as is the absence of my original target of younger students. In the pages that follow I will intersperse
excerpts from various students’ writing with some commentary. Note: I omit or change the names of participant students in accordance with my research ethics proposal.

From the diaries and essays that students generously shared, I noticed a number of patterns.

- Children have a pragmatic flexible approach to managing their dual roles.
- Children take their studentship seriously and devote hours to study each day, often in the small hours of the night.
- Being a student is an important part of many children’s identity and, as several headmasters confirmed, there is often more diligence on the part of local students than there is on the part of teachers for the project of schooling.
- For some children (especially girls), the balance of work or other family issues tips in the other direction and they drop out of school to join a sizeable number of village children who do not go to school, as evidenced by girls’ general low participation.
- Finally, in spite of multiple duties, the majority of school-going children still prioritize and highly value peer play.

The following excerpts from some diaries and essays illustrate these themes.

### 7.3.1 Students’ Dual Roles

A factor that affects how rural schools function is the multiple economic roles of many enrolled students who are managing a macro-economic transition by simultaneously studying and actively participating in labor-intensive family based agrarian economies.

*My mother works very hard. I don’t go to school every day because my mother is old. I help her in work. We both work together (12 year old student, 2008)*

Another wrote:
I am the son of a farmer. My father works in the rice fields. I too work there. I work during working time and study during school hours. I also work in our vegetable garden. We cultivate rice. Sometimes I go to the jungle to bring firewood. I go to the jungle with my friends for cow herding. Sometimes I have to do housework. We harvest in summer also. Actually I enjoy working with my friends.

One student narrates in his diary a typical day where he is asked to stay home from school to help his father:

I got up at 3am, washed my face and prayed for 5 minutes. At 3.15 I read geography book and then history. I stopped studying at 5am and folded my bedding and mosquito net and went to the river holding a small towel.

I returned from the river and my father said to me, “Today we have to plough our fields”. So I went to the field at 7am and started ploughing.

At 9.30 am I returned home and then went to the river to take my bath. I returned home at 11.30am and at 12 I started reading my books...

Following are two days from the diary of a male high school student. From Sunday his parents were away and so for several days he had to miss school and attend to farm and household chores. The Monday diary shows his routine, while attending to family work and his Wednesday’s diary shows one of his school day routines.

Monday 14th July

12 – 5am: I was asleep and then got up at 2.30 in the morning and washed my face and read history books at 2.40 and then I read my geography book. I stopped studying at 5am.

5am to 7am: I went to the river at 5am. Today I couldn’t run on the riverbank because there was nobody at home. Today I brushed my teeth with toothbrush. I returned home at 5.30 and brought my bullocks out of the cowshed. At 6, I washed up the plates and bowls. I cooked Sujana Sa’g (green leaves from a local tree). Today I fetched water from the hand-pump myself.

7-9am: I studied at 7am. I read Maths and English. At 8am I read MIL (Odiya) and stopped studying at 9am.

9am-12 noon: At 9am I had rice which I served myself. Today I didn’t go to school.
At 9.30 I went out for cow-herding. My friends were also there with me herding their bullocks.

12 -3pm: Until 12 I was with my bullocks. I returned home by 1pm with my bullocks and tied them. I cut straw and fed them. I washed my feet and ate rice with onion. At 2pm I went to my garden with a sack and scythe and cut grass. At 2.30 I returned home with the grass.

3pm -6pm: At 3pm I cut up the straw and cut grass and fed my bullocks. At pm I took bath in a pond. I returned home and rubbed coconut oil on my body. At 5pm I took out my bicycle and rode around and returned back at 6pm

6pm- 9pm: I returned at 6, I took my bullocks inside their shed. I told my elder brother’s daughter to fetch water and I cooked rice myself. My parents had gone to my sister’s house. I bought potatoes from the village shop and cooked. I ate dinner at 9pm

9pm-12midnight: I prepared my bed at 9pm and hung my mosquito net and studied a little. My younger brother usually sleeps inside the house. Every day I listen to the radio before sleeping. At 11 I turned off my radio and slept.

Wednesday 16th July

12-5am: I was asleep at 12. I got up at 3am and washed my face. I prayed for 5 minutes then read books on history and geography till 5am. I folded my bed.

5-7am: I went to the river at 5am. I ran on the river sand for 15 minutes and did exercise then brushed my teeth with neem twig, took bath in the river and returned home and rubbed coconut oil on my body. Then I had some muri (puffed rice).

7am-9am: I sat on my cot and started reading books. First I did maths and then English. At 8am I read a little literature. I went to the village shop, bought a pack of Parle G biscuit and ate it. Then again sat for study until 9am.

9- 12: At 9am I ate rice with sujana sa’g. I went to school with my brother at 9.30am. We had prayer in school at 10am.

At 10.30 we came into the classroom and Patayath Sir taught us maths. MIL was taught at 11.30 and Odiya grammar was taught at 12.00 by Ramnath Sir.
12-3pm: At 12 Odiya grammar was taught. There was recess at 1.30. I went to the river with my friend and I spent some time there. We heard the bell ring at 2pm and I returned to the classroom with my friends.

3pm-6pm: At 3pm, Maharana Sir taught us geography. School was over at 4pm. By that time, it was going to rain. I and my brother ran home. I served rice and sag for myself and ate it. I studied English for half an hour at 5.30.

6pm-9pm: I went to the river with my elder brother at 6pm. We returned home at 7pm then I washed my hands, feet and face. Then I prepared my bed and started reading books on literature. I studied science at 8pm.

9pm-12 midnight: I had my dinner with the daughter of my elder brother at 9pm. At 10pm I ate some more rice and studied literature. I turned on my radio at 11 and listened to songs til 12 and then turned off the radio and slept.
7.3.2 Students' Own Investment in Their Study

One of the striking things about the above diary and about the daily routines of many students is the fact that they disrupt their sleep and get up in the early hours of the morning, sometimes 3 or 4 am to read their text books and do homework and generally dedicate a lot of time to their study. This is one expression of children's own personal commitment to their own project of education. Another expression of commitment is simply getting to school, which in rural areas without public transport, can be an arduous feat, with some students walking or cycling long distances to reach school. In the school of the village where I stayed were some students who walked down a mountain each day from their village, about 8 kilometers away and would have to walk back uphill in the heat of the afternoon after school.

The distance of my high school from my village is 8 kilometres. I am studying to fulfill my ambition in life that is, if I pass matriculation, then I can join ITI. (Industrial Technology Institute). I don't know what will happen. I will try my best. I will pray to God also. Many of the students from my locality are studying there. They like me and I also like them.

The following student expressed his hopes and optimism that through education, he would gain knowledge in order to improve the economic condition of his community.

My village is situated in the district of Mayurbhanj. It is a very backward village of Odisha. Most of the people here are farmers or laborers. They are extremely poor and live from hand to mouth, so the condition of my village is very bad.

Now I would like to improve the condition of my village. I shall first of all work for the farmers. They are illiterate and ignorant. They do not follow the scientific method of cultivation. They get very little profit from their lands. Their children therefore get little food and clothes and go without education. They themselves also live miserable lives. I shall at first teach them how to grow more crops. I shall tell them to use machines and fertilizer in their field. If I improve the condition of the farmers of my village then the condition of the whole village will change in no time.
7.3.3 Adjusting Study Routine to Accommodate Peer Play

Increasing numbers of rural children are committed to the occupation of schooling with quite a high level of autonomous dedication. Nonetheless it was clear that peer-play-time is also extremely important to them. One of the things I noticed in some of the diaries of children who get up in the very early morning or stay up late to study is that a number of them wrote that they played soccer or other games with their friends from 4-6pm. From this, I concluded that they would choose to get up in the dark of early morning or stay up late in the night for reading and homework by kerosene lamp, rather than study during 4-6pm, which is the regular time in the village when school-going children tend to ‘hang out’ with each other and play games together. In other words they prefer to sacrifice sleep time to fulfill their study obligations rather than miss the village peer play-time and ‘hanging out’ time. This leads us into the subject of play in relation to schooling.

7.4 Play and schools

We have just noted that many rural children actively embrace schooling and being a student is an important part of their social identity. Their self-motivation for schooling and readiness to invest much of their time and energy in it may be partially attributable to children’s prior autonomous enactive and interactive engagements with their village in both work and play. School opens up new opportunities for sense-making, new approaches to thoughtfully engaging with conceptual paradigms, new kinds of identification with the local area, district, state, nation and the world. This chapter asks, ‘how is children’s play situated within schooling?’

Before turning to play in the school context though, let’s revisit a few aspects of peer play in the village. In brief, through peer play children develop a vital sense of communitas. Moving on from the unison routines in mother-infant play paradigms, peers enact unison routines, exploring ways of interacting and complementing each other through games and other play modes. They engage with factors of local sociality and spatiality. Rivers, ponds, mud, rocks and soil, trees and forests and the village streets are all sites and media for play and mucking around. They perpetuate and transform a rich repertoire of traditional games that engage with themes of competition, chance and team cooperation and that require children to draw up elaborate geometric game boards and advance intelligent game strategies.
or excel in active physical maneuvers. They explore kinesthetic satisfactions of speed and dizziness and tensions between the feelings “I can” and “I cannot” in such activities as marksmanship through archery and marble and knucklebone variants with stones, speed in races, skills such as tree climbing etc. They author and perform slap-stick and meaningful dramas and clay-doll-plays that imaginatively un-stick meaning from one context and paste it to an imaginary new context and satirize or poetically represent their own social worlds. They choreograph and perform dances drawing on local Chhau and Bollywood inspirations. They tinker with things, pulling things apart and reassembling them, including electronic and mechanical items. They create almost all of their own toys and game and play props, including balls made from old plastic bags and twine, carved bats, bows, clay dolls and doll house props, cars, game-board props and woven leaf creations. In brief, their play is a site of creative foment and innovation. It is also part of the way that they identify with, make sense of and transform the cultural, political, environmental and economic space of their village.

What happens to peer play in the school context? Pramanik (2007) explored the way that dual economic roles of school students (schooling demands and productive household demands) leave little time for school children’s autonomous out-of-school peer play. In this chapter I will not add to her well-documented work. Rather I will concentrate on play within schools, looking at two domains: i) organized sport and ii) play in rural classrooms, rural pedagogies.

### 7.4.1 Sports

Schools are primary sites for organized sports and Mayurbhanj students have quite a strong reputation within Odisha for athleticism. Many state schools now have soccer, volleyball and cricket sports equipment and compete in inter-school sports and athletics competitions. As one student wrote:

In this world there are many kinds of play. In play there are rules and by the rules the games are played. I have many interests in play. Football, cricket and running are among them. In 2007 a sports program was held in Jamba Block. In that program I participated in two events and stood 1st in the running event. Then I was promoted to the District events where I also stood 1st in the 21 kilometre marathon and got a certificate and prize. The prizes are t-shirts, drinking glasses and stainless-steel lunch boxes. From our Mayurbhanj District we were initially 15 participants but only 3 were...
selected. The other two were in 14 kilometre marathons and stood 1st and 2nd. Then afterwards on the 20th December we were admitted to the national event in Maharashtra as part of the team representing from Odisha but I could not get a position. Also two girls did not get positions. From our Odisha team we had players participate in kabadi, koko, dhanutir (archery) and marathons. 4 girls were in the junior girls kabadi championship. On the 1st January 2008 we returned to our home. (A Jamda student, July 2008)

In student essays on their play and leisure activities, most boys wrote that football is one of their favorite activities, with cricket as the second most popular sport.

Every day I play football with my friends. We make two sides with 9 players in each. A player among us works as referee. Boys, girls and old people gather in the playground to watch our game. They cheer us and clap which makes us very happy. In the evening we return home (Student, July 2008).

Another student writes:

I always feel happy about games, sports and entertainment. I play cricket and have won many prizes. I have also won prizes in football. I also enjoy film and songs. I have tried to learn music, dance and singing also. I like a lot of things but the most I like is cricket and football.

The sports and games encouraged by school have gender dimensions. As is common throughout the world, there is a gender bias in favor of boys' team sports in the schools' promotion of cricket, football and volleyball. Girls at school (and in inter-school competitions) do play the traditional team games kabadi, kho kho, bahu chor etc. Within the schools and in inter-school competitions these receive less public recognition than football and cricket.

Mayurbhanj schools also organize annual sports carnivals, which are important social events for the entire local communities, adults and children alike. The sports carnivals are held in winter (January/February) and the events attract families from many surrounding villages and stall holders from far and wide. While the carnivals foreground school-students' athletics and sports competitions, there are adult events too, including archery contests, inter-village tug of war competitions, comedy events, male-only attendance cockfights and inter-village tribal dance displays. The sports carnivals represent one of the ways that the school is open
and interactive with the cultural expressions of the local communities: tribal dances, cockfights, archery, village markets and so on.

While outdoor sport is an important element of many schools, it was also evident that the current program of construction of new school and hostel buildings was radically reducing children's outdoor play spaces, particularly in schools closest to the block headquarters. Playgrounds and outdoor sports fields were not within the planning priorities of a good many schools. Such schools with several hundred students would end up with meager parcels of outdoor space by the time building construction is complete.

7.4.2 Play-based learning in the Classroom?

While games, sports and PT are part of the curricula of all schools and quite visible, it was much harder to see visible evidence of play- and games-based teaching strategies in rural classrooms. As we have noted, teacher absences often mean that children are given study tasks from readers and assigned text book based written exercises to carry out and then left to work independently or under the supervision of an assistant teacher (sometimes cane-wielding). Students are often either expected to work silently or to memorize texts aloud through rote recitations. If a teacher was present then students listen to their teacher's lectures or follow teacher-directed instructions.

Observations in school settings and conversations with students, teachers and the headmaster repeatedly showed that a teacher-centered, disciplinarian teaching style, is locally deemed to be the expected register for a teacher. This may partially be related to a long tradition of guru-shiksha (master-disciple) teaching/learning modes. In rural schools it may also be based on the fact that, teachers or volunteers who single handedly manage dozens and sometimes hundreds of children may find it easier to simply exert stern authority over their large classes than to facilitate active peer learning strategies. Ultimately, rote learning of textbook subject matter was the primary pedagogical approach.

There was little pedagogical utilization of active and peer interactive, enthralling simulation and other playful methodologies in the classroom despite the fact that rural and tribal areas such as Jamda have well established traditions of utilizing playful and dramatic media to convey new ideas. For example there is an ongoing
tradition of riddles, conundrums and word games in the poetic languages of Santali and Ho, through which much general and philosophical knowledge is conveyed. Village dramas are also a common medium to provide social commentary and community education on topical, historical and legendary subjects. Such dramas teach through irony, satire and metaphor. Gurucharan explained that the stage dramas that are a highlight of the Santal Sendra Mela engage with themes of contemporary issues relevant to the pan-Indian Santal community. NGOs also frequently utilize village street-dramas as a way to promote health education messages. In other words, the notion of teaching through playful strategies is not uncommon in rural areas, but is not widely incorporated in classroom learning strategies.

In her 2004 ethnographic study, Barbara Lotz pointed out that language and cultural barriers still prevent many Odishan Santal school students from remaining in school (Lotz, 2004). High drop out rates among tribal students can often be traced to the fact that schools teach in Odiya, the state language, whereas many tribal students initially come to school speaking only their mother tongue, i.e., Santali or Ho, or other minority languages. They are therefore immediately disadvantaged compared to caste Hindu or SC students whose mother tongue is Odiya. The language-hurdle of tribal students (who in Jamda make up 70% of students) is compounded if the teacher is not culturally sensitive to Santal or Ho cultural life-worlds. In this context Lotz argues that play based and dramatic student-activities that engage with tribal students’ cultural paradigmatic contexts can play a crucial role in student learning and consequent retention in school up to higher years (2004). Lotz’s summations are backed up by a significant literature on the learning of a second language, which suggests that active learning through

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It should be noted that since 2008 Santali is now recognized as an MIL (Mother India Language) which means that now it is compulsory for Santal to be a language used/taught in elementary schools in Santal areas. However, the bulk of text books are still in Odiya and if teachers are not Santal speakers then Odiya is automatically the language of instruction.
encouraging speaking, role-plays, play and creating interactive learning pathways between already-known life-worlds and cultural paradigms and the new language are vital.

The consideration of play based learning strategies goes beyond the needs of rural students who are coming to school as speakers of a language other than the state language.

As discussed in chapter 4, the enactivist approach to cognition, suggests that we have four primary cognitive modes:

- **Point mode:** thinking about and dealing with the immediacies of the present time and place

- **Line mode:** thinking about/dealing with the immediate past and future as well as the present

- **Flexible mode:** unsticking meaning from usual contexts and applying it to a variety of real or imaginable novel contexts

- **Abstract mode:** thinking about and dealing with no time and no space

(DePaolo et al., 2007)

Enactivists suggest that humans share modes i) and ii) with animals but modes iii) and iv) are particular to humans. They suggest that playfulness and play activities are the best form of practices to enact these quintessentially human modes of cognition (DePaolo et al., 2007). In most rural schools organized sport is the main channel for peer play. Teachers rarely make use of play in student classroom learning.

Of course schools have a defined, grade-appropriate body of knowledge that children need to master in each class. However if mastery of that specific body of knowledge becomes more important than encouraging and developing students’ enactive learning and thinking processes then teachers resort to strategies just to ensure that children have memorized that specific body of knowledge. Many of the children with whom I spoke, and who stay up late at night studying, were cramming information in order to pass examinations, or in case of younger
children, were developing study habits so that they could cram for future higher grade examinations. Learning does involve memorizing important bodies of knowledge and thus the dedicated cramming and rote learning of Mayurbhanj children are part of what their learning involves. However, it is only part of what learning involves.

Various commentators on higher education in India, have expressed concerns about the problem of creativity at the Pan Indian post-graduate level. Mohanan and Kapur (2011) expressed: a) a concern with the general Pan Indian over-emphasis on scoring well in exams and on mastering formulae to perform well in exams, rather than the expression/development of and potential for independent critical thinking amongst tertiary applicants; and b) India's general deficit in international measures of creativity. To address this problem at the tertiary level and the tertiary admission stages involves the pedagogies of elementary schools. For it is here that the foundations of systematic institutionalized learning are formed.

From this ethnographic exploration, it was apparent to me that the majority of school-aged children are themselves sincerely committed to the project of their own education. However their enthusiasm is not yet matched by: a) a sufficient number of dedicated teachers and b) pedagogical approaches that encourage students' creative thinking potentialities. A number of Jamda students and parents acknowledged the many positive achievements that are radically improving the condition of schools in rural areas. (Among these are mid-day meals, text books, girls' uniforms, hostels, bicycles for female matriculation students who live at home, new school buildings etc). However parents and students also complained about the quality of the learning environment in the classroom due to the absence of teachers. Many parents lamented that the situation was so dire that if they didn't send their children to tuition they would not pass exams and be able to progress into the higher grades. Accessing private tuition however places an additional financial burden on economically disadvantaged parents and on children's time and even with tuition, many students told me that unless they pay an extra amount (bribe) to their tutor near the exam time, they will not be given the special information that they need to ensure that they will pass their exams. This type of cramming and the passing on of set lists of facts are creating a culture that cramps
students’ autonomous sense-making. Thus, in a nutshell, rural schooling is making great progress. However there is room to address teacher absence and the quality of classroom learning processes. Of particular importance is attention to the ways that learning and teaching modes may stifle creativity and autonomy rather than support it through play-based or enactive learning strategies.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter described the state determination to radically extend schooling into the remote rural areas and guarantee universal compulsory education, breaking earlier patterns of elite preference. Transforming rural education, however, is more than a macro-economic policy shift (from the prior emphasis on an enclave modernity to usher in a ‘modern’ economy reliant on mass literacy and digital literacy). At its heart education involves purposeful interactions between teachers and students and foremost, the student learning experience.

As this chapter showed many Jamda children strongly identify themselves as students and demonstrate enthusiasm for the project of school-learning that in 2008 was not yet matched by enough teachers. As the student diaries revealed, many children have to balance their school studies with agricultural and domestic contributions to their family productive unit. Many students also keenly valued and devoted whatever free time they had to autonomous peer play, sometimes at the cost of sleep. There is an obvious need to continue research to understand and address the causes of rural teacher absenteeism. There is also great scope for further research into ways that rural school curriculums and teaching practices may draw on children’s innate enthusiasm for play/playfulness and integrate the evident innovativeness that children express in peer play in deepening and enriching young people’s school-based learning in locally creative ways. This does not imply a ‘dumbing down’ of classroom learning tasks. Rather, it calls for rethinking the scope of sophistication of play/playfulness through modes such as through simulated problems, role plays, conundrums and ‘making things’ to challenge, motivate and increasingly extend/expand student-learning. This chapter suggested that such an approach to student learning could draw upon (and extend in a new context) creative play practices and children’s peer capabilities that are already well established in the out-of-school rural village socio-cultural context.
Chapter 8  Children, Work and Play: Socio-Economic Values of Play in Mayurbhanj

As I walked through the village one day, some of my adopted nieces and nephews called out from the veranda of their hut, “Auntie, come and join us in time-pass”. I came over and saw that they were playing ‘Astang’ (see p. 106). We chatted and I watched the game for a while. The term “time-pass”, that I frequently heard in Mayurbhanj villages, carried a few different meanings. It could carry a light-hearted reference to enjoyable games, entertainment, leisure activities or social chit-chat. Or it may more neutrally connote activities that would merely pass the time during periods that would otherwise be monotonous or boring. It sometimes carried a negative connotation, referring to wasting time and under-valued activities that would better be replaced with extrinsically valuable, “productive” activities such as, for children, study, tuition classes or chores and “duty” (another of the few English words I regularly heard the children use).

Amidst other local words for play such as khela (games), majar (joking), nathak (drama), liila (cosmic play/drama), the frequent use of the ambiguous and colonial term “time-pass” in reference to Mayurbhanj children’s play and leisure activities suggests that local perceptions regarding the temporal space of children’s peer play are also ambiguous. They slip and slide between being positively valued and negatively valued vis à vis the other socio-economic activities, duties, aspirations and dreams that occupy children’s time. The frequent use of the term ‘time-pass’ and its ambiguous meaning may reflect the tension between a puritanical-industrial-work-ethnic attitude to time use and the temporal rhythms of agricultural-forestry livelihoods identified by Thompson -- clock-oriented versus task oriented time measurement (1967). The latter involve a systaltic rhythm of periods of intense work activity (speed) and lull periods (pauses) during which play and playfulness are important cultural expressions –either in the form of symbolically significant play in the frequent lunar calendar festivals or, particularly for children, in every-day routine play practices with family and peers.

This chapter looks at how Mayurbhanj adults and children evaluate children’s play. Sense-making and assigning values are dynamic processes connected with
maintaining the continuity (and renewal) of a self-generated, autonomous identity in ever-changing circumstances. Socio-economic transformations are unfolding in Mayurbhanj which influence local communities and their sense-making about time use, as well as expectations and constructions of childhood and children’s play. Contrary to a modern cliché of children as ‘emotionally priceless and economically useless’, children everywhere are economic actors, whether in domestic and family production settings, waged labour or at school. Children’s play too, which is also often conceived of as economically irrelevant, is an interactive part of a socio-economic context and socio-economic conceptual schema. This chapter is concerned with how children and their play fit in with Mayurbhanj socio-economic schemata and other work that children perform.

Before turning to local views on the social and socio-economic value of play, I summarize some diverse theoretical evaluations of play and work-play dichotomies. Secondly I will explore what play means, or how play seems to be valued from the perspective of Mayurbhanj adults (mainly parents and teachers) as reflected in local practices and comments that were expressed to me during conversations in 2008. Thirdly I will explore how play seems to be valued from the perspectives of various Mayurbhanj school-aged children. In the previous chapter, I specifically focused on school-going children and play and incorporated some observational play-data and excerpts from diaries and essays on their work and play written by school students. In this chapter I will foreground the perspectives of some non-school-going children. By this I mean children who are of school age but who either dropped out, or who never attended school. For while schooling is increasingly the dominant occupation for children, there are still many rural children in Mayurbhanj who have either dropped out of school or never/irregularly attended school. As they represent a significant segment of the child demography of Mayurbhanj rural villages, their perspectives are important.

The aim of this chapter is to explore socio-economic evaluations of play and work-play dichotomies, especially as they pertain to Mayurbhanj working children. This is consistent with the overall aims of the thesis to see how children’s play interacts with the various contexts within which it is performed (spatial context, gender context, sacred context, school context and here, work context) and the ways this performance is transformative of contexts.
8.1 Theoretical Perspectives on the Value of Play

Work is obligatory, earnest, productive and serious -- not fun. Play is the opposite, voluntary/optional, unproductive, frivolous and trivial. Of course this is an ideal-type characterisation of play that stems largely from conceptualisations related to the puritanical Protestant work ethic (part of the spirit of capitalism) identified by Weber (c2002). This view has however, retained a remarkably powerful influence on western scholarly and lay attitudes and values about play and work that have generated a basic model: work equals necessary, important, highly valued activity and play equals comparatively superfluous/unimportant, frivolous, activity of little value.

Perhaps against the pervasiveness of this conceptualisation of play, much contemporary play scholarship positions itself as a defensive counter-claim that aims to defend the value and importance of play. For instance, early social science functionalist literature emphasizes play's value in child socialization and enculturation. Later social science literature emphasizes play's value in social transformation (Schwartzman, 1998, Sutton Smith, 1997). Educationists emphasize its cognitive development value and value as a learning tool/vehicle (Piaget, 1951). Psycho-analysts emphasize play's value in diagnostic and therapeutic work that ultimately serves to 'produce' a healthy, well adjusted future worker. Play has been sometimes labelled 'the serious work of childhood' as a perceived way of reclaiming its socio-economic and cultural value and a contemporary construction of childhood models children as school-goers and players. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, drawing on the above positive evaluations of play by childhood theorists, has enshrined the right to play amidst the universal rights of the child (Article No 31) against those who would limit or deny children this, or not give it enough recognition.

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16 Article 31

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.
Apart from theoretical and social evaluations of play, play is valuable economically. Today, pervasive capitalistic approaches to all aspects of social, cultural and environmental life mine play/leisure’s potentials to generate profit and consolidate power. Capitalism treats games, sports, leisurely vacation ‘experiences’, entertainment and the human impulse to compete, gamble, experiment with ilinx and enact make-believe fantasies as valuable commodities. Gaming industries and entrepreneurs treat players and play spectators as consumers to be exploited for profit. As the documentary, ‘Consuming Kids’ cogently illustrates, global corporations have isolated children’s-play as a specific global market and children themselves as key target-consumers and influential drivers of family leisure consumption. In fact, according to data presented within the film, the annual market consumption that is directly influenced by U.S. children’s choices is U.S. $700 billion, which is equivalent to the combined incomes of 700 of the world’s poorest nations (Barbaro and Earl, 2008). Corporate forces establish vastly profitable nexuses between block-buster movie industries, game/toy manufacture and more diffuse advertising campaigns associated with myriad consumables including food and children’s clothing etc (2008). Corporatized sport is another powerful driver of international capital and pervades the socio-cultural life of populations around the world. Digital gaming is a prime driver of computer markets and technology advances. Sizeable percentages of national and global flows of capital are bound up with gaming, sports, entertainment and leisure activities. In brief, capitalism thrives on the social motivation to play and the value of play to generate profit. Capitalistic economics theory draws heavily on metaphors of play in articulating its own practices: ‘competition’, ‘playing the stock-market’, ‘game theory’, ‘high-stakes deals’ etc. Thus diverse expressions of play, games and leisure underlie the dynamics and ontology of contemporary capitalist economies.

While socialization, cognitive development, psycho-analytic theories, child rights approaches and corporate market strategic planning provide convincing counter-claims to notions that play is merely a ‘trivial pursuit’ and unproductive, these approaches still tend to retain commitment to a clear work-play/leisure dichotomy and in relation to this dichotomy, industrial, puritanical work ethics retain their force. Play remains an ambiguous activity—a somewhat embarrassing
diversion from what is socio-economically important or antithetical to the seriousness of the work of daily life.

8.2 The Work-Play Dichotomy

Where does the work-play dichotomy come from? Along with proponents of puritanical work ethics — and the common-sense knowledge that certain work activities, being essential to survival and progress, are of fundamental importance — play scholarship too has contributed to the understanding of the distinction of work and play. Huizinga (1970) pointed out that games take place in a self-enclosed sphere, separate from the seriousness of ordinary life. He designated the invisible spatial, social and temporal barrier between games and the outside world the ‘magic circle’ (described in chapters three and four). For Huizinga, play is linked to idealist philosophical traditions and tends to be beautiful. All play is first and foremost free action and a fundamental aesthetic category. At its heart, the purpose of play, from Huizinga’s perspective, is the generation of meaning and intrinsically meaningful experience for players, which distinguishes it from the extrinsic purposes of most economic activity. Sutton Smith suggests that Huizinga’s notions of play carry tinges of the ‘social-elite amateur-player’ idealization of play (Sutton Smith, 1997).

Turner also partially contributed to the perpetuation of the theme of a work-play dichotomy through his articulations regarding liminoid phenomena that contrast as well as relate with Van Gennep’s ideas on liminal phenomena (Turner, 1982: 24). He saw liminal activity (play) in ‘traditional’ contexts as part of the necessary work of a community. For Turner, society is always in composition and part of this process of becoming is embedded in the liminal. Limen (Latin for threshold, margin, separation) refers to public time-space zones demarcated from routine life that harbour social possibilities (St Johns, 2000: 36). Play and playfulness through role reversals and other ludic expressions is a primary feature of liminality. Turner particularly related the concept of liminality to two forms of rites of passage: life-cycle/initiation rites and seasonal calendar rites. Both forms of liminality feature ludic recombinations of cultural forms in which the known is ludically defamiliarized and the natural transmuted into the unnatural or supernatural. Turner, following Van Gennep, elaborated on the three phases related to transitional rites: i) separation from the everyday work of the members of a
mainstream social group; ii) limen/liminal activity (which foments transformation) iii) re-incorporation into the everyday work worlds of the social group in a transformed mode (Turner, 1982: 25).

Although Turner presented play or liminal activity as a special activity apart from everyday routines of work (hence contributing to notions of a work-play dichotomy), he also saw traditional liminal phenomena as forms of work, thereby breaking down the dichotomy in traditional social contexts. Liminal performances in traditional contexts involve obligatory, collective performances integrated with ritual and economic activities connected with maintaining calendrical, biological and social-structural rhythms or with addressing crises in social processes. Liminal ludic performances are enforced by necessity and contain the potential for the formation of new symbols, models and ideas. They are collective representations, symbols having intellectual and emotional meaning for all members of the group and possessing transformative potential for the society that is always in composition. Such activity is often called the work of the gods and hence work and play in ‘traditional contexts’ are intricately inter-calibrated (Turner, 1982: 54).

Turner contrasted the above described ‘pre-modern’ liminal performances such as festivals, with modern/post-modern quasi-liminal or liminoid phenomena that predominate in capitalistic societies. He characterizes liminoid performances as voluntary and idiosyncratic actions of moderns, which stress individuality and open ended processes. They occur in separate leisure settings apart from obligatory work and are voluntary, exploratory, experimental, plural, fragmentary and provide potential subversion of the status quo. Liminoid phenomena are also, significantly, alienable commodities, largely deprived of the direct transcendentental references that are so potent within much traditional liminal activity (Turner, 1982: 55).

Both Turner and Huizinga fore-grounded the socio-cultural centrality of liminal activity or play. In their separate efforts to explore the discrete features of play, both partly contributed to the notions of a work-play dichotomy. Two theorists among the many whose work contributed to a de-construction of this dichotomy are Hinman and Csikszentmihalyi.
Hinman (1975) calls for a rethinking of the premises that underlie the work-play distinction. He suggests that the idea that work is predominantly servile to individual and public needs (extrinsically valuable) and that play is merely an activity performed for its own sake (intrinsically valuable) and does not fulfil any instrumental/extrinsic purpose is based on an inadequate understanding of human needs (individual and public). He suggests that needs are often, by theoretical implication, viewed in narrow, materialistic terms (Hinman, 1975: 328) and it is presumed that the process of satisfying these needs can wholly consume the working man (Hinman, 1975: 331). Hinman points out that there is no theoretical necessity for conceiving of human needs in such narrow terms. A much richer, less materialistic notion of human needs is to be found in the writings of Maslow (Maslow, 1954, Maslow, 1971), Etzioni (Etzioni, 1968) and Weisskopf (Weisskopf, 1971), which acknowledge the human needs for genuine community, love and self realization (Hinman, 1975: 331).

For Hinman, persistence of the dominant model of a work-play dichotomy has several consequences. Firstly, workers partially enslave themselves or others to an activity they call work, so that they may afford the time, resources and opportunities for the activities they call play and leisure. However, the latter remain trivialized and their meaning and creative potential under-explored theoretically and in practice. Secondly, as long as play and leisure are trivialized, there is very little demand to perpetually transform work into meaningful, enjoyable creative activity where actors have the scope for autonomous self-expression and sense-making that are characteristic of play. ‘Alienated labour’ as a separable, marketable commodity is joined by its separated opposite, ‘alienated leisure’, which has to be bought and consumed (Hinman, 1975: 343).

Finally, he suggests that the work-play dichotomy negates a dialectical relationship that exists between extrinsic and intrinsic meanings, values and purposes. The dichotomy calls an activity “work” when its extrinsic value, meaning and purpose are seen as primary. It calls an activity “play” if its intrinsic value, meaning and purpose dominate. Whereas Hinman points out that a fully human act of any kind must involve both intrinsic and extrinsic value, meaning and purpose, for the aesthetics involved in human actions are at the root of human culture and civilization. Therefore maintaining a necessary separation between the two
contains an a priori denial of the possibility of the humanization of the full range of human activity. Moreover it sanctions a social order that institutionalizes this denial (Hinman, 1975: 343).

Sennett pursues Hinman’s theme: to break down the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy. In The Craftsman, Sennett (2008) names a basic human impulse: the desire to do a job well for its own sake, an impulse that he suggests is broader than pre-industrial skilled manual labor. He suggests the computer programmer, the doctor, the parent and the citizen all need to learn the values of good craftsmanship today. The Craftsman is a reminder of the inner rewards of satisfaction (intrinsic value) associated with work on occasions when one’s work is taken as a craft.

Positive psychologist Csikszentmihalyi’s work on optimal experience provides another possible exemplar of humanization of the range of human activities such as Hinman calls for, including those carried out predominantly for extrinsic values (commonly referred to as work). Through decades of research on optimal human experience, Csikszentmihalyi (1970, 1991) identified a particular state of consciousness that he called flow – a state of absorption in an activity where the person feels alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious and at the peak of their abilities. In the flow state both ordinary sense of time and emotional problems seem to disappear.

Like Hinman, Csikszentmihalyi preferred not to categorize optimum experience as a feature solely of leisure and play (intrinsically valued activity) but as a state of consciousness that could occur in both predominantly intrinsically valued (play/leisure) activities or in predominantly extrinsically valued (work) activities. He acknowledged that play, dance and music were ideal performances for ready experience of flow, but sought to highlight ways that flow states may be facilitated in the full gamut of human activities. Turner, Hinman, Sennett and Csikszentmihalyi all challenged the work-play dichotomy in favour of a model of human activity that is useful and respects the human desire to be useful, while simultaneously bringing inner satisfaction (intrinsic rewards) to the performer of the actions. They all evaluated the work-play dichotomy from a general, not child-focused perspective, although there is no reason why their conclusions would not apply to children.
Sutton Smith (1997) adopts another approach to the trivialization of play inherent in the work-play dichotomy that is particularly concerned with children's play. Rather than trying to re-frame children's play as a form of serious work (as cognitivists and socialization theorists do) or collapsing play and work into various aspects of the single category, fully humanized human activity (as Hinman does), Sutton Smith embraces the idea that play is a discrete form of activity, separate from everyday work, that is not directly related to provision of the needs of basic economic survival and which may well be called frivolous. He then reclaims the value of frivolity. He reminds us that the frivolous figures of tricksters and jokers invite others to explore a space where 'the writ does not run', where ordinary laws are suspended or things are not as they ordinarily are (Sutton Smith, 1997: 212).

Re-telling the story of a king who made his court-fool king for a day, Sutton Smith recounts that on that very day, the king died and the fool became permanently the king. The story suggests that play may be the fool which could become king. In other words, in the subjunctive, 'what if?' space of play, children experiment with things and ideas that are considered unusual, unimportant or the fool today, yet may become dominant or king tomorrow. He speaks of play as frivolous as bearing a direct (jester-like) relation to hegemonies, even hegemonies within play discourses such as play as educational and psychological development or play as power (i.e., sports world cups etc) (Sutton Smith, 1997:204-207). In a nutshell, as mentioned in previous chapters, Sutton Smith contends that the primary significance or value of children's play is what he calls 'adaptive potentiation', the potential to effect transformation and to maintain human neuro-plasticity, biopsychological and cultural flexibility and adaptability amidst inevitable change or transformation, which Sutton Smith suggests is central to play's sacredness.

Biologically, its [play's] function is to reinforce the organism's variability in the face of rigidification of successful adaptation.... Psychologically, I define play as virtual simulation characterized by staged contingencies of variation with opportunities for control engendered by either mastery or further chaos. Clearly the primary motive of players is the stylized performance of existential themes that mimic or mock the uncertainties and risks of survival and in so doing, engage the propensities of mind, body and cells in exciting forms of arousal. It is also interesting to think of play as a lifelong simulation of the neo-natal characteristics of unrealistic optimism, egocentricity and reactivity, all of which are guarantors of persistence in the face of adversity (Sutton Smith, 1997: 231).
Thus Sutton Smith diverges from Hinman’s questions of extrinsic or intrinsic values in either work or play to query what else may distinguish them. One candidate is that both work and play involve patterned activity but with differences regarding predictability of outcome. In work, human actions are patterned to generate rather predictable outcomes, as when crafts-folk follow patterns of activity (in pot-making, weaving, iron-work etc) that they know from prior experience will efficiently produce fairly predictable products (pots, cloth, tools). In play, actions may be patterned but with unpredictable outcomes, as in the unpredictable triumph or defeat that follow the patterned actions (rules) of playing kabadi or karom board. Here, it is the thrill of uncertainty rather than predictability of outcome that inspires action. Play may also be a space where new patterns or transformed patterns are created, tried out, or tested for their limits, as occurs in tinkering and in fantasy play. The not-knowing associated with play provides excitement and enjoyment.

Of course one may argue that certain work activities too involve uncertain outcomes, such as creating and testing out scientific hypotheses or artistic works. I would respond by suggesting that playfulness (attuned to various levels of sophistication) as an attitudinal approach is appropriate in these forms of open-ended work. For instance Einstein’s ability to play mentally with ideas generated important new perspectives and insights such as his play with the idea of what it would be like to drop a ball in an elevator in space, compared to dropping a ball in a stationary elevator on earth, as part of his hypothesising about gravity in relation to special relativity.

Furthering this theme of play as a mode of engaging with uncertain circumstances at work, various commentators such as Pat Kane suggest that it is increasingly useful to draw upon aspects of play and playfulness in approach to modern work. This does not mean setting up play stations or games rooms in organizations. He suggests that it may entail organizations offering resources, human and technical, for the diverse exploration and open ended development of their staff (Kane, 2006). Kane draws on the work of Sennett who suggests that some of the premises of the work ethic call for reconceptualization in the face of the culture of new capitalism. Sennett suggests that the ideal man or woman of new capitalism faces three challenges. The first concerns time and how to manage a life narrative or
even do without a sustained sense of self as one moves between short term relationships while migrating from task to task, job to job and place to place. The second challenge concerns talent and how to develop new skills and mine potential abilities. As the shelf life of many skills is now short, the ideal of craftmanship and associated moral virtues such as commitment, which are seen as past-achievements are currently less celebrated/rewarded than potential ability. The third challenge concerns surrender; that is how to let go of the past as necessitated by the first two challenges (Sennett, 2006: 4-5). All of these circumstances, Kane suggests, point to the increasing need for the kind of flexibility and adaptive potentiation that Sutton Smith describes as the primary quality and effect of play.

In brief, Hinman and Csikszentmihalyi challenge the work-play dichotomy, Huizinga and Sutton Smith reaffirm the discrete work-play dichotomy, suggesting that it helps discern specific qualities of play (such as adaptive flexibility and experience of joy) and Turner partially affirms the dichotomy through the notion of separate limen and partially contributes to notions of play/liminal activity as part of the integrated ‘work’ of communities in certain (traditional) contexts All the authors cited concur that play/liminal activity is an important part of social life.

Having explored various Western scholarly evaluations of play and considerations of a work-play dichotomy, I will now bring in some Mayurbhanj perspectives based on my 2008 ethnography. I will explore how people in Mayurbhanj seemed to evaluate play in relation to preservation of life, the sacred life and as a distinctive performance of children. I will look at these evaluations from a general (adult-dominated) perspective and from various children’s perspectives.

8.3 Play values in Mayurbhanj

8.3.1 Play and the Work of Daily Life

Firstly, how is play evaluated in relation to the routine activities of daily survival? By necessity, most people in the rural villages of Mayurbhanj, including children, have a pragmatic sense of the necessity of labour for basic survival. As one student expressed in an essay on work and play that was referred to in chapter 2:
The poor are more laborious than the rich because if he neglects one day of his duty then it is very difficult to maintain family. Therefore he doesn’t heed the sun rays, chilled cold and rain and works for maintaining his family... (Jamda Student Essays Collection, 2008)

In rural households there are always tasks pending that are physically demanding. Standing knee deep in muddy fields sowing or transplanting paddy day after day, trekking into the hills for fuel-wood collection and other forestry works and local caste professions such as blacksmith work, basket making and pot-making are all labour intensive and often require walking long distances. Caste professions such as smithy work, midwifery, pot making, weaving are imbued with a blend of craft/trade secrets and mystical connotations which bring a holistic sense of purpose (material and esoteric) to the performer. The embodied and lived ethos of exerted effort, hard work that pervades the villages carries over from agriculture-related physical labour to children’s study and there is a fairly pervasive expectation among teachers, parents and students themselves that it is student’s duty to work hard at their study.

Part of the ethos of hard work is reflected in words that also inhere in sacred ideas: tyāg refers to sacrificing something, including one’s own bodily comforts through exertions; tapasya is a similar word that conveys the idea of burning oneself in sacrifice – through extreme penances or hard work; sadhana means to struggle, exert oneself for a goal and is used both in relation to spiritual efforts towards union through spiritual practices and also in materially perceptible efforts such as the sadhana of a writer, or scientist in relation to their craft/work; seva means to perform embodied selfless actions for the benefit and welfare of others. Many Hindu students view their studies as a form of sadhana and tapasya which they offer to the goddess of learning Saraswati and feel that the ultimate outcomes (i.e., passing exams, gaining competencies) rely on grace of Goddess Saraswati. I noted that many students wrote in their diaries that they sat for a few minutes of prayer before they commenced their study. Similarly farmers invoke ancestor and other important spirits or god/goddesses for success in their work (i.e. mother earth goddess in relation to cultivation work and forest spirits when going hunting and gathering) or even feel that they are mediums of particular spirits and forces when they carry out certain work.
Along with the very immediate sense that work, effort and labour is integral to material and spiritual life however, play is not alienated from daily and seasonal social and economic activity. Children and adults enact play and playfulness in the interstices between tasks and even during tasks. For example, some cow- and goat-herding boys play board games drawn in the sand, while they keep an eye on their herds in the forest. Some of the girls who collect fuel-wood and forest products told me that even though it is hard work bearing loads on their heads (which are sometimes up to 50 kilograms in weight) they enjoy their time in the forest away from the social constraints on older girls within the village and have fun there with their friends. When children go to the pond or river for daily bathing and laundry tasks, they invariably intersperse these tasks with swimming, water-play and joking with friends and siblings. The pond is a much loved social and play hub. When women and girls work together in paddy plots transplanting or weeding, jokes, gossip and songs are par for the course, not only for the enjoyment of the workers but to create a harmonious and fertile interaction with mother earth.

Mayurbhanj agricultural activity has its own temporal rhythms of intensive work and lulls in activity, that integrate with scorching heat and monsoon rains. The government enforces closure of schools and businesses after 10.30 am in summer to avoid heat-stroke of citizens and during monsoon, villages may be cut off for weeks. In the lulls adults and children rest and among other things, engage in everyday informal games such as karom-board, cards, astang, pacheesch etc. The lunar calendar, which guides planting, transplanting and other agricultural activities is also interspersed with annual social/sacred festivals, during which there are inter-village chau dance contests, drama competitions, cock-fights and sacred play associated with festivals and sports carnivals.

The ‘Sendra’ for instance, is one of the most important annual gatherings of the Santali community that links Santalis living in far flung areas from north India to Odisha. Sendra is a male only hunting gathering. Although agriculture, not hunting, has long been the principal model of living, the hunt with bows and arrows and spears retains deep significance for Santals. The lunar-calendar-determined Sendra gatherings, that fall just before the commencement of the rice cultivation season, occur sequentially (in terms of location) and chronologically (in terms of dates) in different places along a migratory route that are important in the cultural
history of Santalis. The first Sendra gathering of the year is held in Ayodhya in U.P. State. After the conclusion of the Ayodhya Sendra, the next Sendra gathering is held in an adjacent district for the Santhalis of that locality and so on and on until the final Sendra of the annual cycle is held in Jamda Block of Mayurbhanj District. It takes place just before the commencement of the rice cultivation season. While the main part of the Sendra is an adult male-only congregation related to hunting and sacred ceremonies, another important aspect of Sendra is a ‘mela’ or fair in which there are dramas, entertainment and play for children, women and men. Following is a transcript of an interview with research collaborator, Gurucharan on the subject of the local Sendra, just after the 2008 Sendra in Jamda Block.

During Sendra there is a secret ceremony conducted by a Dewar (tribal priest) and attended only by chiefs held on Pigeon Hill. At around 4am the priests and chiefs come down the hill accompanied by musicians playing the local country violin. There is also a huge and special drum that is only played during Sendra which is played continually for many hours. Then there is a period until 8am which is exclusively for men with entertainment by local story-tellers interspersed with songs accompanied by the local violin. During the male-only period the nature of the songs is vulgar, which is why no women or children are allowed to hear them. Then there is a competition for the best songster and story-teller which is determined by who is able to hold the largest crowd. If spectators start to leave, the performers resort to strongly attractive or humorous antics to get them to stay, or resort to bonga puja to use magic to attract the crowds to them, all of which is very amusing.

Then at around 8am women and children are allowed to attend what then becomes the Sendra Mela (fair). For this fair there is a large stage where different troupes of performers enact dramas. Here the themes are more related to the history of the Santhalis or contemporary issues and themes entertaining to all. There are also stalls, games and other events (Gurucharan Hansda, 2008) 17.

The playful dimensions of Sendra gatherings show ways that work, play and the sacred intermingle in everyday rural village settings in Mayurbhanj, reflecting some of the themes of liminality that Turner refers to. Play is revealed as an inalienable part of the daily and seasonal rhythms of social, economic and sacred

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17 In all other places the Sendra involves a collective hunting party by male members. In Mayurbhanj there is no hunt during Sendra because it is told that a spirit in the form of a snake who used to live on Pigeon Hill (where the Mayurbhanj Sendra takes place) was wrongfully killed. As a result the Santals of this area may no longer hunt during the annual Sendra.
activity, even though it is on the margins and in the interstices of everyday productive activity.

Of course Turner’s notion of liminal activity (obligatory, social, transformational ritual play performances) as a part of the ontology of ‘traditional society’, versus liminoid activity (alienated and commodified play and leisure that is optional and often solitary) as part of the ontology of ‘modern/post-modern society’ has been rightly criticized as a ‘too neat’ demarcation between modernity and traditionality. St Johns (2000) argues, for instance, that urban Australian football matches and folk-music festivals exhibit characteristics of Turneresque liminal performances in modern social settings. Nor can we think of remote communities, such as Mayurbhanj ‘tribal’ villages, as ‘traditional’ in a timeless-past sense. For contemporary rural communities are part of the heterogeneous modern socio-political and economic South Asian state. The practices of work and play in Mayurbhanj involve contemporary enactments of sense-making and reaffirmation of autonomous identity. Many rural residents frequently interact with urban life-worlds. A proportion of Jamda residents, for instance, migrate back and forth between their villages and Tata city for work in mines or other cities for labour or small business. Nonetheless, much of the play in Mayurbhanj is predominantly valued as part of the obligatory and ritually significant work of the village in some of the ways that Turner refers to in relation to traditional society liminality. For example, the everyday and festival play that I observed in 2008 in Mayurbhanj villages is also largely a social phenomenon and a conscious cultural practice rather than an individual pursuit and is mostly independent of marketed commodities for its generation and practice. Its practice is an important part of the systolic temporal rhythm of rural village (agricultural-forestry) life and rural cultural identity.

My emphasis on a prevalence of forms of play that are ‘collective’ phenomena is not intended to deny the growing influence of new forms of individual play pursuits made possible by new technologies. In the most developed villages, and in wealthier village households, solitary play with market products (such as playing digital games on mobile phones or board games on cardboard-printed boards) was starting to become popular during my period of fieldwork in 2008. However, from
my observations at that time, these newer forms were still marginal expressions of embodied play experience in the villages.

8.3.2 Sacred Value of Play

Visvadola’y dol diyecho liila’y bhuban na’ce

You swing the swing of this universe

In Your liila, the whole world dances

In Mayurbhanj, many people value play as an intrinsic aspect of sacred performances and it is part of their conceptualisations about the metaphysical realm. Just as games are specified as arenas where special rules operate, in South Asia, including Mayurbhanj, the entire cosmos is often conceived of as the ‘liila’, cosmic play that is taking place in the arena of the imagination of the creator. The systematic rotations of planets around suns and the roles and interactions of different animate beings are seen as roles and systematic rules in the cosmic play. This invests the very word and notion of play with a sacred and metaphysical attribute. Play/playfulness as a human expression is often seen as a microcosmic reflection or replication of the vast expression of the Macrocosmic liila.

Similarly the experience of joy generated among humans at play is often seen as a microcosmic reflection/enactment of the Anandam (infinite bliss) which is conceived of by many as the ontology of the Macrocosm. Playfulness is thus regarded as an expression of a divine state. The fleeting experiences of joy, exaltation or being outside the ordinary that are experiential features of play are valuable sensory foretastes, or glimpses, of a condition that ultimately transcends the sense organs. In chapter six, on ilinx play and the sacred, I similarly described experiential links between pursuit of blissful mystical states, and mediumship with children’s embodied joyful experiences of playful dizzy-making through spinning, turning upside down, sliding, swinging, riding with speed etc.

The appreciation of liila as a sacred phenomenon is also reflected in attributing playfulness to Gods, Goddesses, deities and other entities such as spirits. Gell

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18 Prabhat Samgiit collection, song number 2777 (Shrii P.R. Sarkar)
describes a similar association of divinities and playfulness amongst the Muria in Chattisgar (Gell, 1980). In Odisha, the state deity, Jaganath, is a particular manifestation of Krishna, indicated by the fact that Jaganath is always flanked by Balaram and Subhadra, who are the names respectively of the elder brother and younger sister of Krishna. In adoration of Krishna, many people remember or ideate upon Him in relation to Krishna-liila and Rasa-liila.

Krishna-liila is a series of popular tales about Krishna’s life and particularly the playfulness and play of Krishna as a child in the cow-herding villages on the banks of the river Yamuna. Local Odishan theatrical performances, songs, films, local dances and stories tell of Krishna’s endless adventures, jokes, pranks, mysterious tricks, games and loving friendship with his childhood peers.

Rasa-liila refers to a tale of Krishna’s youth, when He played His bamboo flute with such mesmerising divine melody that all of the cow-herding girls became intoxicated by the sound and rushed to the forest grove, whence the flute music emanated. Each one wanted to have Krishna as her very own dance partner. The sound of the flute combined with the cow-herd girls’ absolute absorption (rasa/flow) in the thought of Krishna created a peculiar space where suddenly all 100 of them found that they alone were dancing with Krishna, so there were 100 couples of Krishna and an entranced cow-herd maiden dancing in a circle dance. As mentioned on page 183, a number of Jamda Santhali villages have large populations of ‘Olek’ followers (a Krsna-Radha cult) who periodically hold all night Kirtans (devotional chanting cycles) with these very themes of Krishnaliila and Rasa liila, which infuses local conceptualisations of play with particular mystic references. The block headquarters also hosts a 72 hour annual kirtan and megaphones broadcast this so it is heard in many surrounding villages.

In the Ratha Yatra (chariot festival), each year in July, the God Jaganath (Krishna) and his brother and sister come out of their home (the temple) and ride by chariot to visit their maternal uncle. The festival lasts for nine days during which time the temple images of Jaganath, Balaram and Subhadra come out of the temple and stay in highly decorated chariots on the road where devotees may have ‘darshan’ (to have a mutual visual encounter -- seeing and being seen by the God) and at set times pull the large chariots along the road. This is particularly significant for those lower caste Hindus and tribals who are ordinarily prevented from entering the
inner sanctums of temples for darshan. During the chariot festival the fair-ground and magic shows were obviously central attractions for participants. When I went with a jeep-load of adopted relatives from the village where I stayed to participate in the 2008 Ratha Yatra in Rairangpur, many of the children were so pre-occupied with the fair ground that they missed the main sacred event of the pulling of Lord Jaganath's chariot. Yet they went home satisfied, not only with their fair ground experience, but with the sense that they had spiritually participated in the Ratha festival. Even the sacred performance of pulling the Chariot was a thoroughly playful performance as well as a devotional, sacred performance for those who did participate.

During the final day of Saraswati Puja (puja for the Goddess of learning, knowledge and music) school students become raucous and full of playful antics as they take the image of Saraswati on a parade, dancing with her through the streets, before immersing her in their local pond or river. The swing festival described in chapter six is another example of festivals where vertiginous play is the pivotal activity. Many of the local Tantrik gods and goddesses of the Mayurbhanj Santali, Ho and the SC communities invoke playfulness. For example the gods/goddesses and spirits are in a playful mood during the spring festivals of Baha (flower festival) for the Santhalis. As part of this mood, people jokingly throw water at each other. During Makar Sankrant, (winter solstice festival) people cross dress and dance in each others' villages. Monkey Drink festival is another Santali festival where playfulness is prominent. Thus, Mayurbhanj boundaries between play and sacred performances are blurred and this represents part of the sense-making or evaluation that local people bring to the enactment of play. That is, one pleases the God and is in communion with the deity through embodying the carefree play spirit.

Another blurred boundary between play and sacredness involves the ways that local people inevitably call upon deities and sacred technologies (mantras and other tantric practices) to win games and contests; use victory in contests as evidence of divine favour or divination; and rely on dreams and auspicious omens as evidence that they will win in an upcoming event. Often children would, with a mix of playfulness and seriousness, hold the dice or other play objects to their forehead and utter mantras before taking their turn, or simply call on a deity to
help them during the game. Occasionally I saw a child squat and bang his head on the earth in a supplication to “Ma” the Goddess of the earth for triumph in his sport. Men who compete in cockfights (p. 187) draw heavily on multiple omens and technologies of magic, as do contestants in archery contests. As described above, some of the contestants in the Sendra song and story-telling contests also used Bonga puja to win. For in play, players wholeheartedly perform actions and respond to interactions; yet they are compelled to surrender the outcomes of their actions (winning, losing, the nature of experience etc) which seem to be beyond the control of individual players or their sum. This brings a mysterious unpredictability to the realm of play, which many people in Mayurbhanj associate with divine forces.

8.3.3 Play as a Childhood Enactment

8.3.3.1 Adult Perspectives

Local evaluations of play as a special enactment of children can be approached from the perspectives of both Mayurbhanj adults and of children. From adults’ perspectives, making sense of childhood play and social values about it are intertwined with constructions of childhood and everyday expectations of children. In almost all societies adults determine the expected and permitted activities of children and establish the division of labour of that society. Children must find their own ways to work within those constraints.

Mayurbhanj parents of school aged children approached their children’s play in several ways. Many of the parents whom I spoke with spoke favourably about children’s play in both every day and festival contexts and felt that children’s play brings life and joy to the village. One parent told me that seeing and hearing village children at play reminds him of his own childhood play. Other adults concurred that the sights and sounds of children’s play invokes a happy atmosphere and at times nostalgia amongst adults in the village. During festivals, parents expected their children to play in ritually determined ways (i.e., swinging during Raja Sankrant; throwing water or coloured powder during the Baha (for Santalis) and Holi for Hindus; dressing up and dancing or carrying out other dramatic performances during Makar Sankrant and Uda Yatra). As chapter four suggests adult nurturers initiate children into play in play antecedent behaviors and model play to them. Adults often teach children games and play them with young people.
Mayurbhanj adults rarely participate in children's active games as they are expected to embody a particular gravitas in their actions and expressions, however they regularly play board games with children.

In the school settings, teachers supervised and encouraged various team sports including notably, cricket, football and volleyball and athletic forms of play. Teachers are also instrumental in organizing the important annual school/inter-village sports carnival, which is a major event for rural adults as well as children. Mayurbhanj schools are also quite well known for participation in district and state level sporting competitions and some teachers play important roles in facilitating students' participation in these events.

However, although on the one hand many adults in the villages expressed appreciation for children's enactments of play and games and facilitate them, on the other hand, the expectations and commands of parents and teachers are significant constraints on children's scope to engage in peer play, especially autonomously determined everyday peer play. Parents, teachers and other adults connected with children enact their own values of pragmatic division of labour, organisation of children's time-use and senses of appropriate disciplining and guiding children in their care.

Amidst these adult determinations, the importance of children's peer play is delimited and constantly straining against other work expectations of children and of adults. For example, anganwadi centres (preschool children's health and education centres) are meant to provide a play-based pre-school programme for rural children under six years old. However, as anganwadi centres are also expected to provide a host of other services (midday meal for preschoolers, health services to pregnant and post-natal women and babies, and maintain village health records) most anganwadi workers do not actually deliver the pre-school play-based programme at all. Children simply come to collect the cooked midday meal and then return home. Even if a programme is held, teachers largely use the time to discipline children rather than to facilitate play and games.

Socio-economic transformation is as constant and as old as human history. Mayurbhanj District has passed through centuries of social and economic transformations with waves of immigration-settlement, latterly of Santhalis, Ho
and other 'tribal' communities, who, in the Jamda area, cleared dense forests, established villages and brought land under rice-cultivation. Jamda later had influxes of caste Hindus. Contemporary rural Jamda is in a particular economic transition in which locals participate in co-existing forms of economy. On the one hand the jajmani system is still arguably the backbone of the Mayurbhanj village economy, along with other locally self-reliant goods and services trades. In the jajmani system, rice is the main currency. Local rice cultivating families (who are mainly Santhali and Ho) pay traditional village service providers (i.e., blacksmiths, weavers, potters, dai-midwives and Tantrik priests and sacred specialists) with rice once a year after the harvest for the services they provide to the villagers throughout the year. Rice stores serve as both annual staple food supply and household banks (as rice may also be converted into cash at any time through negotiations with rice agents who move through the villages with gigantic iron scales to purchase rice for municipal markets). Apart from this dominant form of non-monetary exchange of traditional services for either rice stocks or other services (jajmani), other aspects of the local economy are similarly economically locally self-reliant. Notable examples are forest-gathering, where products including firewood, construction timber, medicinal herbs, forest fruits, berries, mushrooms, edible leaves, tubers and sal leaves used in plate making, and mahua flowers for beer are sold in local village markets and consumed locally or exchanged for other local products or services without the involvement of cash.

The other dimension of the local economy is the cash economy with exchanges of labour and services for wages and products for cash sale. Part of the cash economy relates to interactions with the state through Block development schemes (NREGS) and government services and part through markets and rural businesses. As participants within the cash economy, most Mayurbhanj families frequently aspire to have one or more family members enter government service or business. Failing to achieve these occupations, many end up entering the waged work-force away from their local villages in mines, construction sites, brickworks, factories or domestic service etc. It should be noted however, that participation in the latter form of economy does not diminish socio-cultural commitment and involvement with the land or the jajmani economy. Those who do migrate out of the village for work retain strong ties with and responsibilities towards their village homes and the way of life associated with forest and fields. This is particularly so for Ho and
Santhali communities for whom the village land and the forest are a matter of cultural and political identity.

In this transitional period of coexisting forms of economy, there are concurrent expectations of Mayurbhanj children. Some parents expect their children to dedicate themselves to schoolwork, tuition classes and study and their other duties are minimal. The aspirations here are that children will gain future employment in government service, or business, or will enter technical colleges to attain skills such as electronics, IT, mechanics, teaching, tailoring etc. Other parents expect their children to work in domestic or family production activities and their children rarely or never attend school. Many children, as the diaries and essays of 58 Mayurbhanj school students revealed, must carry out an ongoing balancing act of school-work and other work (waged labour, domestic and agricultural work, forestry gathering and jati trade skills).

Qvortrup’ argues that children have always been working but that the nature of their obligatory work changes in accordance with prevailing modes of production. This view conveys a sense of continuity to a seeming discontinuity in children’s work as they increasingly enter schools as their primary occupation (Qvortrup, 2000). Qvortrup argues that children’s work did not cease or recede as their dominant work was transferred to schooling. Only the composition of their work changed from manual work to the mastery of symbols and concepts as a necessary contribution to the system-immanent economy (2000: 1). A concerted emphasis on universal schooling is late in arriving in remote rural areas of India, which is consistent with Qvortrup’s idea that schooling only becomes the dominant form of work for children when a society’s economy shifts from primary reliance on manual labour to reliance on its population’s capabilities to manipulate digits and symbols.

With renewed state determination, schooling is gradually gaining predominance as the socially expected occupation of rural Mayurbhanj children – albeit with a series of significant obstacles to overcome in rural schools as discussed in the previous chapter. While nobody objects to the scholarization of children, Qvortrup (2000) argues that children’s schoolwork ought to be audited as a form of child work in the usual sense of productive economic activity as: a) it provides a more accurate picture of the overall economy of any social setting and counters the tendency for
children to be erased or invisible as significant economic actors (the value of study as an economic contribution is consistent with the necessary diachronic long gap between training and productivity in the contemporary economic system); and b) it directs child-focused researchers to remain vigilant regarding the working conditions of children in the school context, particularly as schooling has long been held up as the remedy to the ills of child labour, particularly overwork.

Attentive to this concern, South Asian child researchers Niewenhuys (1994), Pramanik (2007) and Nath (2006) all drew attention to the over-burdening of school-going children in contemporary India in this transitional period. All describe the ways that school going children not only work hard at school but straddle school and other forms of work, leading to a concerning curtailment of their scope to autonomously enact peer play. Pramanik (2007) also drew attention to the nature of the school experience for children. In particular, due to inefficient classroom teaching (i.e., with teacher absenteeism and inept instruction) if a student intends to pass exams, they must: a) attend (and pay for) many hours of out of school tuition; and b) study privately on top of the time they spend going to school. This curtails time available for autonomous play/recreational activities and entails: a) that the disciplinary styles of schooling are authoritarian and rigid, with little scope for students to participate in determining their own project of learning; b) that the discrepancies between what children are expected to study in their curriculum and their life-worlds and works out of the classroom are too great (particularly relevant for rural students)(Pramanik, 2007).

Pramanik's research conclusions about dwindling opportunities for peer play amongst school-aged children in the East Indian town areas and the nature of play in the school context were part of the motivation for this comparative study into the peer play of school aged children in rural village settings. I found that rural village children increasingly face the time constraints that Pramanik noted, even if they have better physical spaces for play than children in crowded town settings. This was discussed in Chapter 7, where Jamda student diaries reveal that children break their sleep and study in the small hours of the night by lamp light. Some of the other problems of play in the school context were discussed in the chapter on play and schooling. This showed that play is rarely incorporated into classroom learning strategies even at the levels of pre-school and junior primary school. Play
at school occurs in small bursts during breaks and in secreted moments in the classroom, such as covert jokes amongst students.

I also found that in the rural areas there are still a large number of 5-14 year old children who don’t go to school and therefore I spent some time gathering data on the play and work experiences of children who were either school drop-outs or who rarely or never attended school. While previous chapters draw on observational play data of school students and the essays students wrote on their work and play lives, in this chapter I will draw on conversations with several non-school-going young people on the subject of their work and play lives. The next section looks at work and play from children’s perspectives.

**8.3.3.2 Children’s Perspectives**

8.3.3.2.1 School Going Children

All children actively negotiate the ways that they slip between their work and play and co-opt the various meanings of the term ‘time pass’ to refer to their own play. Children are pragmatic about the various kinds of work that they know they have to carry out. Sometimes they belittle their own play as a waste of time, conscious as they are of their work duties and expectations. Other times it is clear that their play time is extremely important to them. To illustrate this, one day, 12 year old Gautama called me to come out and play with everyone during an afternoon games session on the playing field. I replied, “I heard you had a fever last night. Shouldn’t you give play a rest today”? He replied, “No Auntie, even if I’m a bit sick, if I don’t play I won’t feel ‘mind-fresh’” 19.

Gautama’s words ‘mind-fresh’ summed up the spirit of *joi de vivre* that play aroused in players. Observing and participating in children’s after-school play from 4-6pm gave me a sense of the embodied experiential value that children give to play. The children are ‘mind fresh’, they experience enjoyment in the flow of the games and mucking around with each other. They also build up a sense of communitas -- special bonds of community that are forged through co-participation in liminal activity. Their play is full of vitality and apparent chaos because many things are going on at once.

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19 Our conversation was in Hindi
Away from determinations of adults, children have an autonomy of expression which I noted that they guard. One day I was busy typing up some notes in my room when I overheard a group of children (with whom I often played) in the neighbouring yard. They were performing a mock ritual and were laughing so much that I would very much have liked to see their performance but also realized that the children were going much deeper into their uninhibited expression and sense making about local rituals (through comedy) without the presence of me, an adult. The next day I asked one of my nieces what they had been playing next door and she brushed off the question, which reaffirmed my sense that some expressions are for peers alone. Some aspects of children’s peer play will never be available for observation or participant observation of adult researchers. We may call on our own memories of childhood peer activities to verify this fact.

Another aspect of children’s autonomous expression through play comes through creating material things needed for their play and general tinkering. Gautama was a great tinkerer, whose hobby was to pull things apart and see how they work, especially machines and electronic devices. Most of the children of the village where I stayed were artistically skilled in creating clay dolls and miniature pots and dolls’ household paraphernalia with clay from the village pond. Creating these props was as much a part of their play as their doll play with the items. Children were also great at weaving leaves into various decorative and instrumental creations. During 2008, as mentioned in chapter three, most of the props for village games (bats, balls, hockey sticks, game counters etc) were crafted by children themselves from local natural objects or from rags, plastic bags and odds and ends. Children also built sand structures, or miniature shelters in the forest edges of the village. Many children expressed a nonchalant pride and satisfaction in their own creativity of play props. In other words there was an autonomous local economy of play and games and their props and toys. This reflects the way that play interacts with its economic context, for as mentioned above, a large percentage of rural Mayurbhanj economy is locally self-reliant.

In chapter six, on dizzy making in play and in chapter four, in the enactment section I mentioned how children experience kinaesthetic satisfaction in the embodied experiences of experimenting with sensory-motor loops and the senses of “I can” and “I cannot”. They value testing their own limits of capability. Boys
roam the outskirts of their villages with bows and arrows and catapults, or play marbles to test and hone their own marksmanship. Others race each other by bicycle or swimming the breadth of the village pond, or scaling trees in one of several tree games. I repeatedly experienced the kinaesthetic feeling of "I cannot" when a group of girls tried to train me in their loka guti game that is played with stones but similar to the universally popular game knuckle bones/jacks. This filled me with renewed admiration for their dexterity.

Children have different opportunities to participate in play according to their familial circumstances. School-going children have all of the constraints that were discussed in chapter *x* of balancing study, tuition, schoolwork and domestic chores. As mentioned, the way that many children play from 4-6pm when it is still light and then study by kerosene lamp in the middle of the night or in the very early morning, suggests that they are not prepared to forgo their peer play, even if it means breaking their sleep to study later.

Many of the games and dramas and play experiences that I have described throughout this thesis were largely enacted by school going children. Thus previous chapters provide a general picture of the work-play lives of village school going children based on their diaries, work-play essays and participant observations. Arjun, Sarita and a Guti/bonded labourer are several young people who work in non-school settings. Here are some brief descriptions of their work-play lifeworlds.

8.3.3.2.2 Non School-Going Children

Arjun Lohar

One day as I cycled back towards the village after a day of household surveys, I saw a cluster of people sitting in the shade of a tamarind tree where a teenager was hard at work in his outdoor blacksmith workshop. I pulled over and joined the onlookers. Several farmers had brought him their tools to be repaired before the upcoming rice sowing season. He heated iron mattock and plough heads and crow bars in the coals until they turned red hot. The furnace was being fanned with a bellows contraption made out of a bicycle wheel and an earthen funnel. When each tool had turned red hot he pulled it out of the coals with his tongs and belted it on his anvil using different sized hammers until he had straightened and shaped each
tool into its appropriate form. The young blacksmith was Arjun Lohar and he agreed to talk to me about his work at a time when he was not busy in his forge.

Some days later, Arjun spoke with my research collaborator Gurucharan and me about his life while we were all sitting on large granite grave-stones in the shade of large trees in his Ho village. He told us that he is about fifteen years old and the oldest son of his parents. He has a sister who is about fourteen years old and a younger brother who works at a nearby brickworks. His youngest brother, Bijay, works as a Guti/bonded labourer in Jharkhand state.

Neither he nor any of his siblings go to school. He told us that he used to go to school but when he was ten years old his father withdrew him because he needed help in his blacksmith workshop. Arjun said he was initially upset to leave school and wanted to continue but his father would not allow him because he wanted to train him in their family’s caste profession which had to be passed to the eldest son. He gradually forgot about study and said he now has no more desire for schooling because he enjoys his work and likes to earn money and is satisfied with his present work and earnings.

Arjun told us that the previous year (2007) when he was thirteen or fourteen, he went to Mumbai with some teenaged friends from his village in search of better fortune. He and his friends shared the rent on a single room where they all slept. In Mumbai Arjun worked as an apprentice welder and earned R 3000 per month. But he said that most of his money was eaten up because of the high costs of living in Mumbai. He said, “My plan was to go to Mumbai and earn a lot of money and then come back to the village and buy a piece of land and construct one house for myself and one each for my two brothers (the brick worker and the bonded labourer). Because my family are still landless here, even after serving these villagers for ten years and we just live in one room of another family’s house”. After some months of working in Mumbai Arjun got critically sick and almost died. Every rupee he had saved was spent in medical bills and eventually his friends brought him back to the village with nothing.

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20 In a later conversation with Arjun’s father, I learned how he passionately feels it is imperative that his son Arjun masters all of the accumulated professional secrets of his jati (occupational caste) and in due course pass them on to his own eldest son.
When I asked him if he would like to return to Mumbai he told me emphatically that he will never leave his village and go to Mumbai or any big city again. He said the atmosphere of this place (the village and hills) is very good and the people are very good. Moreover when he returned from Mumbai the people of the neighbouring village were in need of a blacksmith to serve them and Arjun’s father agreed that Arjun would work as a blacksmith for them.

As well as periodically helping in his father’s workshop, he said he goes to his own workshop twice a day. He starts work there in the early morning up until 11am when he goes to the pond for bathing and then goes home for lunch and a rest. Then he returns to his workshop at about 3.30-4pm for a few more hours work. He also goes to the jungle several times a week and collects wood, builds a fire and after a few hours he puts out the fire and collects the charcoal as fuel into a sack which he carries on his shoulders to his workshop.

He said he can craft anything that the villagers need from knives, hoes, plough irons to metal jewellery. The rice sowing time is the busiest time of year for him. The villagers pay in either cash or kind. The main payment is given once a year after harvest when each village household has to pay him and his father in sacks of rice and straw. The main households each give 40 kg of rice, which Arjun’s family stores and can convert into cash any time by selling it to the rice agents. The villagers also give him new clothes during festivals.

Arjun was wearing an iron ring in the shape of a cobra and I asked him whether he worships Goddess Manasa, the snake Goddess, as quite a few villagers in the area do. He said no, the only god that he worships is his father because his father has taught him everything he needs to know to survive. He said, “My father and mother are my living god and goddess”.

After talking at length about his work, we asked Arjun what he likes to do in his leisure time, when he is not involved in workshop activities. He told us that he does not play any games at all. After all of his hard work, in his free time he just likes to rest and listen to his radio. It is hard to know whether in fact he never plays because when we interviewed him, it was in the middle of his busiest work period

21 Quite a few children who I came to know referred to their parents as their living gods. This did not prevent them from having very human relationships with their parents. Similarly most children’s relationships with deities were natural and human.
of the year (just before sowing), and he was obviously fully involved in work from morning til night. However there are lull periods in his business too. But one thing was clear, Arjun had a sober, serious attitude and seemed to have taken on the responsibility to bring his family out of poverty, indebtedness (with his brother a bonded labourer) and landlessness. In his own life experiences, peer play was not his priority, but peer work was a priority (i.e., going to Mumbai with friends to labour and earn money). Arjun told us that he derived satisfaction in doing his work and said that in his free time he also likes making jewellery, such as the decorative snake ring that he was wearing.

Guti

While watching Arjun in his workshop, I saw a young boy of about 8 years spinning the pedal of the single bicycle wheel that forms a bellows to fan the coals. For fifteen to twenty minutes he continually rotated the pedal and kept the coals red hot. I asked who he was and some villagers told me, “He is a guti/bonded labourer of our village”. Later I asked the boy, who had a tired face, what sort of work he has to do in this village. He told me that he has to herd the goats, cows, and bullocks and take them to the hills. He said he also ploughs and helps in the fields and cuts grass to feed the animals and carries loads and runs errands and whatever other work people give him. I asked him whether he has friends to play with and what games he likes to play and he told me that he never plays and doesn’t have any friends in this village.

Sumita

One afternoon, soon after arriving in the village, I was with a group of girls who were energetically playing Kabadi. I sat on the edge of the Kabadi field and a teenaged girl called Sumita came and stood near me. “Aren’t you going to play”? I asked her. “I don’t know how to play this game” she replied. I was surprised because Kabadi is one of the most popular games, not only of Mayurbhanj villages but amongst children all over India. Gradually over the next few weeks Sumita and I talked more frequently and she shared some of her life stories with me. Through these stories I came to understand that she really hadn’t spent time playing the common village games with her peers.
She told me that although this is her family's village, as they are landless (they own the tiny plot of their hut but have no rice plot) they periodically migrated to Calcutta and other parts of West Bengal for labouring work and left their hut vacant. Sumita said that she had never attended school and was illiterate. She said that she started work at the age of four years old and over the years has done numerous jobs including construction labouring in Calcutta, brickworks labouring and working as a domestic assistant for well-off families. She said that one of her mistresses wanted to teach her to read and write but she was too shy.

At the age of twelve her mother arranged her marriage to an old man. After the marriage she discovered that her husband was brutal (his first wife had died and another wife had run away from him) and she too ran away after only a couple of weeks. She told me that nothing and no-one could compel her to return. She told me how hard it is being a female here in the villages. She said that her parents would not arrange another marriage for her and wanted her to remain with them to work and support them. She had become the main income earner of the family, working at a nearby brickworks and selling head-loads of fuel wood that she would cut in trips into the forested hills. Sumita said, “Anyway, I would never trust my mother’s choice of a husband again. So I will have to arrange my marriage by myself. But for this I have to leave the village. But my parents refuse to allow me to go, even though I could get a much less exhausting and better paid job as a domestic assistant in the town”.

One day Sumita said to me, “You know what is my biggest pain? I am the one who brings in the main income in my family. My father is unemployed and my mother does mostly housework. But they never appreciate or respect me”. A few days later, Sumita disappeared from the village. I soon learned that she and some other teenaged girls from the area had gone to work in a factory in Tata. After several months she returned to the village for just a couple of days and handed over some money to her parents and informed them that she had married a man from Punjab. When I told this news to Gurucharan my interpreter, he said that he felt concerned for Sumita because it is known that a number of scheduled caste and scheduled tribal Odishan children and young girls end up in slave-like conditions in Punjab.
8.3.4 Non-School-Going Children and Play

Arjun and Sumita expressed a keen cognizance of their own economic roles (which informed their own sense making and identity) and a sense of responsibility towards their families. This was initially placed on them by their parents but later had become internalized, as when Arjun spoke of his ongoing aim to buy land for dwellings for his brothers and himself and when Sumita told me as a matter of fact that she was the sole income earner of her family. They both expressed some sense of autonomous satisfaction in their own earning capabilities. However Sumita eloquently expressed the pangs of wanting simple recognition and appreciation for her hard work and the family income that she generated. I did not spend enough time with children who work as Gutiis to learn about how they conceptualize their own economic positions vis à vis their families and those they work for. Needless to say, their autonomy in both work and play is severely circumscribed by others.

Arjun, Sumita and the Guti’s stories show us a different picture of school-aged children’s involvement in play, for these children are primarily occupied with the immediate, basic survival needs of their families. While these stories touch the surface of the complexities of the outlooks and experiences of non-school-going children, they also illustrate how non-school-going children who are heavily involved in work have less opportunities to play with their peers. This is one of the concerns articulated in a globalized normative construction of childhood as a time for school learning and peer play rather than work.

Recent child-focused research approaches query aspects of this model of idealized childhood where children are supposedly removed from the labour-force to participate in school and peer play. Pramanik (2007) and Niewenhuys (1994) argue that participation in school does not necessarily guarantee that South Asian children cease to be over-worked and will have enhanced opportunities for peer play, especially during economic transitions. Rather many school children are overburdened with dual duties (school related and familial obligations) and have as little or less time for autonomous play than non-school-going working children. Moreover, as Qvortrup (2000) suggests, even for children who are freed from other duties to concentrate solely on school work, the notion that they are no longer economic participants fails to account for school work as critical to the modern economy.
Highlighting this issue does not represent a retreat from commitment to universal education through schooling. Rather it prompts ongoing appraisal of: a) the nature of schooling for children and; b) the ways that the documented potentialities of children's play (cognitive, volitional, social, cultural, affective) find expression in school culture and the learning strategies adopted by schools. At the same time, as illustrated within this section, it is still quite premature to presume that schooling is the universal occupation of children in rural India and therefore the peer-play interests and life-worlds of non-school going children deserve ongoing attention. In considering the problem of how children's work and play, as two forms of valuable socio-economic activity, are inter-woven, two ideas deserve critical attention: i) that children are economic actors without whose work inputs economies cannot survive and ii) that children's play is an important expression and indicator of a given economy.

8.4 Conclusion

Mayurbhanj sense-making about play and work adds another dimension to global considerations of what play means and does socio-economically. It seemed to me that in rural Odisha, the sacred/divine is the place where work and play touch.

In certain ways, local attitudes to play in Mayurbhanj reflect some aspects of Turner's notions of 'traditional societies', where liminal activity is part of obligatory, collective socio-economic and sacred activity. Ideas about liila (cosmic play) influence local meanings and generate positive values about play and the experience of joy that comes with play, which is seen as a partial expression of anandam (infinite bliss). However the ambiguous, colonial term 'time-pass' frequently used in reference to play suggests a tension between industrial attitudes to productive time use and agricultural-forestry attitudes, where play is an important cultural expression that is appropriate in inevitable lull periods and that has links with sacred and agricultural lunar-calendar activity. Children's play is an ambiguous area that is both appreciated and constrained by the work duties that children are expected to perform. Adults largely determine the routines and duties of children and although they appreciate children's play, often children's duties and chores take priority over play.
Children negotiate a balancing act between a pragmatic and dutiful acceptance of the necessity for hard work and an appreciation of their own play for the enlivening experiences ("mind-fresh") that it brings to them, the sense of communitas, or peer bonds that it forges amongst players and the general sense of well-being within the village that their play generates. However, working children, particularly non-school-going children, quite often have limited scope to play with peers.

Many of the children who participated in this research are conscious of and conscientious about their work commitments. They also strenuously value peer play and recreation as an embodied mode of social and environmental interaction and an expression of autonomy, emotion and sense-making.
Conclusion

Socio-dramatic play and playfulness seemed to run deep in many rural Mayurbhanj children with whom I spent time in 2008, and influenced their mental attitude to problems. The introduction illustrated some children’s playful response to the photo-voice exercise: children frequently used the still-camera exercise to create whimsical, playful posed shots such as the bicycle shot (p. 15). The video-voice exercise similarly drew out children’s playful creativity and they immediately made use of the video camera to enact and shoot mini-dramas. One day, I asked a group of students to write an open essay on the subject, “Me, My Family and My Village”. One of the few girls who participated in the project returned the following essay (translation from Odiya).

....We have different jatis of people living in our village. Many people are facing many troubles in this village. Mostly we face troubles in the rainy season. Mostly all of the people walk on me. The farmers go to their fields and school boys and girls go their schools by cycles or walking. The milk boys go to graze their cattle. Some passers-by (travellers) and businessmen go to the market on me. The trucks full of goods come to the market on me. Hot road, how many things I have seen. I witness the proud laugh of the rich, the pitiful cries of the depressed, foreigners returning. I am well known to everyone. Where is the question of dust blowing? And the days passed away. Again, black chips were brought in the trucks, not in the bullock cart. Pitch drums were brought to the site. Work men melted pitch and mixed chips along with the black chips and all were poured on me. As soon as they poured, my colour became black, so deep black. It is true. But trucks and carts and cycles are driving beautifully now. Now on both of my sides, trees have been planted. They will be the rest-shade after they have grown to their full extent (Jamda student, 14 years old, excerpt from essay in essays collection, 2008).

When I read the translation of her essay, I said to one of the translators, “I don’t understand what she means to say”. My translator friend replied, “The student is writing as if she is the village road”. Realizing this, I was moved by the imaginative, style of the essay. The young author took the potentially prosaic essay subject and twisted it in an unexpected and whimsical way. She gave the reader a riddle to initially puzzle over the riddle: “who am I”? I was slow and needed my translator to reveal the puzzle about the author’s perspective: “I am the village road”, the road that runs through the village, the conduit of local people’s daily movements
and distant travelers’ journeys, the road that is connected to all places and comes back home.

The student approached her essay subject playfully: she is making-believe, imagining and sharing with the reader her imaginings of what its like to be a living road, witnessing all of the comings and goings of her village and the changes, ‘developments’ in the road’s own body (from dusty to tar). Her playful essay is both nonsense (i.e., she is not really the road) and conveying sense-making about change, about way-farers.

This thesis is my own sense-making about children’s play and the way-farers through the journey of childhood who taught me their games in Mayurbhanj. In 2008 I played with some children in rural villages. I paid attention to their games, dramas, mucking around, idling, and their dexterous skills in various expressions of play. Since then I have played with finding ways to make sense of their playful comings and goings, the order and disorder of their play and to convey my own sense making to you, the reader.

The result, this ethnography of school-aged children’s play in the rural villages of Mayurbhanj District, North Odisha, offers a contribution to scholarship on children, childhood and play that reflects the heterogeneity of South Asian children’s life-worlds. For while critical issues related to metropolitanism and ‘modernity’ increasingly dominate the landscape of scholarship on South Asia in response to increased urban expansion, in Odisha at least, almost 80% of the population still reside in rural areas. Thus there is still ample necessity for ongoing scholarly engagement with the (again heterogeneous) dynamics and ‘modernizing’ transformations of sociality and socio-economics in rural contexts. This thesis places childhood, children and their play at the centre of a rural South Asian study. While much South Asian childhood research concentrates on the important issues of child-work, health and schooling, there is little contemporary scholarship on peer play, a lacuna to fill.

Contemporary rural villages provide a rich context for learning more about the culture of children’s play. As this thesis illustrates, Mayurbhanj villagers, particularly the Santal and Ho retain a strong core of commitment to a way of life and conceptual paradigms in which humans live in a particular form of
coordinated cooperation with the land and its spirits and a Supreme Being. There is still a major core of local economic self-reliance amongst rural inhabitants and socio-economic coordination via an active jajmani economy.

The remote rural domain is also the site of current unprecedented state and international economic development focus and children and ‘child welfare’ is the centrepiece of rural development in the form of invigorated attention to schools and anganwadi (preschool-children’s welfare) centres. Notwithstanding the state focus on public institutions of childhood, as chapter 7 illustrates, there are ongoing problems in the organisation of school and anganwadi centre services, which directly affect children’s every-day experiences. For example, in frequent cases across numerous Mayurbhanj village schools, students take the trouble to come to school but there is no teacher present to run a class. Notwithstanding the teacher absences, increasing numbers of rural children are now enrolled in school and integrate schooling with their family and village-community economic and cultural responsibilities. Many of the young people I interacted with in 2008, particularly the girls, were the first generation to seriously commit to elementary schooling and for some, hostel life.

Peer play in the village is one of the performance-sites where children make sense of their spatial and socio-cultural environment. Mayurbhanj children’s play incorporates a number of features that seem common to young people’s play in diverse ethnographic settings and historical periods across the world. Alongside these commonalities and the ever-popular international sports such as football, cricket and volleyball, there are features of rural village play in Mayurbhanj that are unique. Various chapters have sought to explore these commonalities as well as the geo-social and technological particularities. Chapter 3 explores ways that Mayurbhanj competitive games and games of chance follow universal features (i.e., setting up a magic circle of game rules; competition and cooperation; universal game features of the chase, the race, the hunt, the harassment etc). It also explores some uniquely South Asian popular games and the particular ways that children’s games interact with the spatial context of their villages and with children’s own technologies and play prop creations. In particular it focused on the connection between ‘ma’ti’ soil as a central agricultural motif and play. While make believe play/socio-dramatic play is common amongst children across the world, Chapter 1
and 5 look at the unique features of some of the make-believe dramas that some local children authored and enacted in 2008 and how these relate to the cultural context. Chapter 8 situated Mayurbhanj work-play values amidst diverse theoretical discourses on the subject of work, play and values. Chapter 7 looks at the correlations between play and schooling in the rural villages.

The central question this thesis sought to answer was, ‘what is the relationship between rural Mayurbhanj children’s play and the context within which it is performed?’ This question prompted an inquiry into the nature of relations between: a) children and their play; and b) the wider socio-cultural context. What do play and a socio-cultural context do for each other? This question is of ongoing interest to play scholars and the anthropology of play. Two dominant analytical models offer contrasting responses. The socialization model views children’s play as pre-practice and mimicry of adult social and economic roles for their own future adult roles in any given social context. Here children are conceived of as passive recipients and reproducers of existing adult-dominated social orders and cultural paradigms. The transformation model views children’s play as performances that provide multiple possibilities for/or actualize the transformation of social orders and cultural paradigms. Here children are conceived of as active agents whose play contributes to the ongoing unfolding of a socio-cultural context via multi-generational interchanges.

When I set out to theorize my ethnographic data on Mayurbhanj children’s play I struck problems with both the socialization and the transformation models. I could see enculturation and socialization elements at work in their play: children drew intimately on local themes, practices, conceptions, cultural motifs and the very materiality of their local environment. The games they played often perpetuated a long history of rural gaming culture. Could I sum up their play as local enculturation? Partially, yes. Yet their playfulness invariably treated these themes, practices, norms and traditions in an unexpectedly different manner to their everyday treatment. For instance when girls played the gender roles of vulnerable, coy brides in the bahu chor (bride thief) game, they would suddenly turn and aggressively chase the would-be thieves, deriving great fun and hilarity from this, which seemed to echo the Turneresque proposal that liminal activity is transformationally reversive.
So was their play better represented by the creativity/transformation model? Certainly their diverse forms of play were often sites of creativity and free experimentation. Furthermore, 2008 children themselves were key actors in a major rural transition with unprecedented emphasis on schools and increasing exposure to diverse forms of media, which meant that children’s life experiences and negotiation both in and out of play were being shaped and shaping themselves in novel ways, quite distinct from the experience of their parents. Does this mean that children and their play were important agents of cultural transformation? I could only give a qualified ‘yes’ because we cannot say that all of this cultural change originated in the performances of children. Rather they are often compelled to adapt to changes determined by external forces and processes, local and wider.

These were the sorts of problems that prompted me to seek a synthesis of the socialization and the transformation models in interpreting the social significance of children’s play. My approach has been to regard play as a mode of interaction, or dynamic exchange with social context. This view notes the ways that children at play imbibe their local spatial, social and cultural contexts through sensori-motor couplings, are constrained by it, seek to make sense (and nonsense!) of it and transform it. Seeing play as a dynamic exchange with context respects the ways that children at play innovate and shape their environment (inscribing their own novelty upon it); but also pays attention to the ways that micro and macro forces and structures shape and direct the forms and expressions of children’s play and the ways that children, and childhood, are largely determined by forces beyond children’s immediate control that they somehow negotiate and work within.

The model of ‘play as interaction’ that this thesis proposes is not just an amalgamation of the socialization and transformation approaches. It has its own features that combine insights from Sutton Smith’s play as performance theory and from enactivism (‘embodied mind’ social cognition theories). Play as performance suggests that play is eminently social from its earliest manifestations in human mother-infant exchanges onwards and that it rests on theatrical roles (actual or implied/virtual) of actor, counter-actor, director and spectator. It also acknowledges the inter-relationship between these social interchanges and each individual player’s cognitive, affective and conative processes that accompany play.
Enactivism is a cognitive science approach that considers the computer models of human cognition (information processing or operations on symbols that represent what they stand for) to be only part of the story. Enactivism suggests there is something else that distinguishes human and social cognition from robotic capabilities. The defining features that enactivism articulates rest on a combination of five factors: autonomy (capacity to direct one's own life course at some level); embodiment (a capacity to engage in sensory-motor couplings with a physical/social environment); experience (a concern-full being for whom experiences are felt as either implicitly supporting continued viability of self identity or threat); sense-making (making value judgements about situations related with one's autonomous identity); emergence (various levels of autonomous identity interacting with others to create a new autonomous identity that is more than the sum of its parts and whose actions are felt and have consequences for each of its lower level autonomous parts). The enactivism perspective views children's play-interactions as a special mode of autonomous, embodied experience and sense making that operates at various levels via processes of emergence: within the individual embodied mind of the child; within a community of players amongst whom the play interactions generate an emergent autonomous identity that encompasses all players and produces a shared social cognition and lived structures of feeling; and between players and an environmental context, which again generates a particular emergent identity that subsumes all the players and the spatial/cultural place-time of play.

The play as interaction approach foregrounds the interaction process itself as a synchronic occurrence and experience, which is quite different to the socialization and transformation models which tend to emphasize what play will do for the future of a social system and for the future of child players (their adulthood).

The enactivist/interaction approach also aims to bridge the theories on play as a social phenomenon with the psychological approaches to play. This suited my efforts to think about and write about Mayurbhanj children's play. For while this is a socio-cultural ethnographic study of play, rather than a psychological one, I soon realized the impossibility of separating out the intertwined threads of the social relations of children's play (and the relations of their play to the wider social setting) from players' dynamic processes of engagement with conceptual
paradigms, individual and collective sense-making and the clashes and cohesions of shared and individual feelings and emotions that children were manifesting. This was part of what I endeavoured to convey in chapter one, through the examination of the children’s Goddess and the Tantrik video drama and again in chapter five on children, play and gendered identities.

One of the most important contributions of this thesis is simply its documentation of how some children in a particular time-place (rural villages, Mayurbhanj, 2008) played, and what various local children and adults said about their play and their work-play roles. The ethnography provides insights into Mayurbhanj play, children’s play that are distinctive and which I hope will contribute to a broadening and deepening of global understanding of the scope of what children’s play — and play more generally — is and does.

I became profoundly aware in these rural villages of the blurred boundaries between many manifestations of play and the sacred domain. This is consequently a recurring theme in several chapters. Children ‘play-worship’ and frequently incorporate references to divinities in their play, such as bowing to touch the earth of the sports field mid-play. They have no hesitation in being rambunctious and playful in their own approaches to deities and it was often impossible to draw the line between a sacred act and an act of play. Adults too incorporate play and theatre into many of their sacred ritual performances. Santal and Ho circle dancing are a combination of sacredness and playfulness, where the boundaries between the two are merged. Adults also incorporate connections with the divinities into their secular play (gambling, cock-fights, drama and archery competitions). Many local seasonal sacred festivals involve obligatory play as a means of relating with the divine. Play is thoroughly permeated by cosmological and devotional conceptions: of creation, preservation and dissolution of the universe and the divine consciousness behind it all; and of the intimate play of hide and seek between the human being and the Divine Being. These blurred boundaries between Mayurbhanj play and the sacred were a reminder that play, like music has an inexplicable quality that is primarily related to the experience of joy — and pure joy or Anandam is widely synonymous with consciousness throughout South Asia.

Another thing that stood out was the high level of children’s autonomy in generating all of the props and toys needed for a diverse array of games and socio-
dramatic plays from their environment. This is not to romanticise Mayurbhanj children’s play as thoroughly immersed in the natural environment, for although most children who I came to know demonstrated their joy at being surrounded by trees, rivers, ponds, soil, rocks that were part of their play scenario and the bases of play props, they were also enthusiastic about television, mobile-phone digital games and store-purchased toys, if and when they could access them. However, for reasons of both natural environment and economy, the central motifs of play in the villages where I lived in 2008 were linked to the outdoor rural village landscape and the profound sociality of village life. Surrounded by fields, trees, rivers, ponds and hills, the children I played with and observed were enlivened and joyful in much of their outdoor play. They expressed a gracefulness and self confidence in their capabilities to generate the required play props. This flexing of creative capabilities through play appeared to be a source of satisfaction to players.

Apart from documenting various manifestations of play in the social lives of rural Mayurbhanj children, this thesis has aimed to open discussion of autonomous playful creativity as a vital mode of interaction and sense-making among rural young people that ought not be overlooked in the process of shaping and determining children’s daily lives through schooling. Especially in light of the ways that children’s playfulness manifests a dynamic mobility between the known and the unknown, between what is and ‘what if’? As chapter 7 suggested, schooling typically works in ways that ignore these creative capacities, emphasizing rote learning of standardized texts and an overemphasis on examinations as proof of merit. Finally this thesis proposes that exploring children’s play as a particular mode of interaction offers another way of approaching cross-cultural play studies.
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