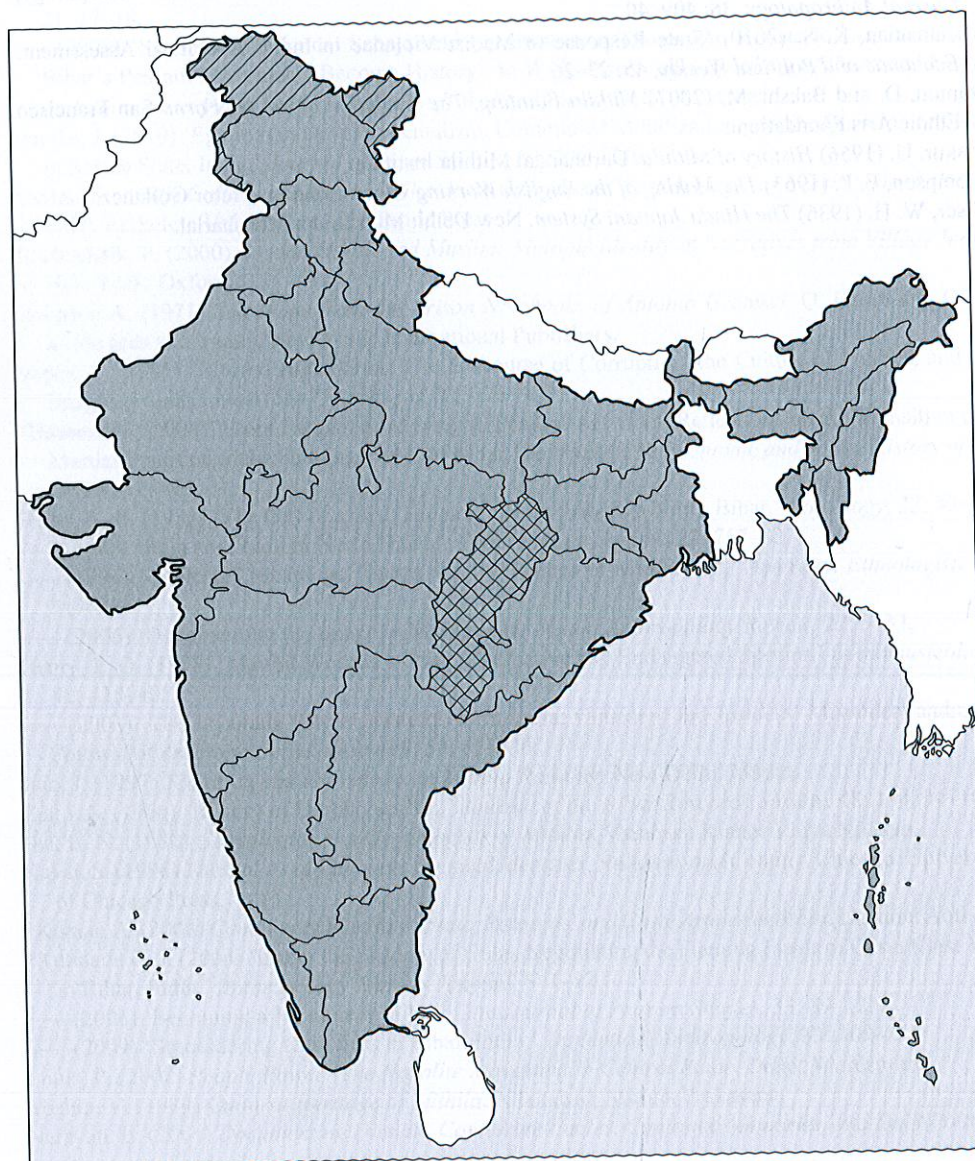


4 Chhattisgarh

At the crossroads

Christopher A. Gregory



The crossroads

Jagdalpur, the former capital of the Princely State of Bastar, is popularly known as the 'city of crossroads.' This image, says a recent political commentator, best represents the political disconnect between the state and the people in the Bastar region today (Mahaprashasta 2010). The idea of the crossroads also best represents the deep history of economy and culture in Chhattisgarh as a whole. The uniqueness of Chhattisgarh as a region in India is defined by its position at the crossroads of a north/south division of India into Indo-Aryan and Dravidian-speaking linguistic regions and an east/west division into wet-rice and dry-grain producing farming regions. These oppositions, in turn, have been modified by the deep and shallow history of Chhattisgarh. The arrows on the maps drawn by archaeologists (Bellwood 2005) of the movements of Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, and Munda speakers into India meet in Chhattisgarh; the sons and daughters of the Chhattisgarh soil speak dialects born of this clash. Meanwhile, the agrarian frontier has moved slowly westward as rice has asserted its dominance over millet and with it, in the mythical allegories of the oral epics of farmers, the dominance of Lakshmi (as goddess of rice) over her elder sister Alakshmi (as goddess of millet) as the main co-wife of Narayan. Rice's victory was complete on the lower, well-watered Raipur plain, but is a never-ending conflict on the higher, marginal farmlands of the Bastar plateau. The history of Chhattisgarh is a long one of migration into the area, but one that has intensified over the past 75 years as DDT has transformed the region from an endemic malarial area to an epidemic one, and as high-yielding varieties of rice have ushered in the green revolution. The arrival of steel, and the human sacrifices this new god demands (Parry 2008b), has pushed the region in new directions: a relatively peaceful melting pot of people from different castes, classes, and regions here (Parry 2008a), a red revolution there as forests are cleared and the mountains raided for their mineral treasures. The new state of Chhattisgarh is at a new crossroad. The old debate between 'tribe' and 'caste,' previously restricted in the main to academic journals, is now fought out at all levels in the political arena as politicians, Naxalites, Hindu nationalists, unions, and villagers try to define the key terms in a new debate about Chhattisgarhi identity: *adivasi* (original-dweller), *vanvasi* (forest-dweller), *dharati putr* (son of the soil)? This has wrought changes that contemporary ethnographers strive to document. The following account locates these studies in their geographical and historical context.

The Raipur plain and the Bastar plateau

The state of Chhattisgarh was formed on November 1, 2000 when the sixteen easternmost states of Madhya Pradesh gained statehood; it has an area of 135,194 square kilometers and, in 2001, had a population of 20,834,000. This rectangular-shaped state, which measures roughly 700 kilometers north-south and 200 kilometers east-west, is on the westernmost boundary of monsoon Asia, a fact that has shaped the economy and culture of the region. The state is divided into two distinct physiographic regions: the Raipur plain to the north, which contains about 90 percent of the state's population, and the Bastar plateau to the south.

The Raipur plain is drained by the Mahanadi river system into the Bay of Bengal. The plain averages 250 meters and the surrounding hills to the north and east rise to between 700 and 1,000 meters. It is popularly known as the 'rice bowl of India' but it is also the site of much heavy industry including the Bhilai Steel Plant, the BALCO Aluminium Plant, and the National Thermal Power Corporation, whose plants at Korba and Bilaspur supply electricity to a number of Indian states. Chhattisgarhi is the *lingua franca* and the state's capital, Raipur, is located in the centre of the state on the plain.

The Bastar plateau is a distinctive ecological zone that begins abruptly at Keshal ghat, some 170 kilometers south of Raipur. It is bounded on the west and south by the Godavari River and in the east by the deforested hills of Orissa. The undulating plateau, with its hilly ranges to the west and south, is rich in forest and mineral resources. Rain-fed rice cultivation provides the staple, but the unreliable rains require that this be supplemented by millet, a dry-area grain whose importance rises as one moves westward across the plateau out of the monsoon zone toward Maharashtra. Jagdalpur, the capital of the former Princely State of Bastar, is situated on the banks of the Indravati River. This drains to the west into the Godavari and bisects the region into the plateau proper in north Bastar and lower lands of south Bastar that fall gradually to sea level. Halbi was the *lingua franca* of the region and, along with Bhatti and other local Indo-Aryan languages, remains the mother tongue of approximately half of the indigenous people of the plateau. Gondi and other Dravidian languages are also spoken by the other half of the population. Hindi is the language of administration and commerce for the state as a whole.

The stark ecological contrast between the Raipur plain and the Bastar plateau, along with its equally obvious socio-economic correlates, has provided the basis for the popular image of the Bastar plateau as a remote, 'backward', tribal homeland, far removed from the modern, industrialized Raipur plain where caste Hindus predominate. The pioneering ethnographic work of Elwin in the 1930s and 1940s did much to promote this image; indeed, a prominent anthropologist of Elwin's generation described Bastar as an "unblemished tribal haven" (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1982: 201). Whatever merits this image may have had in the past, post-war ethnographers have struggled to present a more historically-informed description of Chhattisgarh that reflects the complexity of the present situation, one where Hindu nationalists, Maoist insurgents, and migrant merchants have created religious division, social conflict, and new class cleavages. Comparative theorists for their part have a theoretical interest in Chhattisgarh ethnography because the state straddles the 'frontier zone' between the cultures of the Indo-Aryan north and those of the Dravidian south. This has enabled them to gain new insights into the values that give the region its cultural and historical specificity.

Elwin's legacy

Any account of ethnographic work in Chhattisgarh must, perforce, begin with the pioneering work of Elwin. Fieldwork was a way of life for him rather than a mere academic pursuit. A Christian missionary, turned Gandhian, turned Indian civil servant, he married into a tribal community and became the self-appointed scribe and advocate of tribal people in general. He spent over two decades conducting research on the tribal cultures of central India, an area that included the hill areas of the Raipur plain, the central Bastar plateau, and its eastern rim land in the Orissan mountains. He then moved onto the north-east frontier where he continued to research and write. His output was prodigious and he left behind an encyclopaedic documentation of tribal India the like of which has few parallels in the history of anthropology. His studies of central India, for example, included six substantial ethnographies (Elwin 1939, 1942, 1947, 1950a, 1950b, 1955), five collections of the oral traditions (Hivale and Elwin 1935; Elwin 1944, 1946, 1949, 1954), as well as three other books (Elwin 1943, 1951, 1958) and numerous articles. His life and work has attracted the attention of two biographers (Misra 1971; Guha 1999) but, because he was not a theorist, his writings have had little impact on mainstream academic thought. For the student of Chhattisgarh culture, however, his work remains an invaluable encyclopaedic reference on tribal culture even though his somewhat romantic portrayal of the tribal has provided contemporary ethnographers with many an

antithesis to structure their own work (Gell 1992; Vitebsky 1993). Perhaps the most important, and ongoing, general question his work begs is that of the notion of 'tribe' and its relationship to caste.

Tribes and caste in Chhattisgarh

The notion of 'tribe' is a master concept in anthropology; indeed, there was a time when the study of 'tribes,' the semantic successor of 'primitives,' defined the scope and limits of anthropology. While use of the concept in Africa and Oceania was, and to some extent still is, relatively unproblematic the same cannot be said for India where the word 'tribe' has always excited very strong emotion. This is because the descriptive content of the term immediately invites comparison with 'caste,' a contrast that has hotly disputed prescriptive implications. For example, Elwin's use of the word 'tribal' in his first book, *The Baiga* (1939), drew strong criticism from the Indian anthropologist Ghurye (1943), who argued that they were 'backward Hindus' rather than 'adivasis' (literally 'aborigines'). Elwin, the tribal advocate, was well aware of the prescriptive implications of the term and did not shy away from drawing out the policy implications of his work. He witnessed firsthand the internal colonial conquest of the indigenous people and advocated policies of protection; his opponents caricatured these as tantamount to the establishment of an anthropological zoo (Guha 1999: chapter 8).

Subsequent work by anthropologists concentrated initially on the descriptive adequacy of the tribe-caste distinction. Bailey (1961), for example, developed the idea of the tribe-caste continuum, an idea that has attracted much debate. For the people of Chhattisgarh the problem of the descriptive adequacy of the term is not a matter of academic debate; it is a question of cultural identity that has far-reaching political and economic consequences. This is because the term 'tribe' acquired a legal status in the Indian constitution: people so classified are deemed to be underprivileged and entitled to receive government funds and benefits. With the formation of the new state of Chhattisgarh this question has acquired a new salience because the notions of 'Chhattisgarhi identity' and 'tribal identity' are intimately related. The following exchange between a journalist and Chhattisgarh's first Chief Minister, Ajit Jogi, illustrates this.

Q. There is a controversy over your tribal identity, which is being used by the Opposition and also some members of your own party to demand your resignation.

A. This is an absolutely false campaign. I very much come from a tribal family. Jogi is not my surname, it is a title relating to Jogisar, the place from which my ancestors hail. My great-grandfather fled the village after he had eloped with a Rajput girl of the same village. My ancestors later settled in another village called Gorella and converted to Christianity. But the conversion does not alter my tribal identity. It is obvious that the controversy has been generated with political motives. I cannot be bothered with such pettiness.

(Chaudhuri 2001: 18, 24)

Disputations about tribal identity are the stuff of endless discussion everywhere in modern Chhattisgarh, be it in state parliament in Raipur or in the remotest village on the Bastar plateau. The word *adivasi* is the term used by non-English speakers and increasingly by English speakers. But this term is unacceptable to the Hindu nationalists for whom India is

fundamentally Hindu; they prefer *vanvasi*, forest dweller (Froerer 2007: 33). Terms such as 'tribe,' 'adivasi,' and the like are, therefore, heavily loaded in India and this fact poses special problems of ethnographic description and analysis. One way out of the problem is to avoid the term altogether and to ask what values, if any, define Chhattisgarh—and central India more generally—as a distinctive cultural region of India.

Chhattisgarh as a cultural region

The question of the unity and diversity of Indian culture is much debated but the ethnographic evidence reveals significant cleavages between the Indo-Aryan north and the Dravidian south, especially in the realm of kinship, gender relations, life-cycle rituals, and annual rituals, as Fuller's (1992) synthesis of the ethnographic literature on 'popular' Hinduism illustrates. Even Dumont (1966), for whom 'India is One,' acknowledges this diversity. However, a significant omission from the bibliography of both writers is any reference to the work of Elwin and, as such, any serious attempt to grapple with the cultural specificities of central India. As Pfeffer (1997: 5) has noted, Dumont simply ignores the 'tribal' issue in the sociology of India; his large oeuvre contains just one cryptic comment to people who have 'lost contact' with the wider society.

In this respect Trautmann's (1981) classic work on Dravidian kinship is exceptional: for him ethnographic data on the 'frontier zone' between the Indo-Aryan north and the Dravidian south was the key to unlocking the problem of Dravidian kinship in India. As he put it, "the future of the inquiry into the nature, and necessarily also the history, of the Dravidian kinship system lies in Central India" (1981: 236). He hypothesized the existence of a third kinship system in Central India, but lamented that he was unable to develop the argument further because of the poor quality of the extant ethnography. He considered Elwin's data on the kinship system of the Baiga, noting that the terminology "was predominately Indo-Aryan in its vocabulary, but Dravidian in semantic structure" (1981: 137). Of more interest to him was Grigson's (1938) ethnography of the Maria Gonds of the Bastar plateau because the kinship system here was "thoroughly Dravidian" in structure. "We shall have to rethink the Dravidian terminology in the light of the intriguing case of the Maria Gond," he argued (Trautmann 1981: 200), calling for more data on other Gondi speakers and the speakers of other central Dravidian languages (1981: 207).

Trautmann's insights into central Indian kinship were simultaneously developed by Pfeffer (1982, 1983) and elaborated in subsequent publications based on extensive fieldwork in Orissa (Pfeffer 1996, 1997, 2004). He noted the importance of the notion of seniority and alternate generations as general features of central Indian kinship; but a consideration of his analysis of the specific variations found in the Orissan highlands is beyond the scope of this chapter, important though they are for a general understanding of Indian kinship.

Parkin's (1992) *The Munda of Central India* is an exhaustive survey of the extant data on the Munda speakers of central India; it established beyond any doubt the existence of a distinctive form of central Indian kinship. The distinguishing features of this Munda kinship system, as he called it, are alternate generation equivalence and the division of kin within a generation into named marriageable and non-marriageable categories. He also went further than Trautmann by noting the social and religious correlates of the Munda kinship system. For example, reincarnation beliefs in central India, he noted, are intimately related to "the conceptual unity of alternate generations" (1992: 203).

The Munda system, like the Tamil and other southern systems, permits cross-cousin marriage, but a peculiarity of the Munda system is that marriage with the cross-grandparent is a logical possibility. Elwin (1939: 141) and Grigson (1938: 245) both noted this logical

possibility and reported actual cases of its occurrence. A peculiarity of the Tamil case, by contrast, is the possibility of an elder sister's daughter's marriage, a form of marriage that is taboo in central India. These different marriage types are the effects of two quite distinct forms of generational merging: alternate generation equations in central India, adjacent generation merging in the south.

The Trautmann-Parkin theory has the advantage of getting us beyond the language of tribe and caste, but in doing so raises new problems because linguistic categories like 'Munda' and 'Dravidian' are inadequate descriptors of the socio-cultural reality to which they refer. Parkin, to his credit, was well aware of this problem.

The present work is essentially an account of Munda social organization. This does not mean that it attempts to argue in favour of any sort of linguistic determinism—quite the contrary, for it is clear that the Munda share many if not most of their values with neighbouring low-status groups who speak Indic or Dravidian languages instead.

(Parkin 1992: ix)

Parkin (1992: 16) also noted another problem of significance for his analysis: "the outmoded or indifferent quality of much of the published [ethnographic] work." This point is well taken because, at the time his book was written, relatively little ethnographic work had been done in Chhattisgarh since Elwin's time, especially on Indo-Aryan speakers both on the Raipur plain and on the Bastar plateau. Recent decades have seen a revival of ethnographic interest in the area but much more work needs to be done, not only in the area of anthropology but also in archaeology and history. Cultural geography must be historically informed as Trautmann's method of analysis demonstrates. His distinction between the cultural consequences of 'deep' and 'shallow' historical relations of contiguity gives us a new way of approaching the cultural specificities of a region in a descriptively adequate way; however the language of historical linguistics is manifestly inadequate for the Chhattisgarh case as Parkin notes: the term 'Munda' avoids some of the problems of the term 'tribe' but only by introducing new ones.

Recent research on the Bastar plateau

If an indigenous person can be defined as a migrant whose ancestors have lived in the same region for more than five generations, then the indigenous population of Bastar can be said to be made of roughly equal numbers of Indo-Aryan and Dravidian speakers, with Halbi and Gondi being the major languages of the respective groups. This definition of an indigene, which is advanced here for the sake of exposition, is not accepted by the Hindi-speaking administrators and other outsiders who visit Bastar. For them Gondi language is the marker of the 'true' tribal; Halbi speakers are low-caste Hindus. We can be certain that these classifications, which have been accepted uncritically by many academics, were not based on any anthropological evidence because, prior to the recent work of Gregory (Gregory 1988, 1997, 2004; Gregory and Vaishnav 2003) and Prevot (2005) and the linguistic studies of Woods (1973, 1980; Woods and Bowman 1978), no one had ever made a serious study of the Halbi-speakers of Bastar. Meanwhile, a number of studies have been made of Dravidian speakers, including Simeran Gell (1992), Alfred Gell (1980, 1982, 1986, 1997), Savyasaachi (1992, 1993), Popoff (1980) and Thusu (1965). In addition, Huber (1984) and Sundar (2007) have written anthropological histories of the district, informed in both cases by fieldwork in Dravidian-speaking areas.

The work of these scholars and others enables us to move beyond the image of Bastar as an 'unblemished tribal haven' and to see the place as the historical product of a range of

cross-cutting forces that inform the present diversity found in the region. From Orissa in the east has come rice farming; this has been a process of agrarian transition that has been going on at glacial pace for millennia. Rice, the undisputed king of the grasses in terms of yield, ousted millet, an inferior grain that can be grown on drought-prone hilly country; this happened as rice farmers slowly moved westward to exploit the rice-growing potential of the monsoon rains. They appropriated the lower-lying fertile ground, cleared the forests, and levelled the land to create bounded fields to catch the rains. This forced the millet farmers westward into the forests and upwards into the hills where they could continue to practice swidden cultivation, a process that continues to this day (Savyasaachi 1993). This agrarian extensification was accompanied by an intensification process as millet farmers acquired rice-farming skills and began to grow rice on their lower-lying farmlands and millet on their higher lands.

The process of agrarian transition has left its mark in every village of Bastar, an ecological reflection of the fact that the Bastar plateau describes part of the westernmost boundary of monsoon Asia. Millet and rice are grown in almost every village but as one moves west across the undulating plateau the proportion of land devoted to millet slowly rises and becomes the sole crop in the Abujmarh hills on the Maharashtra border (Agarwal 1967: chapter 6). Within each village the intensification process sees rice move slowly upward to the higher farm lands as millet is forced to conquer the steeper slopes of newly expropriated forest land (Gregory 1997: chapter 3; Gell 1992: chapter 2).

The status of rice as the premier crop of Bastar is enshrined in its rich cycle of agrarian rituals where rice is worshipped as the goddess Maha Lakhi, as Lakshmi, one of the three great goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, is called in Halbi. This association of Lakhi with rice is perceived of as an identity rather than an equation: rice is Lakhi, Lakhi is rice, as every Bastarian will tell you. This identity is celebrated in its most elaborate form during the singing of the Lachmi Jagar epic, literally 'the wake for Lakshmi,' an annual harvest ritual held in the cold season from November to January. The ritual takes a fortnight to perform and involves the singing and ritual enactment of an oral epic of some 31,000 lines long. This is sung by women (*gurumai*) and it tells of the birth and marriage of Lakshmi. The culmination of the event is the ritual harvest of a sheaf of rice, representing Lakshmi, and its symbolic marriage to a coconut, representing Narayan. This, the story tells us, is his second marriage; his first was to Akisrani, 'the 21 queens,' representing the various millets. They get very jealous of Lakshmi and cause her many problems. She runs away, famine ensues, and they beg her to come back (Gregory and Vaishnav 2003).

This tale is an obvious allegory of the deep history of agricultural transition in Bastar for it highlights the antagonistic relationship between the rice, the newcomer, and millet, the existing resident who must now make way for the newcomer. Rice has won this cultural war on the Bastar plain (and the Raipur plain) but not in the Abujmarh hills where a millet culture prevails, threatened though it is on its lower reaches by immigrant rice farmers, their new gods, and their new rituals (Savyasaachi 1993).

Religion and ritual in Bastar is defined by the annual agrarian cycle on the one hand and the life-cycle of people on the other. In both cases the rituals are local variations on a general Hindu theme. In the wet season, for example, the Halbi-speaking *gurumai* sing another epic called *dhankul*, which is also ritually enacted by participants. This ritual, which often lasts for two to three months, tells the story of Mahadev (= Shiva) and Parvati. Gondi speakers participate in this ritual but also sing their own songs about Mahadev whom they called Lingo. As Elwin (1947: 174) noted, the religion of the Gondi speakers "is undoubtedly a religion of the Hindu family with special affinities to its Shaivite interpretation." He adds the contradictory rider "yet at the same time it is but little 'Hinduized'." It is not clear what he

means by this but it does pose the question of the specificity of Bastar Hinduism. One important sense in which Bastar religion has not been 'Hinduized' is the fact that the Bastar caste system has neither top nor tail, neither indigenous Brahmins nor sweepers. As such, the caste system has an egalitarian twist, an ideology that still prevails in villages today despite the migration of many high-caste Hindus from different parts of India into the area. This ideology also prevails within castes between wife-givers and wife-receivers, but not within the patriarchal family. This ideology permeates the Lachmi Jagar epic, too, where castes are equal and defined by occupation, not ranked by degrees of pollution. The only violence sung about in this long epic is wife-bashing, a fact that, alas, is a feature of Bastar households (as it is of households everywhere in the world).

A sharp contrast is evident in the male and female approaches to religion and ritual in Bastar: female ritual practitioners tend to be concerned with the all-India goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, male ritual practitioners with highly localized spirits of the recently dead who have become deities; women (*gurumai*) sing epic myths about the goddesses, men do not tell myths but become the medium (*siraha*) through which the local spirits speak and act; female ritual is based around the domestic hearth, male ritual happens on those special market days (*dev bazaar*) when the clan gods come out to 'play.'

Little work has been done on male religion save for Alfred Gell's prize-winning essay (Gell 1980), which describes male spirit possession rituals he observed in Manjapur village, an essay that offers a speculative interpretation of possession as analogous to autism. A detailed ethnographic account of the *dev bazaar* ritual was conducted by Prevot (2005), a French ethno-musicologist who worked with a Halbi-speaking musician-caste in Barkai village. His French PhD thesis is yet to be translated and published.

Oral epics are sung everywhere in India but Bastar is unique in that it is the only place, it seems from the extant evidence, where women are the principal singers (Blackburn *et al.* 1989). However, it is possible that this is an artefact of bias in reporting. The Bastar women's oral tradition has passed by largely unnoticed, even by Elwin who makes only one passing reference to it (Elwin 1947: 188). This seems to have been due to his methodology. "My custom," he reports (Elwin 1954: x), "was to translate the stories on the spot, as they were narrated or interpreted to me." "The narrators," he adds, "were in the main elderly men, the headmen, priests and shamans of the village." Some of the stories he collected from these men and reproduced are obviously potted fragments from the epics sung by women. For example, a brief twenty-line myth about the origin of rice that Elwin (1954: 163-4) reproduces takes up 5,200 lines of the Lachmi Jagar epic. Even the long prose version of a myth about Lakshmi that Woods (1980) recorded and transcribed as the basis of her unpublished thesis, is a fragment of a Sanskritized version of the Lachmi Jagar epic sung in villages near the district capital of Jagdalpur that Vaishnav has recorded, transcribed, and which he and Gregory are in the process of translating. Their method has been to record actual sung performances rather than to ask people to relate their myths in summary prose form.

This women's oral epic tradition is not limited to the Bastar plateau (Gregory 2004). While its limits are yet to be determined, recent research by Gregory and Vaishnav in Bastar and surrounding regions, and ongoing work by Otten (2009, in press) in the Koraput District of Orissa, has revealed that it spreads as far south as Dhamtari on the Raipur plain and over the Eastern Ghats of Orissa. Variations on the Lakshmi rice epic can be found all the way down to coastal Orissa. However the myth takes some classic Lévi-Straussian double-twists as it wends its way down to the seaside: an allegorical tale sung by women in the Bastar plateau about rice and wife-beating husbands becomes a didactic literary treatise written in Oriya by men about theological consequences of the bad behaviour of wives (Sahu 1965).

The oral epics women sing also vary in a way that reflects the natural and cultural history of the particular micro-region of the Bastar plateau in question. For example, millet and rice have a complementary rather than antagonistic relationship in the Koraput hills on the eastern rim of the Bastar plateau. Here rice grows in the shallow river beds and millet on the banks of the river valleys (Rousseau 2008; Berger 2007). The rice farmers of Koraput extract high yields using highly skilled transplantation techniques, a marked contrast to the relatively inefficient farmers on the Bastar plateau who broadcast-sow their rice and rely on rain-fed irrigation. Yields of around 0.5 tonnes per hectare or less are achieved, making the Bastar plateau quite literally the most marginal rice farming area in monsoon Asia but one of the richest in terms of mythical and ritual elaboration.

To the west of the Bastar plateau the millet culture in the dry lands of western India prevails. Very little is known about this part of central India from an ethnographic perspective. Savyasaachi's (1992) restudy of Grigson's (1938) work remains an unpublished PhD. Further to the east in Maharashtra little has been done since the sociological surveys of Singh (1944) and Thusu (1980). There is no evidence that Maharashtra's millet culture has influenced Bastar but some evidence of cultural influence in the other direction is that Halbi is spoken in those districts of Maharashtra that border onto the Bastar plateau. What we can be sure of, though, is that the contemporary society and culture of the Bastar plateau has been greatly influenced from Andhra Pradesh in the south and the Raipur plain in the north. If the agrarian history of Bastar has been shaped by rice farmers to the east, its political history has been shaped by rulers and revolutionaries from the south and its modern commercial history by merchants and migrants from the north.

Sundar's (2007) anthropological history of Bastar covers the period from mythical times to the present day, with a primary focus on the period since 1854. The Kakatiyas, the royal family who ruled Bastar until 1947, claim to have come from Warangal in Andhra Pradesh in 1323, when they allegedly supplanted the Naga kings whose ruined Shiva temples can still be found at their capital in Barsur. The inscriptions in these ruins, Sundar (2007: 47–8) notes, indicate the presence of high Hinduism, a fact that contradicts the popular image of Bastar as 'primitive,' 'tribal,' and 'isolated' (see also Cooper 1997; Postel and Cooper 1999: chapter 2). The Kakatiyas, after much moving around, eventually established their capital at Jagdalpur, the present-day administrative capital. They also established Danteswari as the tutelary goddess of Bastar, whom they regard as a form of Durga. She is still worshipped annually, both in the capital and villages, during the Dussehra ritual during the first half of the lunar month of Asvina (September–October).

The spectacular fifteen-day long ritual in Jagdalpur has received more scholarly attention than any other ritual in Bastar and its interpretation has been much debated (Crooke 1915; Gell 1997; Mallebrein 1994; Sundar 2001). Sundar's (2001, 2007: chapter 2) scholarly historical account shows how it is critical for understanding the Bastar polity, both its transformations over time and for the different stories the sovereigns and subalterns tell about this. An example of the latter comes from the myths the Ghadwa people of Kondagaon tell about the king and his goddess (Baghel 1982). They say that the king did not come from Warangal but emerged from a home-grown pumpkin. Danteswari, they assert, is not Durga but a local goddess who was born with teeth (*dant*) on the banks of the Sabri river in Konta, from whence her name. Thus *dant* plus Sabri gives *dantsabri*, which becomes Danteswari. Furthermore, they argue, twisting the standard Brahmanic myth upside down, that whereas Durga won the battle with the buffalo demon, Danteswari lost it. These myths informed the sculptures the Ghadwa traditionally cast for use in temples. Today their art is part of the global 'tribal art' market and Bastar bronzes, renowned all around the world, have attracted the attention of scholars interested in material culture (Hacker 2000, 2004; Postel and Cooper 1999). Leaders of the

community, such as Jaidev Baghel who relates these myths in Halbi, are locked in a battle with the government over their official classification as non-tribal (Gregory 1995–96). "The government promotes our work as 'Tribal Art'," notes Baghel, "but classifies us as low caste Hindus; if our art is Tribal then we are Tribals" (Gregory, fieldnotes).

While the political history of the sovereigns and subalterns of Bastar has been a verbal battle involving the use of myths and sculptures as weapons, the recent political history of Maoist insurgency in Bastar is of a radically different order involving guns and violence, looting and burning. Sundar (2007: chapter 10) chronicles the origins of the Maoists from Andhra Pradesh in the 1980s and subsequent formation of the so-called people's movement against the Maoists called Salwa Judum. This government-sponsored program has had devastating consequences for the people of Dantewada District in South Bastar. Some 150,000 people have been displaced, approximately one-third of whom were officially living in camps as of February 2006; some 500 to 1,000 people have been killed and over 3,000 houses burnt (Sundar 2007: 287). Maoist activity has now spread all the way up the eastern side of the Bastar plateau but not as yet on the scale seen in Dantewada, where the intensity of counter-insurgency activity is correlated with mining activity and plans for further industrialisation.

The modern commercial history of Bastar can be traced from the north via the national highway that links Raipur with Jagdalpur. This road has long been the main trunk route to the Bastar plateau and the recent construction of a bridge over the Godavari River in the south, together with a planned upgrade of the road that will establish good road links with Hyderabad, will obviously influence future commercial developments. There is still no road link across the Godavari River in the west to Maharashtra but a track (now a pot-holed bitumen road) has long existed on the eastern route to the coast via the deforested mountains of Orissa. The absence of trees along this eastern route—a sign of the long history of agrarian transformation from monsoon east—stands in stark contrast to the forests that line the roads in every other direction.

The livelihood of Bastar farmers is intimately tied up with the forests, a theme explored by all ethnographers of the region. However, the forests are also intimately tied up with the Indian state and commercially-minded outsiders interested only in its value as a commodity. The large-scale commercial exploitation of the forests in the name of 'development' has never harmonized with its small-scale exploitation by farmers who have long used the forests to hunt animals and harvest its fruits, and cleared it to establish rice farms as their numbers grew (Gregory 1997: chapter 3). The farmers have often been victims of the development projects but not always so, as Anderson and Huber's monograph, *The Hour of the Fox: Tropical Forests, the World Bank and Indigenous People in Central India* (1988) illustrates. This book reveals how the views of the indigenous people, who have a long history of resistance to the commercial exploitations of their forests, were probably decisive in terminating a major World Bank forest project.

Meanwhile, rich Marwari merchants from Rajasthan, poor landless laborers from the Raipur plateau, along with migrants from almost every other state in India, migrated to Bastar to capitalize on the commercial opportunities the economic development on the plateau presented. The merchants exploited the opportunities presented by the traditional periodic marketing system and enabled it to flourish to the mutual advantage of all. Villagers take their cash crops and minor forest products to the local markets where they sell them in order to buy the clothes, jewellery, and groceries they desire. The markets also provide landless people with a source of income from petty trading, a commercial opportunity that has attracted many landless people and marginal farmers. Gregory's monograph, *Savage Money:*

The Anthropology and Politics of Commodity Exchange (1997), describes this dynamic showing how the all-Indian kinship networks of the Marwaris enables them to monopolize the lucrative trade in high status, high valued commodities such as jewellery and cloth, leaving the trade in low valued commodities, such as glass bangles and trinkets, to the locals. The trade in these commodities, too, is kin-based but, unlike the Marwari situation, the Bastar lineages do not supply a source of trading credit, the lifeblood of a successful merchant.

Recent work by Gregory (2009, 2010) has concentrated on the kinship and life-cycle rituals of the Halbi speakers, a theme developed by Simeran Gell (1992) in her study of the mixed-sex dormitory of the Gondi-speaking Muria. Gell's monograph corrects the romantic vision of the *ghotul* "as a dreamland of adolescent sexual bliss" (Gell 1992: 21) by locating it in its social context. This book is a classic village ethnography in the best sense of the term and one of the few village studies available. She provides a micro-analysis of the relationship between the forest, swidden millet farming, and wet-rice cultivation at the village level; an account of the clan structure, land tenure, kinship system, and village politics; and a detailed descriptive account and interpretation of the *ghotul*. The village in which she worked, like many in Bastar, contained approximately roughly equal numbers of Gondi and Halbi speakers. Centuries of contiguous residence has created a convergent culture, especially in the domain of kinship and marriage and in the performance of rituals of an annual and life-cycle kind. However, the various cultures of Bastar define themselves in opposition to others by adopting distinctive cultural traits.

Language is one way they do this. Hindi has replaced Halbi as the *lingua franca* in Bastar today but it remains the mother tongue of many communities, Murias, Gandas, Kalars, Maraars, Gadwa, Lohar, Panka etc., some of whom (Gadwa, Lohar, Panka) have their own private dialects they call *bhaasadi* or *phaarasii* (Vaishnav, pers. comm.). A variety of other Indo-Aryan languages are also found in Bastar such as Bhatti, Bastari, Chhattisgarhi, Marathi, and Oriya, with the latter three, of course, being the language of people whose ancestors migrated to Bastar many generations ago. Woods' study of sentence patterns in Halbi (Woods 1973) is the only serious linguistic study of a Bastar language. A socio-linguistic analysis of language in Bastar as a marker of local identity is yet to be done.

The other way communities within Bastar differentiate themselves is through variations in the performance of rituals. Gell's interpretation of why the mixed-sex *ghotul* is found among the Muria and not other groups develops this argument. What is at stake is a relatively small, but highly significant, variation in the order of life-cycle rituals. Pre-puberty weddings were the norm among many Halbi-speaking groups such as the Maraars. These weddings were celebrated with full pomp and ceremony. The young married girls would stay at home with their parents until they reached puberty, when they would, after a second minor wedding ceremony, move in with their husbands. The Gonds, by contrast, only had one post-puberty wedding but, at the time Maraar girls were getting married, the Gond girls would enter the *ghotul*. As Gell was told by her informants: "The Maraars get married when they are little. We don't. We go to the *ghotul* instead" (Gell 1992: 245). With the present-day demise of pre-puberty weddings among the Maraars and the demise of the *ghotul*, this cultural difference is becoming a thing of the past.

Today the indigenous people of Bastar—defined for the sake of the argument of this paper as those whose ancestors have lived on the plateau for more than five generations—see themselves in opposition to new migrants from all over India who have taken up residence in the major urban areas and peri-urban villages. These migrants include the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. Many of the latter have married into the local communities and adopted their culture; indigenous farmers, for their part, are joining the ranks of the

economically disadvantaged as their landholdings become ever smaller through population growth. The forest lands that they traditionally cleared, now the property of the state, are no longer available for them to expand onto; those who are forced, by economic necessity, to expropriate forest land find themselves strangers on their own traditional lands, their livelihoods dependent on the whim of corrupt forest guards (Gregory 1997). Others move to urban areas, surviving on daily labor and petty trading, where they continue to celebrate their weddings at great cost to the parents of the bride and groom, and where the performance of rituals such as Lachmi Jagar continues to thrive.

Recent research in the Raipur plain

The Raipur plain, also known as the Chhattisgarh plain, is the most populous region of the modern state of Chhattisgarh as well as being the political and economic heartland today. It has always been thus. Its fertile, flat, and well watered soils shaped its deep agrarian history of rice cultivation and commerce; Nehru's decision to establish a steel plant in Bhilai has shaped its recent industrial history. This has accelerated the rate of migration of people from other parts of India into the area creating a complex multicultural society, but one where tribal identity, religious identity, and regional identity are asserted and contested. Early post-war work continued the tradition of focussing on the *adivasis* in the surrounding hills (Fuchs 1960), but recent ethnographic research has focused on contemporary issues and has begun to fill the large gap in our understanding of the plain.

The Raipur plain is an exemplar of one of the five basic types agronomists use when analysing the rice cultures of monsoon Asia; the other four basic types include intermontane basins, deltas, volcanic foothills, and tidal swamps. Rice farming in these different terrains requires specialist labor and distinct forms of social organisation. For example, ethnographers in Java, Bali, and insular Southeast Asia have carried out extensive studies of how the control of the abundant water supplies in the volcanic foothills of these countries has shaped culture; so, too, have ethnographers working in the intermontane basin areas of northern Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, China, and Japan, where rice rituals were important affairs of the state (and still are in Japan and Thailand). However, ethnographic studies of the relatively unstable rain-fed tank irrigation of the plains, of which the Raipur plain is the classic example along with southern Southeast Asia, are almost non-existent. In this respect, *The Aghira: A Peasant Caste on a Tribal Frontier* (Skoda 2005) fills an important gap in the literature, even though the location of the fieldwork was the Orissan village of Mundaloi, rather than the modern state of Chhattisgarh. However, we must not let the location of modern state boundaries constrain our thinking about the cultural ecology of region. The pre-colonial state of Chhattisgarh, from which the modern district and the modern state derived its name, included territory such as Mundaloi village that is now part of Orissa; it also included parts of Maharashtra.

The pre-colonial state of Chhattisgarh, literally 36 forts, consisted of two kingdoms (*raj*) of the Haihaibansi dynasty (Wills 1919). One king, an elder brother, was based in Ratunpur in the north and controlled eighteen forts (*atharahgarh*); another king, his younger brother, controlled the other eighteen forts from Raipur in the south. Each fort contained 84 villages (*chaurasi*) under the control of a chief (*diwan* or *thakur*), and seven *talugs* composed of twelve villages (*barhons*) under a minor chief (*gaontia*, literally village headman). The numerical basis of this kingdom is clearly based on Hindu numerology rather than empirical fact, but these terms for office holders, and some of their functions, remain today. For example, the *gaontia*, as Earth Mother priest, still plays a central role in village affairs on the

Bastar plateau and no ritual can be performed without his presence. In the Raipur plain, where agrarian social structure was more class-based, the *gaontia* was a landlord. This at least was the case in the village Skoda studied. However, unlike the situation for intermontane rice-growing areas of monsoon Asia, there is no evidence that rice rituals were ever affairs of the pre-colonial state in Raipur plain, something that may be related to the relatively low status of farming in the Hindu caste system.

Skoda's ethnography consists of a detailed description and analysis of the life-cycle, the annual cycle, and the accompanying rituals. It is clear from this study of religion and social organisation that it is a variation on the general theme for central India defined by Trautmann and Parkin. What distinguishes this area from Bastar is the extent of Brahmanical influence. For example, rice rituals, as in the Bastar case, are based on the identification of rice with the goddess Lakshmi: rice *is* Lakshmi, Lakshmi *is* rice, and the aim of the annual rituals is to invite her into your kitchen because when she is a resident good fortune ensues. However, whereas the Bastar rituals are informed by oral epics sung by low-status women, the rituals Skoda describes are informed by Orissan texts written by Brahman men. East-central India has the richest source of vernacular oral and textual tradition concerning Lakshmi in India, and the fact that one of the major varieties of rice, *indica*, probably has its origins in Orissa may have something to do with this. Both the textual and oral sources associate rice, an aquatic plant with the highest yield of any grass ever cultivated by *homo sapiens*, with good fortune, and its 'opposite,' low-yielding millet, with misfortune. This is hardly surprising given that the yield ratio of rice is around ten times that of a dry grain like millet or wheat (Tanaka 2002). This rich vernacular tradition of Lakshmi worship in Chhattisgarh and Orissa remains largely unknown; thus the claim by the author of a recent book on Lakshmi (Chaturvedi 1996) that there is no legendary text (*purana*) devoted to Lakshmi needs correction in the light of this extensive textual and oral evidence from Chhattisgarh and Orissa.

It is a comment on the richness of the oral traditions of Chhattisgarh that Elwin's vast writings on the subject barely scratch the proverbial surface. For example, he does not document the extensive women's oral epic tradition that extends over north Bastar, the Koraput hills of Orissa (Gregory 2004) and the southern Raipur plain. Flueckiger's multi-sited ethnographic research on women's folklore in the latter region has added to our knowledge of the latter (Flueckiger 1983, 1987, 1991a, 1991b, 1996; Flueckiger and Sears 1991). The position of women in the rice cultures of eastern India, she notes, differs from that in the wheat-growing areas of the west. This is because rice is a labor-intensive crop requiring the participation of women in the transplanting, weeding, and harvesting stages; wheat, by contrast, requires less labor. Women, who spend months working closely together in rows in the fields, pass the time singing and/or listening to elders singing fantastic tales about deities and ordinary people. They also participate in many rituals involving rice. One of these is the parrot dance, a harvest dance genre performed by female land laborers, "a performance that transforms harvested paddy into ritual wealth, the goddess Lakshmi herself" (Flueckiger 1996: 24). Another tradition is that of the *bhojali* ritual where women plant wheat seedling in a basket, worship the sprouts for the duration of a ritual that takes nine days, and then, on the final day, immerse the baskets in water and use the sprout to create ritual friendship with other women.

Men also create ritual friendship in the Raipur plain (Jay 1973) and it seems to be a phenomenon widespread throughout Chhattisgarh and central India more generally (Skoda 2005: 164). A multitude of different types of ritual friendship are found in Chhattisgarh that cross-cut gender, caste, religion, and communities. Some ritual friendships, as Skoda (2005:

chapter 3.4) notes, create relations of ideological *identity* between friends, and raise fundamental questions about notions of *equality* and *hierarchy* that have dominated anthropological debates about the sociology of India.

The general question of 'popular' religion in the Raipur plain was addressed in Babb's oft-quoted study, *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* (Babb 1975), a triple-sited ethnography based in the capital city of Raipur, a small village some 48 kilometers to the north of Raipur, and a major temple and pilgrimage site. This book, while it contains an informative chapter detailing the ethnographic specificities of the region, is mainly concerned to provide a systematic account of popular Hinduism by focusing on the generalities. A picture of Chhattisgarhi Hinduism emerges but one deliberately severed from its social structure. Babb is concerned to understand popular Hinduism as a "cultural domain which displays a pattern and consistency of its own" (1975: xvii). This was the only account of Chhattisgarhi religion until the work of Lamb (2002) and Dube (1998) on 'Untouchable' religion and Froerer's *Religious Division and Social Conflict: The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in Rural India* (Froerer 2007), a detailed village-based ethnography that complements Babb's study by anchoring contemporary religious practice firmly in its social and historical context.

Froerer's study raises the question of Christianity among the Aboriginal (*adivasi*) population, something that all previous studies have ignored. Her concern is to understand the reason for violence against Christians by means of a 'grass roots' study of the spread of Hindu nationalism, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), throughout the area. Her fieldwork was based in a village near Korba in the northern area of the Raipur plain but it is not a village study in the classic sense; it is a study *from* a village rather than *of* a village, a strategy that enables her to address general questions about religious division and social conflict from a particular standpoint.

The village she studied consisted of some 43 households, which can be divided either by official status, religion, language, migration history, or economic status, and all of which tell a different story. Official status divides by ST (scheduled tribe), SC (scheduled caste, i.e. 'Untouchable'), OBC (other backward classes); religion by Hindu or Christian; language by Indo-Aryan speaker (Chetriboli or Chhattisgarhi) or Dravidian (Kurukh); migration history by the number of generations one's family has been resident in the village; and economic status by measures of wealth such as landholdings, off-farm income, etc. Another division is by subjective linguistic divisions used by different groups. On this score she makes the important observation that the RSS prefer the term *vanvasi* (forest-dweller) to *adivasi* (tribal) because the latter word implies that the tribal people are the original inhabitants of India, a threat to the RSS claims that they, as Aryans, were the original inhabitants of India. Another term Froerer uses is "sons of the soil," a theoretical concept she borrows from Weiner (Weiner 1978).

The conflicting objective and subjective classifications of people at the household level in a village immediately raises the general question of the adequacy of the tribe/caste opposition that has informed so much debate in the past. Froerer's use of the 'sons of the soil' notion has the advantage that it raises the empirical question of the migration history of various groups of people, one that if pushed to the limits gives various answers according to whether we are talking about years, generations, or millennia; in other words, it has the potential to problematize any notion of 'original inhabitant' because the deep history of people anywhere is one of continual mobility and migration. In this respect Froerer's use of the notion of 'sons of the soil' resonates with the pragmatic definition given above of Bastar indigenes as migrants whose families have been living in Bastar for more than five generations.

For the Ratiya Kanwar people of Mohanpur village, history begins nine to ten generations ago when their ancestors first settled in the village; they divide others into those who have been in the village for seven generations and those who have been in the village for just one generation. In this particular case it so happens that the latter group are all Christians from the Dravidian-speaking Oraon community who were granted land to settle on and who have become relatively wealthy over the past two decades through their own hard work and from off-farm income; their relative wealth is such that they lend money to others in the village taking land as security. Froerer's close analysis of local approaches to sickness and healing, local corruption, land tenure, and liquor reveals how the RSS have worked with members of the Ratiya Kanwar 'sons of the soil' to exploit the divisions within the village and to spread their influence within the area.

Froerer's study of 'modern' Chhattisgarhi religious life complements Skoda's more 'traditional' ethnography; considered together they tell us much about contemporary rural life on the Raipur plain. Rice economies and the religious beliefs associated with them involve repetitive cycles that reproduce themselves year after year, decade after decade, and century after century, but never in exactly the same way because the reproduction of tradition is always subject to the historical contingencies of the moment.

Parry's recent work on the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) poses the question of a radically different kind of modernity, one that creates a radically new concept of 'tradition' for those people involved. Steel making is governed by the unpredictable short-term history of the commercial trade cycle rather than the relatively predictable annual cycle of rice production, governed as it is by the cycles of the sun and moon. The study of a steel plant poses special problems for the ethnographer, too. Parry, one of India's foremost ethnographers and well known for his earlier work in the Himalayas and in Benares, found that he had to develop new methods of a biographical and historical kind because there were no 'rules' and 'customs' of the classic type to be found.

The BSP began production in 1959. When Parry began his fieldwork in 1993 it had 55,000 employees and covered an area of seventeen square kilometers. It is now one of the largest steel plants in Asia even though the number of employees had fallen to 39,000 by 2003. The plant has had a profound effect on the economy of Chhattisgarh as a whole and the Durg District in particular. Parry's work has focused on the lives of the workers, their values, and their social relationships. While the situation he describes is extremely complex, one theme that has echoes with Froerer's work is the notion of 'sons of the soil,' which here has an indigenous expression, *dharati putr* (Parry and Struempell 2008: 51). Migrants from all over India have moved to Bhilai to take advantage of the new economic opportunities offered, but the *dharati putr* bitterly complain about the disproportionate share of BSP jobs these people have taken. Parry was surprised to find little nostalgia for old village ways among these 'sons of the soil,' noting the disdain those raised in the town had for village labor (Parry 2008b: 237). New values such as these are found throughout monsoon Asia where industrialisation has led to a relative decline in the economic importance of agriculture as a percentage of GNP. In other words, the 'great transformation' experienced by the wheat cultures of Europe in the nineteenth century are now affecting all the rice cultures of monsoon Asia notwithstanding the political resistance of the agrarian lobby in many parts of Asia (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Bray 1986, 1998).

Parry's writings on BSP consist of a series of essays on various topics rather than a monograph. Almost half of the essays deal with specific industrial topics such as unions, labor relations, and social relations between migrants and other workers (Parry 1999, 2003, 2008a), some with more general comparative issues dealing with corruption and violence

(Parry 2000; Parry and Struempell 2008), and others on more classic anthropological themes such as kinship and marriage (Parry 2001, 2004, 2005) and religious beliefs about industrial development (Parry 2008b). These essays defy simple summary suffice to say that they are rhetorically designed to present an ethnographically-informed challenge to accepted ideas about Indian society and culture.

Take his essay on 'Ankalu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh' (2001) for example. This challenges accepted ideas about endogamy and marital instability in India through the presentation of rich ethnographic data analysed in its broader comparative context. Parry argues that "certain pockets of the country sustain divorce rates quite comparable to contemporary California" (2001: 786), the Chhattisgarh region as a whole being one of these. He quotes statistics from Gell's work on the Gondi-speakers of Bastar to the effect that more than 50 percent of first marriages ended in divorce. These are bolstered with statistics of his own but, more tellingly, with fine-grained case studies dealing with the emotions excited and moral dilemmas posed by affairs, divorce, remarriage, and intermarriage between castes. These stories also tell of the influence of employment at BSP on marriage patterns; they show, for example, that marriages among the 'labor aristocracy' tend to be more stable.

Of more general and contemporary interest is a joint paper with Struempell (Parry and Struempell 2008) that examines the problem of ethnic and communal violence through a telling comparative analysis of Bhilai's steel plant in Chhattisgarh with the Rourkela steel plant in Orissa where Struempell conducted research, telling because, in spite of the many commonalities, the Rourkela plant has been racked with ethnic conflict whereas ethnic relations in Bhilai have been relatively benign. Their detailed ethnographic analysis of the reasons for this contrast enables them to challenge received ideas in the political science literature on postcolonial nationalism.

Which way?

If Chhattisgarh is at the crossroads again then which way will it go? If history is any guide then the region will take the paths it has always taken and go off in all directions simultaneously, with all this implies for the becoming of the economy, society, culture, and peoples of the region.

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The Modern Anthropology of India

Ethnography, themes and theory

Edited by
Peter Berger and Frank Heidemann

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The modern anthropology of India : ethnography, themes and theory / edited by Peter Berger and Frank Heidemann.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Ethnology--India--History. 2. Ethnology--India--Methodology. 3. Ethnology--India--Philosophy. I. Berger, Peter. II. Heidemann, Frank.

GN17.3.I4M64 2013

305.800954--dc23

2012042154

ISBN: 978-0-415-58723-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-58724-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-52322-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Saxon Graphics Ltd, Derby



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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