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What is This?
Commons to Capital: With a Special Reference to the Mundas of Jharkhand

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Abstract
The tribal and ecological history of India has been the history of forced transformation of the natural commons into private property engineered under both the colonial and post colonial state policy. In the following period of structural adjustment programme during and after the 1990s the state has opened the public domain for privatisation by the trans–national corporations and Indian small and large companies. Natural commons is being treated as capital. For the indigenous peoples, privatisation of natural commons is not only loss of livelihood but the disintegration of their communal life, their egalitarian culture and bio–centric world outlook. Disintegration of natural commons also leads to shrinking of knowledge commons, the knowledge of taming the animal kingdom, the medicinal values of vegetation and the climate.

For the women in the forest–based society natural commons has been the storehouse of their natural and ritual knowledge, a bastion of their economy and, more importantly, a source of their power and status. Loss of commons leads to the growth of patriarchy.

Disappearing commons prompts the community to internalise the dominant notion of privatisation of livelihood resources leading to the disintegration of many a traditional institution that strengthens the commons and the communal mode of production. The destruction of the old commons of natural resources and communal labour is bringing forth a new commons of labour market and natural resource bank for capital to exploit and rich to enjoy while the commoners suffer.

Keywords
Natural commons, Indigenous People, Knowledge commons, Capital, Privatisation, Displacement, Patriarchy
Overview

The tribal and ecological history of India has been the history of forced transformation of the natural commons into private property and the property of the state, euphemistically called public property. It has also been the history of the indigenous peoples’ relentless struggle to resist such transformation. The colonial process of dividing the commons into public and private domains got completed in the post-colonial period of so-called nation building. In the following period of the structural adjustment programme during and after the 1990s the state has opened the public domain for privatisation by trans-national corporations and small and large Indian companies. Natural commons are being treated as capital. State mechanisms overtly violate laws that came into being out of state processes to protect commons. For the indigenous peoples, privatisation of natural commons is not only loss of livelihood but the disintegration of their communal life, their egalitarian culture and bio-centric world outlook. Disintegration of natural commons also leads to shrinking of the communal knowledge commons. The knowledge of taming the animal kingdom, the medicinal values of vegetation and the climate disappear along with the denudation of forest and destruction of the animal kingdom.

Destruction of natural commons causes sharpening of gender struggles and results in the diminishing status of women in the tribal society as well. Commons have been the domain of women in the forest-based society. It has been the storehouse of their natural and ritual knowledge, a bastion of their economy and, more importantly, a source of their power and status. The loss of commons therefore, leads to the growth of patriarchy, which is otherwise stunted in their society.

With the disappearance of commons, the community has also internalised the dominant notion of privatisation of livelihood resources. Even where a little bit of commons survive legally the families divide them amongst themselves and treat them as private property. This has been leading to disintegration of many a traditional institution that strengthens the commons and the communal mode of production. The destruction of the old commons of natural resources and communal labour is bringing forth a new commons of the labour market and natural resource bank for capital to exploit and for the rich to enjoy while the commoners suffer. In the new commons of the urban centres the original inhabitants are either fully excluded or their access to them is severely limited.

The recent movements reclaiming the commons have been spreading very fast throughout the country. The fact that the Adivasis are at the forefront of these movements reveal that the collective memory of their egalitarian social life has not fully disappeared and the urge to go back to the ‘golden age’ of commons is still alive.

Introduction

In recent times a section of Indian bureaucracy and politicians have been advising the government to consider the tribal land and forest as capital in the event of its...
acquisition for industrial purposes. The owners of the land would become shareholders in the company that takeover the land and would be entitled to receive dividends. In the recently drafted mining legislation that would be called Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 2010, the Government of India agreed in principle to provide 26 per cent equity or pay out of profits to the local communities whose land would be mined. This is envisaged in the context of the best possible way of compensating the tribal people, whose livelihoods are being disrupted by industrial projects, especially mining. Big trans-national companies like Arcelor Mittal and Tata Sons are all in favour of this idea of upholding the neo-classical view of land as another kind of capital.

This is a radical shift from the hitherto practiced state policy based on the colonial view of land as state property under the usage of the tenants that can be acquired in lieu of monetary compensation. It is also not entirely motivated by the view of conflating land into capital and allowing land rent to be hidden and diluted in ways so that the unearned interest arising from social improvements fell to speculators rather than being returned to society in rent. It is true that the companies acquire land much more than is needed for the declared purpose of acquisition. When the market value of the land goes up owing to social improvements mostly done by the state they sell the surplus land or appropriate the higher value by bringing it to profitable usage. Thus they cheat the state and the individual owners who would have otherwise benefited.

The phenomenon of land being treated as capital may be understood in the context of the ever-expanding character of capital. In the present era of neo-liberalism, bringing the resource-rich tribal areas into the fold of capital is a necessary factor for the survival of the capitalist economy. Now in the context of neo-classical or ‘two-factor economics’ land has lost its independent meaning and position as one of the three factors of production, the land, labour and capital. Now it is only labour and capital where land as capital is to produce dividend and not rent, and the landowner is a shareholder in the company and not a producer.

The journey of land from being commons to capital provides a fascinating story of the changing relationship between human and nature. Land that was held by society in common, as free as the air, water and climate, travelled a long way to become private property and then a commodity and finally to capital also entails a series of changes in its vocabulary. However, this transformation did not take place without resistance by the commoners and its violent suppression by the usurpers of the commons in the past, and the pattern is being perpetuated till the present day. Therefore every new coinage of terms that replaced the previous ones in the history of the changing vocabulary of commons is the product of a violent means to define and redefine the relationship between human and land with a progressively shrinking access to land by the common folk.

The changing vocabulary of commons indicate a societal change, especially a change in the mode of production. Therefore, it parallels a corresponding change in the vocabulary of the commoners, as tribes, castes and class, as well. The changing vocabulary of commons may be traced in four phases, the primordial,
medieval, colonial and modern. This chapter looks at this change with a special reference to the Munda tribe of eastern India.

**Primordial Commons**

‘*Atamata bir ko talare* (under the dense forest) our ancestors lived’, recollect the Mundas. It was a vast desolate forest, *seya sandi bir*, (Roy, 1912: 5). The collective remembrance of the Mundas in the Jharkhand cultural region, comprising the eastern part of the central tribal belt of India, corroborates the findings of the modern archaeologists and historians. Even till the early medieval period it remained a part of a vast topography, known as the Great Central Indian Forest (Habib, 1982). It occupied the whole of central India between the Gangetic plains in the north and the Deccan plateau in the south. The oral history of the Mundas describes the long wanderings of the tribe throughout this jungle fastness over a long period of time in the olden days (*sida samay re*) till they finally reached the place they called the *Bir Kandara Disum*, the densely forested country (Singh, 1978: 31). Here they settled villages by clearing the virgin forests. In every settlement they left a small part of the virgin forest for the spirit of the land to dwell and to be propitiated by them. They called it the *jaer (Jaher, Santal)*, the sacred grove. Later they named their habitat as the *Jaer Kandara* or *Jaer Kanda*, the land of the sacred groves. The present Hindustani word *Jharkhand*, literally means ‘forest land’, might have been derived from this original Mundari word.

‘The Supreme Being (*Sing Bonga*) and His “first love” Mother Earth (*ote enga*) together created this world for all of us including the forest biodiversity and the animal kingdom’, thus goes the Munda belief (Munda and Manki, 2009: 51–52). The Supreme Being turned the *Asura* women to female spirits to protect every part of the Mother Earth (*Asura* legend. Hoffman, 1950: 240–50). The village tutelary spirits are to protect the community from diseases and dangers. The Munda belief system, unfolds before us a way of life based on egalitarian principles, a continuum of nature, ancestors and humans, and a symbiosis between the human and animal kingdom. It emerged from a lost world the whole of humanity shared once. It was the world of magic where the creator and the created lived together. It was a bio-centric world as opposed to anthropocentrism of the normative religions. The Supreme Being (*Sing Bonga*) created it for his own pleasure (*Asura dehavada*. Chattopadhyaya, 1959: 48–50). The cause of the variegated creations was, therefore, not to please the human. The human was created along with others to fulfil the desire of the god to have companions. The scheme of the creation of the world is such that it becomes the home of all the creations, the spirits, the life, the vegetation and the animated matter. It is a holistic creation of interdependent components. The earth was created truly as commons.

The land under the sun and under the trees (*sing suba, daru suba*) was a continuous topography for the Mundas, where their ancestors roamed, settled and resettled. Their association with the land is through totems (usually animals and
plants belonging to the local biodiversity) and the spirits of the animated material objects. Thus land for them is not an arbitrarily fenced piece of territory. The territories between the tribes and their settlements are demarcated naturally. This is why the Munda vocabulary has no word for ‘country’.

The Mundas received the territorial identity from the aliens of the plains of the river valleys, the dikus (literally ‘the others’). The dikus came from all directions and formed states (primary) in their land and gave them names, such as, Chutia Nagapur, Padma, Singh Bhum, Shikhar Bhum, Jashpur, Sarguja and so on. Indigenous and tribal peoples all over the world call themselves ‘human beings’. But the others prefer to call them different names that in most of the cases are derogatory. The dikus in Jharkhand also coined names for the tribes. The Mundas, for instance, call themselves the hodoko, meaning ‘the human beings’. But the others who occupied their land were called Mura (mudha in Sanskrit) meaning ‘foolish’ (Roy, 1912: 24, footnote 10). Similarly, the birhodoko or simply birhors, a forest dwelling branch of the Mundas, are called mangkadias in Odisha meaning ‘monkey-like people’.

**Commons to Property**

The history of transformation of commons into property is traced back to the epoch-changing phenomenon of state formation out of the Aryan social matrix that began and matured between 500–200 BC in the eastern part of the vast Gangetic plains of North India. The phenomenon preceded a long period of gradual social transformation that the early Aryans passed through.

During the *Rig Vedic* and *Atharva Vedic* period overlordship of the land, vesting in the tribal chief, the village chief (*gramani*), or anyone else does not seem to have existed. There is the further possibility that...some Aryan tribes (even) did agriculture in common...during the time of Alexander (Habib, 1995: 61–62). The ‘equalitarian’ structure of the agrarian society of the Aryans must surely have been affected in the course of time by their struggle with the indigenous enemies (Habib, 1995: 62). With the help of the defeated enemies, the *dasa/shudras*, as they were categorised by the Aryans, and the discovery of iron in the upper Gangetic valley around 1000–800 BC the Aryans, who were originally pastoral tribes, took a thousand years to denude the forest commons of the indigenous tribes of the Gangetic valley (*gaanga* is a Mundari word for the river Ganges, Ganga in Sanskrit) and turned the land into the property of their clans (tribes), the *jana*. The root of the *jana* or *samgha* in the tribal social formation is proved by their names that are mostly totemic by origin (Chattopadhyaya, 1959: 1157). The territory under the control of the *jana* was known as the *janapada*, literally ‘the commons of the tribe’.

The availability of vast stretches of cultivable land along with a large number of enslaved human labour and hoards of cattle prepared the ground for the emergence of a new social formation. The Aryan tribes, the *janas*, changed into
oligarchies and had helots, the *dasas*, to cultivate their common land. In other words, the Aryan commons survived but its character changed, the Aryan farmer became a landowner cultivating his land by slaves (Habib, 1995: 64). At a later stage ‘the land and the produce changed from usage to property…cultivated land changed from clan ownership to ownership of the *gahapati* (*grihapati*) as the head of the household’ (Thapar, 1984: 158). The substitution of *gahapati* for *vaisya* points to the final disintegration of the original *vis* (Thapar, 1984: 88), the Aryan commoners. Fields were counted as an index of wealth for the first time, showing that large landed possessions became possible (Habib, 1995: 64). ‘There is no doubt that the presumably more advanced *samghas* were showing early signs of class division...’ (Chattopadhyaya, 1959: 1157).

The historical law is that the states could emerge only on the ruins of the tribes (Chattopadhyaya, 1959: 142). The Aryan oligarchies started disintegrating owing to their internal developments or stratifications. The states of Magadha and Kosala emerged out of such disintegrations of oligarchies. Magadha is an example of a primary state, the earliest one, and it has been argued that the secondary states are formed by primary states conquering non-states. The Magadhan conquest of a large part of central and northern India included, besides some primary states, a vast territory that did not have a state system. The Magadhan state that became an empire under the Maurians (c. 200 BC–AD 650) could not economically restructure these vast territories and integrate them into the state system (Thapar, 1984: 159). The question of restructuring the economy hinges on the wider question of landownership (ibid: 161). Therefore, the tribal land system with communal and equalitarian access survived on a large scale alongside the emerging state system where land lost its tribal character of being commons and transformed into private and public properties.

The common land, forest and water bodies thus brought under state control were put primarily in the public sector. Arable land was in both public (*sita*) and private sectors. The forests, however, remained as commons except for some identified as ‘elephant forest’ or ‘forest for king’s hunting of expeditions’. Even though Kautilya prepares a long list of forest produces in his *Arthashastra* and puts forests in the category of the property of the state, the large tract of forests even within the Maurian empire remained the domain of the free forest dwellers. A notion of ‘common property’ also emerged. Sheds, courtyards, latrines, fireplaces, places for pounding grain and all open spaces were to be used as common property (Rangarajan, 1992: 342).

*Arthashastra* recognises that the *samghas* (oligarchies) are characterised by the collective leadership of a council of leaders and that they were cohesive entities. Enemies could not break them easily (Rangarajan, 1992: 619). The emerging states, however, could not allow the survival of such oligarchies around them for two reasons. There is no prospect for the rising monarchs so long as the free *samghas* survived in the neighbourhood. Besides, the example of their democracy, (the political commons), was dangerous for the monarchies. ‘The destruction of *samghas* was thus inevitably a part of the policy of the rising state...’
power’ (Arthashastra, as quoted by Chattopadhyaya, 1959: 473). The other reason, which the same Arthashastra of Kautilya stresses, may be the more important one: the importance of conquering the land of the tribal peoples for the prosperity of the state and its inhabitants (Rangarajan, 1992: 3).

The Maurian state imposed its own rule and moral dictates (dharma) over the conquered territory by replacing the customary law of the defeated people (Rangarajan, 1992: 351). Customary laws are nothing but the knowledge commons of the concerned people of a particular locality. In the following period the state increasingly started making land grants to the Brahmans or the Monks (Buddhist) and also to the temples and monasteries ostensibly to settle them in the countryside for the propagation and establishment of dharma, the law having religious sanction. The land thus provided was mostly the commons of the non-state people, called the ‘wasteland’, that the grantees were expected to bring under cultivation. This fact immensely contributed to the growth of ‘feudalism from below’ (Kosambi, 1975: 295) during the post-Maurian period.

Conquest brought the Brahmans in the land of the Atavikas (forest dwellers, atavi-forest) by land grants. The Brahmans brought many an agricultural technology to the hitherto swidden agriculturists. Plough agriculture began on a large scale. The ranks of shudras and panchamas (fifth category of people outside the four varna system consisting of the ‘most polluted ones’) started increasing rapidly. The self-sufficient Indian village emerged. All this happened at the cost of the forest and swidden commons. This process led to the state formation out of the indigenous (non-Aryan) matrix as well. A large number of hitherto non-state communities disintegrated, their chiefs became their kings who connected the territory of the community to the larger state system and introduced new institutions of tax and turned the people into peasants tilling their privately owned fields. The Varna system transformed into the caste system. The people who did not know agriculture, the hunting–gathering ones, were forcibly brought under the new system as real proletariats, the Dalits.

The following empires of the Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims religiously followed the pattern of disintegrating the resource commons, political commons and cultural commons of the tribal society that the Maurian Empire set.

However, despite the emergence of empires and feudal relations on a large scale a larger section of Indian peoples remained outside the pale of this system. What Baden-Powel (1972: 226) observed through his firsthand experience and what Marx gathered through his second hand sources about the dominant type of village society of India (Asiatic Mode of Production) was in fact the tribal model of social system—economically self-reliant and politically autonomous. The majority of the pre-British Indian villages were of that type. The Brahminical model of village society existed only around the politico-religious centres of the state. Though it was a politically powerful model, but it was not a socially dominant one. Since the Muslim rulers did not disturb this model, the Indian village society remained predominantly tribal in nature till the advent of British colonial rule. Now when we use the term tribal we basically refer to the sedentary
communities of cultivators rather than the hunter–gatherers, though they shared the same social values.

The centralised feudal states under the Hindus and the Muslims had no serious stake in the low-yielding rocky lands of the indigenous peoples and the primary states of the forestland had no strength to subjugate them completely. Both kinds of state were happy with irregular tribute made by the people. They did not disturb the indigenous social system to any considerable extent (Sinha, 1987: xvii). Rather, the medieval state system sought to preserve tribal autonomy (Singh, 1985: 124).

In Jharkhand the primary state formation began around the 15th century. The secondary state could not emerge owing to strong tribal resistance. The ‘jungle states’ followed the same Magadhan pattern of engagements with the tribes, the koles (the generic name given to all the tribes living in the region by the Aryans) in this case. Under the overall supremacy of the Muslim rule that did not deviate from the previous state system much the territory of the kols was divided into Jagirs, Parganas and Maujas. The hattu/ato of the kols was not only rechristened as mauja, its nature was also changed radically. The commons of the Mundas in the area under the control of the state was made both crown land (Majhihas) and private land distributed among the Jagirdars and members of the royal family. The commons that the Mundas retained was termed as khuntkatti (khunt means lineage and katti means clearance), the clearance of the lineage of the Mundas. In the area where privatisation of land became the order of the day, due to the pressure of the state, the land was called the bhinhari and the holder as the bhuinhar. Forest generally continued to remain as commons.

The institutions that sustained the commons earlier either disintegrated or became highly corrupted to accommodate the change in the human–land relationship in the bhinhari areas. The political commons patti (the village council where decisions are taken collectively and on the basis of consensus) in the khuntkatti areas enjoyed much more autonomy than its counterpart called parha in the bhinhari areas. The labour commons (the institution of cooperation and collective action of labour), denga or madaiti (cooperation) was corrupted to become a free labour pool for the kings and the intermediaries. The common access to the fruits of labour of the individual families (comprising of agricultural surplus and gatherings and game) ensured by the institution of kupul or mehmani (becoming guests) gradually lost its social significance. The state became the harbinger of Sanskritisation among these lineage societies. ‘Aryan culture and Brahminical Hinduism contributed to their (a section of the Mundas) transformation into agricultural communities’ (Singh, 1985: 29; Sachchidananda, 1979: 66). New knowledge of the agricultural operation and implements were introduced from the plains and the autochthonous chieftains acted as champions of Neo-Brahminism (Singh, 1985: 27).

Land grants to Brahmins brought from the neighbouring Bengal, Odisha and Bihar and construction of temples became a regular practice of the state. The ritual knowledge commons (Sarna belief system) of the ‘animist’ tribes faced gradual
disintegration with the spread of popular Hinduism and Brahmins usurping the ritual knowledge of the tribes. Many tribal shrines were converted to Hindu temples.

Mundas, like other communities, lost their language commons in and around the seat of political power. Mundari was either fully replaced by Sadri (Nagpuri), Panchpargania and Khortha or it was heavily corrupted by them. Consequently, the folk literature and dance forms, the commons of the community’s performing arts, were transformed to a great extent in the exposed areas and accommodated alien elements in the core tribal areas. Munda and Zide (1969) observed the structural influence of the Bengal Vaishnava songs on the traditional Mundari folk-songs. And we know that Vaishnavism stood for personal god as opposed to the Munda tradition of a collective propitiation of the Supreme Being.

Another very important development took place within the tribal societies in the area of gender relations along with the process of state-making in their midst. The transformation of commons to private property, first to the fraternity of the lineage brotherhood and then to the individual families, diminished the access of women to the resources drastically though their labour contributed the greater part of the community pool of labour. The Munda brotherhood (hagakobhaiad) kept the cultivable land as common property of the lineage in the khuntkatti area but in the bhunthari region land became property of the family. With the transformation from ‘hoe’ to ‘plough’ agriculture along with the easy availability of cheaper iron tools that was made possible by the state, the society became progressively sedentary and economic dependence on forests started diminishing. Though the forest still remained the domain of the tribal women as commons, their role as the food suppliers reduced as the settled agriculture, now under the control of men, became more productive than foraging and the swidden. The state promoted the supremacy of men over the land and accentuated the division of labour between the genders. Several taboos debarred the women from the ownership of means of production like the plough.

Women were marginalised and then excluded from the knowledge commons. Certain parts of the traditional knowledge commons, where women played a dominant role, were delegitimised and demonised. Women’s traditional role as healers, najom, was challenged and the male institution of baid/deonra was introduced to replace it. Women’s knowledge of biodiversity was branded as their knowledge of poison and their ritual knowledge was branded as black magic (jadu ton). Branding of powerful women or women in possession of land of her deceased husband, as witches and killing or harassing them by the lineage brotherhood was a form of gender or class struggle, which sought to remove land rights from women and confer them to men (Kelker, 2000: 2041–42).

Colonial Transformation of Commons to Commodity

British colonial rule shook the tribal model by its roots. The colonial state drastically changed all previous equations between the indigenous peoples and
the state in terms of the preservation of commons. It not only changed the ‘basic design’ of the Indian caste-based villages; it also initiated a radical change in the basic structure of the indigenous peoples’ societies. This was not a question simply of a new type of land revenue administration. What was at issue was something far more fundamental—the basic value by which economic life in the village had been governed in the past (Béteille, 1980: 109).

In the previous Mughal system, the state enjoyed only the right to collect land revenue, which was in many places akin to only a voluntary contribution, bali or chanda, for instance, in Jharkhand. The peasant enjoyed communal rights over all the natural resources of the village, the land, forest and water. Now under the Permanent Settlement (1793) the British East India Company turned the commons into a commodity (zamindari) and auctioned them to the Zamindars, a newly created class of landlords, as their permanent property. The alien Zamindars and the socially alienated local elite of the primary states destroyed the landownership pattern by turning the independent cultivators/peasants into tenants-at-will, the raiyat, (a rent-paying peasant who enjoys no permanent rights over the land that he tills) and dispossessed them of their ancestral rights over land, forest and water resources.

However, the cruelllest aspect of the colonial state-making was its policy of placing environment in the public domain and agriculture in the private domain (Shivaramakrishnan, 1999: 4). Forced peasantisation of the tribal people and alienation of forest from them indicated the end of commons and the social values of the communal access to resources.

Common natural resources of the indigenous peoples were declared as terra nullius and occupied by the colonial state as their eminent domain. ‘Community-managed forest land, which once existed over large part of India, were steadily dismantled during the nineteenth century. The process of state usurpation was consolidated in the Indian Forest Act of 1878’ (Gadgil and Guha, 2000: 40). For the first time the indigenous peoples’ domains were brought under the state power with an alien legal and administrative system. Now the vocabulary of the forest commons was changed from bir–buru (hills and forests) of the Mundas to reserve, protected and private forests. A regular army, police and prison implemented laws, unacceptable to the indigenous peoples. These regions were opened first to mercantile and then to industrial capitalistic exploitation. Commercialisation of forests, mining activities and industrialisation exposed the indigenous peoples to the most abhorring experience of displacement. Thousands of people were taken to faraway places in the tea gardens of Assam and Bengal as indentured labourers. However, the colonial forest policies and practices of forest management could not succeed in the large part of the ‘Bengal woodland’ that included the eastern tribal belt of India. ‘In part this was because woodland Bengal—its people, flora and fauna—clearly emerged as an agent able to confound foresters and resist their ambitious schemes’ (Shivaramakrishnan, 1999: 3).

Tribal revolt throughout the 19th century forced the colonial state to adopt a policy euphemistically called ‘paternalism’. It was actually a policy of drawing
'treaties’ with the revolting tribes. Under this, the tribal habitat in Jharkhand was put under a simple administrative system (initially as the South Western Frontier Agency and after 1935 as a Partially Excluded Area) and land rights of the tribes were recognised.

The British administrators had built up the theory of peasant proprietorship for Chotanagpur tribals, who were described as the original reclaimers of the land. This theory of peasant proprietorship was reiterated by the German missionaries who, with the agrarian background of their home country, pleaded for the restoration of the rights of the tribals as peasants. (Singh, 1978: 29)

The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) was the outcome of this policy that made tribal land both, private and collective, inalienable. As a token recognition of the traditional commons of the Mundas, only 156 villages were identified that had been continuing to remain as the commons of the lineages and another 449 Munda villages were identified as village where the traditional system of ownership had been partially broken in the original district of Ranchi. The reason of the breakdown was attributed to the tribes exposure to the ‘more advanced races’, in general and ‘the zamindars and the moneyed classes’ in particular (Reid, 1996: 308–9). They were called the Mundari Khuntkatti villages that would enjoy the ownership rights of the Munda lineage brotherhood over the land, forest and water resources under the traditional boundary of the village. The Act did not accept the land rights of the tribal women. It upheld the Christian Missionary (Hoffmann and Emelen, 1950: 2388) and Hindu anthropologist (Roy, 1912) interpretation of the tribal society as patriarchal and women enjoy no land rights. As this interpretation ignored the internal gender conflict over the access to resources, both physical and knowledge, it failed to recognise forest and swidden fields as the source of the women’s political power and economic stamina. Taking advantage of this omission of women’s rights in the Act the rights of men started growing faster and, in many places, the Munda women lost their ‘life interest’ in paternal and husband’s land and were forced to be happy with the right to ‘maintenance’ in case of widowhood or remaining spinsters till death. The Act treated the Mundas as peasants.

However, this treaty was not respected in the following years. A further decay in the Munda system was admitted in the latest survey and settlement report completed in the district of Ranchi by 1935 (Taylor, 1996: 1170). By 1930 the number of the Mundari Khuntkatti villages was reduced to 156 (Taylor, 1930). Large-scale forest felling was undertaken to meet the demand of shipbuilding, construction of railway tracks and mining. Plantation under the scheme of ‘scientific forest management’ began to replace natural forest and exotic trees replaced the local species. The Mundas objected to the construction of roads in their country. They said, ‘…we are happy with our hora (the village pathway), we do not want the sandak (roads) because hora takes us to the commons but the sandak takes it away from us’. Roads and railways brought more and more
outsiders to the land of the Mundos who, in collaboration with the administration, kept alienating tribal land blatantly flouting the tenancy act. The government acquired large tracts of land for administrative purposes and for the army. All this happened in the name of the ‘public purposes’.

Modern Times: Commons to Capital

The 100 years of tribal revolt against the British colonial rule cannot be equated with the ‘freedom struggle’ of the Indian elite that wanted to replace the rulers not the content of the rule. Tribals rose against an alien civilisation that turned nature into private property and humans into tenants; and everything that nature offers and a human produces, taxable. Land that they revered as mother was turned into a commodity and their egalitarian way of life was ridiculed and attacked as savagery. It was a conflict of civilisations. In the post-colonial scenario the basic content of the tribal movement has not changed because the nation–state that replaced the colonial state did not restore the lost value of the communal living on common resources. Tribals promised to create a new political commons of democracy hand in hand with the rest of the people of India and the state promised to respect tribal rights over land and forest commons (Jaipal Singh and Pandit Nehru: Statements in the Constituent Assembly) (Saksena, 1981). However, whatever came out of the state process was taken away by the state mechanism of the Indian nation–state.

A critical view of the Tribal Panchsheel (five principles) of the early years of independence reveals that ‘development’ is the keyword of the panchsheel that was laid down as the tribal policy of the government under the aegis of Pandit J. L. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. It was shelved before it could really take off because the so-called national development came in conflict with the tribal development. The discourse of tribal development revolved only around the issue of state entitlements. Even that failed to benefit the tribal people miserably as the tribal areas were progressively being treated as internal colonies. A half century long bitter collective experience of the country’s development turning into destruction of tribal life, livelihood and commons prompted the tribal peoples to unanimously reject ‘development’ as the means of achieving a better life. They are now looking for an alternative to development. Globally too the debate of tribal development has been clinched and development has been branded as another name of neo-colonialism that has not only been adversely affecting the lives of the tribal people but also of all the marginalised and weaker sections of the society.

‘Development’ explains why legal measures that followed the Panchsheel taken to satisfy the tribal demand of restoring political commons at the village level through participatory democracy, and forest commons through collective management rights and ownership rights of NTFPs (Non-Timber Forest Products)
were so blatantly disregarded. The non-implementation of the Panchayati Raj Extension in the Schedule Areas Act 1996 (PESA) and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 cannot be explained simply in terms of a corrupt and power-hungry bureaucracy but in terms of the overwhelming demand of resources by the industrial capital.

The truth that the tribal folk singer’s lament, ‘banali pardeshi nij ghare’ (we have become strangers in our own home), reveals is enough to imagine how the ‘chariots of the foreign companies treading upon the chest of our homes’. More than 60 per cent of the displaced families in Jharkhand have been the tribal peoples. The commons have always been the easy targets of ‘development’. The state converted large tracts of forest land into mines and doled out village commons (gair majrua am and gair majrua khas) to the mining and private companies whenever demanded. The folk poet’s determination, ‘we will not part with our dancing ground, whatever may come’ could not stop the march of development in the Munda country.

Destruction of tribal commons is also partially caused by the internal developments of the tribal society itself. Tribal societies never remained isolated from the rest of the world. It survived in the periphery of the caste-based peasant society of the medieval feudalism but remained connected to it through trade and tribute. It is still alive in the hills and forestlands throughout the country but heavily exposed to the industrial mode of production. As jungle states emerged out of tribal matrix in the medieval period owing to the development of privatisation of agricultural land under the feudal mode of production, a new tribal elite class is emerging in the present time owing to the entry of the tribal people in the tertiary sector of the economy increasingly dominated by the capitalist mode of production. A section of the tribal educated elite and politicians welcome industry considering it as inevitable and condemn the attachment of their people to the tribal mode of production as a curse in the path their progress.

In this context it is worth quoting the statement of the first chief minister of the Jharkhand state (province) who was himself a tribal person.

The era of development has started. Agriculture cannot sustain us. We have to enter into business and for that we need land and capital. Who would give us capital against our land under this non-transferable land tenure system? As long as the present tenancy laws are there both tribal and non-tribal people will remain backward. Let us demand the scrapping of these acts that the British colonial rulers created to execute their policy of divide and rule. (Singh and Kumar, 2003: viii–ix)

His view has been receiving unconditional support from the other tribal chief ministers who followed him. They were the architects of 101 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) signed between the Government of Jharkhand and the trans-national and Indian industrial giants of the corporate world.

However, this fact cannot be cited as an indication of the inevitability of the disappearance of the tribal mode of production and tribal values of egalitarian
way of life based on economic, political and cultural commons. This fact has to be seen as an outcome of a civilisation apparently dazzling with diabolic consumption, but unsustainable and ecologically criminal at its core. It is the capitalist civilisation, which has been spreading its tentacles faster than ever before in the present era of globalisation. What is inevitable is nothing but the collapse of this civilisation.

This brings us to the debate of ‘socialism’ as an alternative to capitalism. Criticising the so-called socialist mode of production as it was practiced especially in the Soviet Union and as it is being implemented by an authoritarian state in China, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha point out that from an ecological point of view the similarities in these two developmental paths (capitalism and socialism) are more significant than the differences. They are similar in terms of the scale and direction of natural resource flows, the patterns of energy use, the ideologies of human–nature interaction, the specific resource-management practices and ultimately, the cumulative impact on the living environment. Therefore, they conclude that industrial socialism and industrial capitalism are simply two variants of one industrial pattern of resource use (Gadgil and Guha, 2000: 14). This conclusion, which is absolutely correct, however, may lead one to believe that there is no alternative to capitalism. The authors unfortunately see the root of the problem in the industrial mode of production and not so clearly in the very substance of capitalism as such.

Along with industrialisation growing population is also considered as a factor for the destruction of commons. Garrett Hardin’s theory on the *Tragedy of Commons* (1968) leads many people to believe that privatisation of commons can only save them from their selfish use by the growing population and their ever-growing need. The logic presented by the state in support of alienating forest commons from the tribal people and putting them under the state control emanates from the same theory.

The alarming rate of global warming and horrifying pace of the destruction of biodiversity bring us back to the question of what is the alternative to the capitalist mode of production. Socialism, the way it has been practiced so far, is certainly not the answer. But one has to recognise the fact that Marxism never subscribed to this form of socialism. In fact 20th century socialist projects mimicked capitalism in their pursuit to compete with it and in the end authoritarian states emerged that

...survived the deadly climate of the twentieth century imperialism by following capital in its exploitation of labour (and over exploitation of nature). They never achieved, therefore, the most elementary condition of socialism, as defined by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*: that it be ‘an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’. (Kovel: 2003: xxiii)

Free development of all is truly the value of the commons (see Box 1).
Box 1
The changing vocabulary

Changing vocabulary of human beings
*Pilchu hadam* and *Pilchu Budhia* (the first man and woman)—*Horo honko* (children of human beings)—*Hatu kisan* (village cultivators)—*Raiyat/Poroja*

Changing vocabulary of the land
*sing suba daru suba* (belongs to the supreme being)—*Jaer kanda* (belongs to the tribe)—*ote hasa* (belongs to the lineage occupation but under the usage of the family)—*Raiyati Zamin* (private property of the individual).

Changing vocabulary of the forest
*Birburu* (belongs to the Supreme Being)—*Khuntkatti birbur* (belongs to the founding lineage of the village)—*Reserve Forest and Protected Forest* (belongs to the state) and *Private Forest* (property of the *Zamindar*)—*National Park and Sanctuary* (belongs to the state)

No notion of country but space—topography as opposed to fencing of the space, drawing boundary between the states, kingdoms and empires, *zamindari* and private property.

Changing vocabulary of political commons
*Patti/Parha* (*Panch*—village council)—Council of only lineage brotherhood/fraternity (women are left alone), *Munda/Manki* Head of the council/head of the confederation of councils) becomes tribute/tax collector under the state system, *Gram Sabha* replaces *patti/parha* under PESA. A government servant not belonging to the tribe/lineage is appointed as the secretary of the council in recent times by the state.

Changing vocabulary of cultural commons
*Giti Ora* (youth dormitory) are branded as dens of promiscuity and were sought to be replaced by schools and hostels by the Christian missionaries.

*Sarna* belief system was/is being replaced by Christianity and Hinduism.

*Mundari* (language of the Mundas) was replaced by *Sadri/Panch Pargania/Khortha* (language of the rulers) under the medieval state, by *Hindi* under the colonial and modern state.

References


*Social Change, 41, 3 (2011): 381–396*