

Mining in a Sacred Landscape: Adivasis, Deities and Alliances in a Former Princely State in Odisha/India

Uwe Skoda
Aarhus Universitet, Danmark

Abstract The paper explores ideas of a sacred landscape inhabited by indigenous people as well as other communities, deities as well as other beings manifested in localities and ‘objects’ forming various relationships, alliances and a thick web of relationality in a former kingdom in central-eastern India. It introduces these historically evolved ties through the foundational narratives as well as contemporary rituals, while the area is undergoing major transformations after Indian independence and even more so in a phase of accelerated industrialisation, especially tied to a mining boom and sponge iron factories. The latter not only threatens to uproot an existing, though changing sacrificial polity around local deities, but it also has massive ecological consequences and leads to partially successful protests.

Keywords Mining. Sacred landscape. Adivasi. Odisha. Goddess.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Mining, the Sponge Iron Industry and Its Darker Sides. – 3 Protests and Resistance. – 4 Bonai, Its Sacred Landscape and Foundational Narratives. – 5 Performing an Alliance. – 6 Old Photograph. – 7 Conclusion: Multiple Sovereignties, Multiple Perspectives.



Peer review

Submitted	2021-10-03
Accepted	2021-10-27
Published	2021-12-21

Open access

© 2021 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



Citation Skoda, U. (2021). “Mining in a Sacred Landscape: Adivasis, Deities and Alliances in a Former Princely State in Odisha/India”. *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 1(2), 219-244.

1 Introduction

Sundargarh District got its highest flagpole with installation of a 100 ft height flagpole with 30 Ft X 20 Ft tricolour at Biju Park, Bonai. The mammoth flag was unfurled by Sundargarh District Collector [...] in the presence of other government officials, representatives of corporate houses.¹

On February 5, 2018, a new “monumental flag” was hoisted in Bonairgarh, which became literally a towering emblem of the Indian state remaining in the spotlight even at night. Located just outside the king’s fort, the vicinity serves as a visible reminder of the most recent state transformation in this former kingdom, i.e. a neoliberal state promoting a rapid industrialisation with expanded mining as well as new sponge iron factories arriving together with industrialists in the valley from 2003 onwards. A state-corporate sector nexus is clearly exemplified by Naveen Jindal, who is not only the Chairman of Jindal Steel & Power, which has significant economic interests in the region including mining, but is also the founder of the Flag Foundation of India, which donated the flag that increasingly overshadows the royal sovereignty and older state rituals.

Asked what will happen if mining would start in and around his village, the Dehuri or ritual specialist serving their Goddess Kant Debi replied:

The seat (*asana*) of our goddess will be lost, our waterfall will be destroyed, all our gods and goddesses, edible roots, whatever materials we offer to the goddess will be destroyed. Asana means the shelter of the goddess and the loss of water will happen if the mining will be conducted. [...] We the Adivasi Paudi Bhuiyan think that mining should not be done in the place where Goddess Kant is staying or the 16 Pradhani of Paudi Bhuiyan [the Paudi Bhuiyan area]. (Interview 2016)

These two quotes and glimpses above indicate an ongoing transformational process in a former princely state that merged with the Indian Union in 1948, nowadays a sub-district of Sundergarh District, known for its wealth of iron ore deposits that attracts the attention

The article is based on discontinuous fieldwork in the area since 2003 initially funded by the German Research Council (DFG) within the *Orissa Research Project* and later on as part of the Graduate School “Cultural Encounters and Discourses of Scholarship” and Aarhus University. I am also much obliged to Late Raja Sahib K.K.C. Deo, to Raja Sahib Bir Keshari Indra Deo and to my local interview partners, who helped immensely in the course of my work. Diacritics have been omitted throughout the article.

¹ <http://orissadiary.com/100-feet-high-monumental-flagpole-bonai/>.

of the Indian government and business houses alike, but also present dissenting voices of Adivasis or indigenous people resisting being pushed aside by extractive industries in a period of rapid industrialisation – reminiscent of Hylland Eriksen’s (2016) idea of ‘overheating’.

Focusing on Bonai, an area also known for its pristine forests and rich biodiversity – especially in the jungles and sacred groves² –, the chapter looks at the case of the Bhuiyan and especially Paudi Bhuiyan (Hill Bhuiyan) predominantly populating the hills, while being embedded in a historically evolved royal framework that shows a certain tenacity. The Paudi Bhuiyan are a small community of 5,788 people in Odisha, as compared to 306,129 for all Bhuiyans in general – the latter being part of a wider administrative category named ‘Scheduled Tribes’ forming 51% of the population in the district as well as the Bonai Sub-Division.³ Besides, the Government of India classifies Paudi Bhuiyan as “Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group”, i.e. communities with “declining or stagnant population, low level of literacy, pre-agricultural level of technology and [...] economically backward” to which “priority is accorded for their protection and improvement in terms of the social indicators like livelihood, health, nutrition and education so as to decrease their vulnerability”.⁴

Against this backdrop, the paper briefly looks at the trajectory of mining and the sponge iron industry as well as its environmental impact in an area, before delving into the sacred landscape of Bonai with its tangible manifestations, but also the foundational narratives of the kingdom and current ritual performances in order to unpack, it is argued, an existing, yet threatened “‘world’ of rich relationality and sociality” (Harvey 2006). The Paudi Bhuiyan, and the Bhuiyan broadly, as well as the raja (and other communities) are linked through a foundational alliance, which is mediated through gods, but even more so goddesses. The ‘charter myth’ of Bonai as kingdom includes communities, deities etc. but also non-humans – first and foremost the peacock supporting the conquest of the realm and being later enshrined in the royal crest. The alliance and privileged relationships between humans/communities and non-humans or *ak-*

2 Ecological and Sociocultural Aspects of Biodiversity Conservation in Sacred Groves of Bonai Forest Division, Odisha, India by P. Mohapatra et al. – see https://www.academia.edu/38582810/Ecological_and_Sociocultural_Aspects_of_Biodiversity_Conservation_in_Sacred_Groves_of_Bonai_Forest_Division_Odisha_India.

3 See Census 2011: <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/statistical-profile-of-scheduled-tribes-in-india-2013/>.

4 F. No. 22040/37/2012-NGO, Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Scheme of Development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), (Effective from 01.04.2015) – see <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:2H2mWBS61WAJ:https://tribal.nic.in/downloads/NGO/Latter-Notice/14.pdf+&cd=2&hl=de&ct=clnk&gl=dk&client=firefox-b-d>.

tants, particularly deities, form a thick web of relationships manifested in the landscape, but also a sacrificial polity of the former kingdom as well as royal chronicles and other narratives. All of it hints at alternative ontologies raising questions of time and boundaries (esp. between ‘entities’, persons, things), of visibility and the broad sensorium. While this web and wealth of relations is threatened by a rapid and rampant industrialisation, protests have been partially successful in preventing a new mega-mine. In fact, the established alliances going back to foundational narratives and expressing forms of hierarchical, yet mutual care in contemporary rituals, seem to have been instrumental in the protests, while being reinvigorated in the process.

2 Mining, the Sponge Iron Industry and Its Darker Sides

The global demand for steel – especially in the first decade of the twenty-first century – led to a significant expansion of mining in Bonaï in the post-liberalisation period and even more so in a period of “accelerated change” (Hylland Eriksen 2016) after 2000. While mining was not new to the area and the first iron ore mines were established around the middle of the twentieth century to provide ore to the newly built Rourkela Steel Plant in the 1950s, new mines have come up in the hills. From 2000 till 2014, permission was given to increase production from 41,654 million tons to 118,978 million tons, leases were expanded or in other cases an over-extraction of ore was even legalised in retrospective – all leading to a depletion of ore resources.⁵

As the Justice Shah Committee detailed in its Report 2013, in the first decade after 2000 there was “rampant illegal mining across the state” with reference to the unlawful extraction of iron and manganese ores – all adding to a “mine of scams”.⁶ The report listed almost 150 cases of violations of environmental clearances and mining plans leading to the destruction of pristine forests, pollution of rivers etc. As the Commission stressed in the report, almost 80% of mining took place in forest areas, and almost 100 out of 200 mining leases did not have environmental clearance. It concluded its report with a staggering estimate of an illegal mining scam worth more than Rs 59,000 crore in just two districts – namely Keonjhar and Sundar-

⁵ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/m-b-shah-commission-report-odis-has-mine-of-scams-exposed-43348>.

⁶ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/m-b-shah-commission-report-odis-has-mine-of-scams-exposed-43348>.



Figure 1
River Bonai 2016.
Photo by the Author

garh (including Bonai).⁷ Bonai itself, it was estimated, covered roughly 25% of the sum.

Leaving aside illegal mining activities, the average profit per ton of iron ore rose from ca. Rs 140 per ton in 2001-02 to more than Rs 3,200 per ton in 2010-11 and companies earned “super normal profits”, while at the same time the local population did not benefit from these profits and the average income of Adivasis remained around a meagre Rs 8 per day, while facing the loss of forests and a concurrent impact on its society and culture – even partial displacement among Paudi Bhuiyan.⁸ Even after a rather massive industrialisation in Bonai, unemployment among them remained high.⁹

Moreover, while mining increasingly impacted the hills, a relatively visible transformation occurred in Bonai subdistrict, i.e. the valley was increasingly dotted with sponge iron factories which produce iron pellets (called ‘sponge iron’ due to their porous nature) by reducing the carbon and oxygen content without melting the iron.¹⁰

⁷ See <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/m-b-shah-commission-report-odishas-mine-of-scams-exposed-43348>. However, in 2017, the figure was corrected to almost Rs 18.000 crore following the investigation of central empowered committee appointed by Supreme Court.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/decade-after-scam-odisha-imposes-penalty-of-rs-2056-cr-for-illegal-mining-101612209948737.html>.

⁸ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/m-b-shah-commission-report-odishas-mine-of-scams-exposed-43348>. See also https://silo.tips/queue/national-workshop-on-underlying-causes-of-deforestation-and-forest-degradation-i?&queue_id=-1&v=1633076969&u=MTg1LjQ1LjIyLjEzMQ==, 155. See also Padel 2012.

⁹ https://silo.tips/queue/national-workshop-on-underlying-causes-of-deforestation-and-forest-degradation-i?&queue_id=-1&v=1633076969&u=MTg1LjQ1LjIyLjEzMQ==, 146. See also *Report On Employment and Unemployment Situation of Odisha Based On Pooled Data of State and Central Samples of NSS 66th Round 2009-10*: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewiDwbXryq7zAhXG-yoKHYvsAaEQFnoECACQAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.desorissa.nic.in%2Fpdf%2Fns-68-emp-unemp.pdf&usq=A0vVaw230FDrHGGkz2yJ-4K0kclh>.

¹⁰ On sponge iron see: <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/direct-reduced-iron-DRI.html#ixzz3eG1bIfRv>.

The period 2003-08 became a boom period for sponge iron due to the demand for steel, along with the high price of metal scrap and its restricted availability, while the factories required a relatively low capital investment, and promised high profits based on subsidies and availability of raw material in the area.¹¹ In fact, it had been estimated that a “0.033 MTPA plant requires a capital investment of about ₹7-12 crores with a recovery period of 12-18 months and can generate profits to the tune of ₹60 lakh per month”,¹² which makes it a highly profitable venture. Subsequently, India became the largest sponge iron producer in the world with the number of units multiplying ten times from 2004 onwards, reaching a capacity of about 37.30 MTPA - with around a third of the production being concentrated in Odisha, out of which 10-13 units based in Bonai itself (2010).¹³ Though the production had its ups and downs, for example, due to deceleration in the steel demand, but increasingly also environmental issues and protests as well as a tighter control on the supply of iron ore, it remained somewhat stagnating on a high level after 2009.

As in case of mining, the unprecedented growth of the sponge iron industry also led to an equally unprecedented environmental impact - especially in case of coal-based factories. However - as the Centre for the Study of Environment found in a 2011 report (*State Pollution Control Boards are Failing Miserably in Controlling Pollution from Sponge Iron Factories Across the Country*) - in many cases they functioned largely without state interference.¹⁴ Given the pollution level, including air pollution of such dirty form of growth and the literally ‘dark clouds’ of the chimneys, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) felt compelled to classify the sponge iron industry in the ‘red category’ of industries, i.e. the most polluting ones.¹⁵ As Rifat Mumtaz observed already in 2008 in terms of the environmental consequences:

Thick black smoke, contaminated water, depleting vegetation, falling agricultural yields, premature death of domestic cattle, and poor human health conditions are just some of the impacts. The

11 *Sponge Iron Industry. The Regulatory Challenge*. Report by the Centre for Science and Environment 2011, 7 - see <https://www.cseindia.org/sponge-iron-industry-the-regulatory-challenge-7729>.

12 See <https://www.cseindia.org/sponge-iron-industry-the-regulatory-challenge-7729>, page 7.

13 See footnote 12; “Sponge Iron Industry Needs Quick Actions for Survival”, *Economic Times*, Oct 24 2013: http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-10-24/news/43396343_1_restricted-availability-steel-melting-scrap-iron-ore.

14 <https://www.cseindia.org/cse-releases-the-study-on-sponge-iron-sector-in-odisha-2097>.

15 <https://www.cseindia.org/sponge-irons-dirty-growth-2100>.

plants are located deep inside forested regions that are rich in iron ore and have already been devastated by the mining industry.¹⁶

Thus, hills and valley in Bonai somehow share a similar plight, and the loss of pristine jungles in the process means a loss of biodiversity which has not even been fully understood and studied. The recent discovery of new species such as the Limbless Lizard from the Khadadhar area may serve as a case in point here. Though not much is known about it, “[i]t is presumed that this species is found only in this forest (because it likes to live in cool and dense forest) and considered as a keystone species”.¹⁷

3 Protests and Resistance

Not surprisingly this industrial transformation led to protests. As vividly documented by Biju Toppo and Meghnath in their documentary film *Iron is hot* (2010), common people felt compelled to resist the factories and to fight for their own survival in the midst of such a life-threatening environment - “with few regulations in place to protect those most vulnerable, the people must take it upon themselves to fight to save their land and livelihoods”.¹⁸ And with the number of factories and mines growing, protests grew in Bonai too. For example, in 2008 protests against the high density of factories around a semi-urban settlement - in some estimates even 17 polluting factories in a 5km-radius - began and

500 women members of the Bonai Vana Suraksha Samiti Mandal [Bonai Forest Protection Association], a people’s front in Sundargarh district, marched to the sub-collector’s office in January 2008. They were carrying samples of soil, contaminated water and grains as proof of damage caused by sponge iron factories. These factories have high stack emissions and dump ash and char in open areas. The district administration ordered an inquiry and 12 factories were closed, only to reopen 42 days later.¹⁹

16 <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/dark-clouds-over-indias-sponge-iron-industry/>.

17 https://silo.tips/queue/national-workshop-on-underlying-causes-of-deforestation-and-forest-degradation-i?&queue_id=-1&v=1633076969&u=MTg1LjQ1LjIyLjEzMQ==, 152.

18 For details: Kolkata People’s Film Festival (<https://corkolkata.wordpress.com/the-cor-stall/2261-2/>). The film received: Best Environmental Film National award, 2010, Best Environment film IDPA, 2009.

19 Sugandh Juneja 2011 (<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/sponge-irons-dirty-growth-32920>).

Apart from sporadic protests against sponge iron factories with short-lived success, resistance against mining galvanised from 2006 onwards when the South Korean steelmaker POSCO proposed and received a prospective mining license to open a mega-mine in Bonai for an area of more than 6200 ha (in comparison, the older mine of the Orissa Mining Corporation covered Orissa Mining Corporation covered an area of 'only' 160 ha).²⁰ Though finally shelved in 2012, this project was initially supported by the State Government and envisioned as largest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the state entailing a total investment of Rs 51,000 crore for a mine located on top of the iconic Kandadhar waterfall and at the heart of Adivasi settlements, a steel plant at Jagatsinghpur, and a captive port at Paradeep.

The promise of a brighter future projected by POSCO's own slogan "Steel makes our world a better place"²¹ rather met with skepticism based on experiences with mining elsewhere in Odisha. Fearing a displacement of up to 30,000 people, the project met with massive resistance. For example, a local nongovernmental organisation known as Khandadhara Suraksh Samiti (KSS) [Khandadhar Protection Association] brought together

one massive rally at Bonaigarh region followed by a thousand of tribal peoples who had promised by taking water in their hands not to allow POSCO to lift the iron ore from the Bonaigarh region where in, it is, understood [sic] to have a deposit of 600 million metric ton of iron ore spread over a land of about 62 square Km. Fifteen days thereafter the tribal people gheraoed/cordoned one of the officers of POSCO at Bonai Sub Collector office who had came [sic] to the area for their survey and other government sanctions. The tribal people literally take that official's consent who had promised not to come to the area for their project work.²²

During the rally, the Subcollector of Bonaigarh was asked to submit a memorandum to the governor of Odisha. The petition handed over to him detailed the demonstrators' fears and frustrations. Extensive mining and the resulting pollution were projected to severely harm - if not completely displace or even eliminate - the Paudi Bhu-iyian communities in the area. Furthermore, the danger of an iconic waterfall totally drying up and creating ecological devastation was

²⁰ https://silo.tips/queue/national-workshop-on-underlying-causes-of-deforestation-and-forest-degradation-i?&queue_id=-1&v=1633078606&u=MTg1LjQ1LjIyLjEzMQ==, 151-2.

²¹ <http://www.posco.com/homepage/docs/eng3/jsp/s91a0010001i.jsp>.

²² "Odisha's Tribals", 16 August 2007: see <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/orissas-tribals/210689/>.

clearly stressed. But it was also emphasised the religious significance of the area by mentioning Sita as a pan-Indian deity who is believed to have passed through the Bonai when she was kidnapped by Ravana, and by referring to “Mata Kanteswari Devi” (i.e. Kant Debi in her Sanskritized name), whose divine abode is near the waterfall. Indeed, as the Kant Dehuri as religious specialist of the goddess pointed out in the abovementioned interview in 2016, everything will be lost – the seat of the goddess, all water and the waterfall, all edible plants. This same point was poignantly summarised in an NGO report based on discussions with villagers in the surrounding area:

The forest and stream of Khandadhar [waterfall] has an immense religious and cultural significance for people of Bonai and adjoining area. The Khandadhar Hills are the abode of “Maa Kanteswari Devi”, the chariest goddess of local people and deity of Paudi Bhuyans. There is one temple of “Maa Kanteswari Devi” in the form of a cave near Bahapura stream [...]. There is a belief that she comes out from this cave on invitation of Bonaigarh’s King in the month of Dushera [i.e. dasara] to give blessing to its worshipers and fulfils the cherished desire of the people. There is a strong feeling among the local people that any destruction to her temple or the habitat of wild animals and home land of Paudi Bhuyans would create catastrophe in the region.²³

Despite the fact that the POSCO plan appears to have been abandoned – a success for the protesters – work in the existing mines continues and an auction of additional mining deposits is still being considered. Thus, the struggle may continue and the long-term outcome of the resistance movement against the takeover of the land, against the expected environmental impact, but also in defence of the goddess remains to be seen (see e.g. Odishatv website).²⁴

4 Bonai, Its Sacred Landscape and Foundational Narratives

The frequent references to Kant Debi, but also to gods and goddesses more generally and to animals and plants very broadly make it worthwhile to look more closely at the sacred geography and at the foundational narratives of the former kingdom in order to understand what is at stake here. Entering Bonai, it is argued, does not mean to simply

²³ https://silo.tips/queue/national-workshop-on-underlying-causes-of-deforestation-and-forest-degradation-i?&queue_id=-1&v=1633076969&u=MTg1LjQ1LjIyLjEzMQ==.

²⁴ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/mining/fight-for-khandadhar-53257>.

arrive in a valley surrounded by hills, but one enters “a living, storied and intricately connected landscape” (Eck 2012, 2). This sacred geography may be best understood as a symbolic web dotted with material manifestations of the divine including temples, such as the one of the tutelary goddess; small and at times non-descript shrines commemorating mythical figures; caves as abodes of deities; crossings (*tirtha*) considered as connections between worlds; but also swords as divine yet mobile manifestations and so forth. These sites, beings and objects represent an eclectic combination of different, yet entangled traditions that left an imprint on Bonai, for example Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnava traditions within Hinduism linked to the royal family and others having intimate relations as heir, legal owner, guardians, servitors, priests etc.²⁵ These localities and tangible manifestations are inhabited by humans and non-humans, animals associated with deities, spirits etc., and intersect with texts and ritual performances outlined later, but let me start with a few concrete examples.

The abode of Lord Baneshwar as manifestation of Lord Shiva, playing a significant part in the formation of the kingdom and as Lord of the place (*sthanpati*), is the largest, wealthiest, and definitely one of the most important temples within the royal framework. His shrine and the royal fort lie on opposing sides of a bend in the river Brahmani. Though increasingly engulfed by an expanding town, Lord Baneshwar’s temple was once thought to be located in the wilderness, to which the raja paid periodic visits (e.g. during the investiture), which could be interpreted as symbolic repetitions of the first raja’s foundational migration into the ‘wilderness’. And, unlike other temples, the Lord is served by Bhuiyan priests (*pujari*), indicating a higher status and special access to the *sthanpati* for the community.

The relation between Lord Baneshwar, the Bhuiyans and the royal family is elaborated on in the royal chronicles (*rajbonsaboli*) or foundational narratives of the kingdom. Though some may consider the narratives simply as myths in the sense of something being untrue, I agree with Harvey pointing out that “one function of such narratives is to put the hearer into the scene and induce ‘an awareness of being in the world’ of rich relationality and sociality” (Harvey 2006, 101). Leaving aside debates around the contested concept of myth, in case of Bonai the foundational narratives point at a “transformational world” (Castro 1998, 471) in which gods and ancestors are also related to animals and plants and here especially to the peacock and Kadamba tree with a “key symbolic and practical role” (Castro 1998, 471) by performing protective acts for humans who in turn are in a

25 For the sake of brevity, the article largely leaves out the Vaishnava tradition, though it e.g. Lord Rangunath as tutelary god present in the form of the *salegram* stones is certainly equally relevant.

transitional phase. Thus, the charter narrative hints at alternative ontological dimensions, but let us turn to the concrete narrative presenting Lord Baneshwar, the peacock and Kadamba tree intertwined with the fate of the raja-to-be Pratap Deo arriving in the wilderness:

At that time Bonai was full of forest. First Pratap Deo came to Singhjoda and stayed there changing its name to Kadambadiha. At that time Kolha, Bhuiyan, Keuta and other Adibasi people were staying at Bonai. Among them Bhuiyans were the supreme (*srestha*) group and enjoying the landlordship (*Jamindar*). (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 49)

Pratap came to know about Lord Baneshwar as manifestation of Shiva and began worshipping him. The local chiefs came to know about it and conspired to kill the stranger. Returning from the Baneshwar temple Pratap noticed them, was worried about their intentions and took refuge in the jungle. However, the chiefs followed him.

Knowing this Pratap Deo looked around to save his life. Then he saw a hollow tree (*gacha khola*). He prayed to Baneswara and entered into the hollow tree. A peacock was sitting on the tree. With its tail it wiped out the footprints of Pratap Deo and again sat on the tree. All Jamindars reached there and couldn't find anybody. [...] Pratap Deo saw everything through the bark of the tree and on that day out of fear he didn't come out from there. That night Baneswara appeared in his dream and gave him the order "Pratap Deo, I make you the King of Shronita Nagar. You will enjoy the kingship without any obstruction". The Raja asked: "How can I be the King?" Banasura told: "Tomorrow morning whoever you meet in the temple, keep them with you and kill those people. Being the king of this place, you have to worship the tutelary deity (*ishta debi*). Debi will order you, in your dream". Raja [...] came out from the hollow tree. He spent the whole night beneath the tree. (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 50)

The next day he meets the Bhuiyan chief and as ordered in the dream forms an alliance with him, which lasts until today as it will be shown later. Blessed by Lord Baneshwar and together with his new ally, the first raja kills the other chiefs and according to the narrative, the chiefs revealed the presence of the tutelary goddess Kuari [Ma Kumari]. Besides, some chiefs like Mahabira [great hero] stated conditions at the time of their death e.g. a requirement to be worshipped by the new raja.

Mahabira [...] came out from his home. Immediately Pratap Deo shot an arrow at him. When he was wounded by the arrow he said, whoever will kill me, he will be the King here. He will worship me,

otherwise his clan will vanish. Pratap Deo said “I will worship you here”. Mahabira’s dead body was burnt towards the eastern side of his home and there, he was worshiped. (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 51)

A place of worship for Mahabira is identified as such outside of the palace and thereby, as in case of the Lord Baneshwar, ties the narrative to the sacred landscape of the valley. In the end, Pratap is anointed as raja and makes the Bhuiyan chief his *samanta* [“general of the forces”], which additionally is also reflected in the ritual performances.

However, in a different version of this narrative Cobden-Ramsay, as Political Agent familiar with the region, argues that the royal family came from Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and claims a “mysterious and foreign origin”. The dynasty’s founder

was abandoned by his mother under a kadamba [Nauclea cadamba] tree. Being thus on the point of falling into the hands of the enemy, the infant was rescued by a peacock, which swallowed him, and kept him in his craw until the danger was past. (Cobden-Ramsay [1910] 1982: 143 ff)

The seemingly helpless infant absent in other Bonai narratives survived through the peacock’s intervention.

The theme presented with reference to the peacock who offers support to Pratap Deo, when his life is in danger, is in line with a broader understanding of his role as “the friend of those who are in need” in India (Nair 1974, 135). In remembrance of the service the peacock together with the Kadamba tree became the key symbol of the Bonai crest adding to the “unrivalled position [of peacocks] in Indian iconography, epigraphy and numismatics” (127). Moreover, the appearance of the peacock in the narrative may not be entirely surprising given, as Nair (1974, 100 ff.) shows, his long association with royalty. On the highest level the famous peacock throne of the Moghuls bears testimony of this intimate tie, while in Odisha the dynasty of Mayurbhanj carries the name and there are also hints at a Mayura dynasty in Bonai before Kadambas (Dash 1997, 169-70). Even today the peacock still enjoys a significant presence in the palace of Bonai in the form of furniture or doors alluding to his role as “guardian of palaces” (Nair 1974), while both, peacock and peafowl are being considered rather common birds around the Khandadhar waterfall and in the district generally.²⁶

²⁶ For example, the District Irrigation Plan of Sundargarh District, (Odisha State), March 2016 states that “common birds are pea fowl, peacock, parrots and myna in

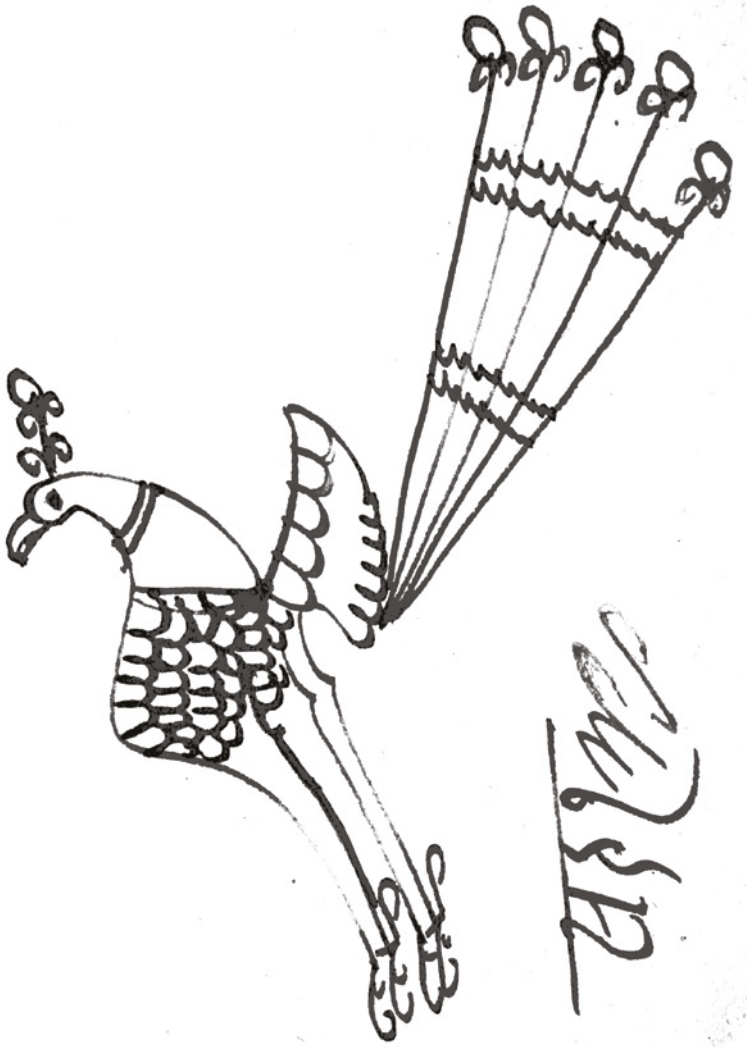


Figure 2 Peacock in a seal with a hand-written peacock as royal symbol of Bonai – file dated 1899.
Photo by the Author



Figure 3 Peacock in a door at the palace. Photo by the Author

The peacock, however, is not only linked to royalty, but according to Bhuiyan myths, the community was born out of a peacock's egg "which took that shape when a drop of semen [sic] of the Creator flowed into the earth" (Dash 1997, 172). Similar ideas are expressed in case of the Mayurbhanj dynasty, whose ancestor is believed to have emerged from the egg of a pea-fowl (Nair 1974).²⁷ The Bhuiyan narrative not only points at pavlatry or the worship of peacocks common in India, considered as original habitat of the bird, generally, but at strong peacock cults in part of Middle India, where – together with south India – , according to Nair (1974, 168) one finds the "staunchest votaries of pavlatry". As Nair (1974, 93 ff.) elaborates, the peacock has been venerated as Mother Earth and associated with a range of deities across the subcontinent, but among indigenous people in Odisha and the Northeast, the peacock with its rich lore has, for example, been linked to ploughing, while at times boys have even been turned into peacocks.²⁸

As Douglas (1967, 65) argued, the power of myths lies in their polyvalence and "every listener can find in it references to his own experience". Such a "range of reference for its native hearers" (65) may not only refer to the origin of communities such as the Bhuiyan, but may also relate to the emergence of the peacock feathers, which in turn are considered auspicious and metonymic for the worship of Krishna in Hindu traditions (Nair 1974, 107 ff.). In versions of the *Ramayana* epic, as Nair (1974, 136) shows, one also finds a striking parallel to the Bonai narrative in coupling the bird with the Kadamba tree. For example, in the *Uttarakanda Ramayana*, "Rama beholds the peacock in company with his mate singing after a dance with the fan-tail outspread, perched on the Kadamba tree, with the pang of separation from Sita greatly enhanced at the sight". The dance, often consid-

the district". https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewjomZmRy67zAhW0y4sKHQLLBvcQFnoECA4QAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fparksy.gov.in%2Fmis%2FUploads%2F2016%2F20160617011210512-1.pdf&usq=A0vVaw1KkMKrtZ_NWupxbi8i9cuH. And an Eco-Lodge next to the Khandadhar waterfalls claims that "in the evening Birds, Peacocks and barking deer call out loud to temper the excitement of the tourist" <https://jmsrkl.blogspot.com/2019/03/khandadhar-nature-camp-eco-tourism.html>.

27 See also Roy 1935. The Hill Bhuiyas of Orissa, Ranchi. Roy argues that the Hinduised Puran in Mayurbhanj stated that "the semen of Bhagwan (God) fell on the earth and produced an egg resembling a pea-hen's egg. From the white of this egg sprang the first ancestor of the Purans, from its membranous coating the progenitor of the Sarasvas, from its shell the first ancestor of the Kharias, and from the yolk the ancestor of the Bhanja Rajas of Mayurbhanj". (Roy 1935, 25). He also referred to Risley who identified Purans with Bhuiyas.

28 Nair (1974, 96 ff.) refers to stories about the origin of peacock in Chhattisgarh, Odisha etc, for example among the Kuttia Kondh, Soara, Gadaba, Baiga but also Khasi – frequently collected by Elwin. For example, the peacock is worshipped as Thadha Penno among Maliah Kondh.

ered with awe, itself is richly connotated and seen as “harbinger of clouds” and broadly as heralding rain (Nair 1974, 151).

The narratives refer not only to peacocks deeply embedded in royal ‘mythology’ as well as indigenous culture, but also to Ma Kumari as tutelary goddess whose presence has been revealed by the autochthonous chiefs before being killed by the first ruler. Her temple is situated north of the palace marking the boundary of the fort and is arguably the most important goddesses in the Shakta tradition located in Bonaigarh. Not unlike other goddesses, she combines a role as “protectress of a site” by being placed right on the boundary with a role as the “protectress of a family” whose tutelary goddess she has become (Biardieu [1981] 1989, 132). Ma Kumari is a goddess who is often linked to Durga and vice versa. This connection is emphasised in a prayer (*janan*) dedicated to her in the royal chronicles (Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 38), in which she is addressed as ‘mother’, ‘demon-slaying goddess’ (*Mahisamardini*), ‘caretaker of the whole world’ and ‘caretaker of the fort’ (a universal as well as very specific context of protection), or as ‘tutelary deity of Bonai’ and ‘Durga of the forest’ (*Bana Durga*), implicitly also linking the royal family to wilderness. Together with Durga present in the palace e.g. as Naba Durga in the form of bracelet(s) known as *nabadurga kankana*, but also together with other goddesses surrounding the fort in all directions, Ma Kumari is classified as goddess of the *chandi* form, meaning she is generally fierce, possibly destructive, capricious, but also benevolent as well as motherly, yet does not represent a *shanti* form (e.g. like Lakshmi) – a local distinction correlating to widespread goddess classifications (Biardieu [1981] 1989, 140; Michaels 1998, 247).²⁹

Ma Kumari is feared by many because of her *chandi*-like appearance, and several people claim to have witnessed her terrible manifestation at night. Though she is portrayed as a caring mother (*ma*) during droughts and outbreaks of contagious diseases such as smallpox, her ‘terrible’ side is highlighted in stories about her unusual idol (*murti*) being disfigured after devouring a young boy – an act commonly associated with the goddess’ ambivalent role as ‘childless mother’ yearning for children. In the royal chronicles it is stated that Ma Kumari as goddess of the fort (*gada debi*):

takes care of the state’s well-being. Once one sage [*bramhachari*] came here. At that time Bonai was full of dense forest and he stayed at Kumari Debi’s place to worship her. He had a student

²⁹ One often encounters an opposition expressed as Sri / Lakshmi > wife > prosperity > pure > pacified > passive > mild > vegetarian versus Durga > virgin / unmarried / childless > warrior > impure > violent > active > wild > non-vegetarian / blood sacrifices.

[*shishya*] with him. He sent the student to fetch water from the river and he went to the village to beg for alms. After returning he saw that water was there but the student was not. The Bramhachari searched everywhere, but did not find the student. Then he saw a pair of footprints in front of the Goddess. He thought that the Goddess had eaten his student. Then he angrily threw the full plate with food offerings [*jou*] on the face of Kumari Debi and her face has been hidden ever since. (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 37)

Ma Kumari is not only present at her temple, but she also has a particular relationship with the raja, who received Ma Kumari's blessings (*prasad*) in the shape of the sword known as *kumari prasad*, according to the royal family. It is one of a collection of divine swords that also includes:

one big sword named 'patkhanda' [*pat* = main, *khanda* = sword]. [...] worshipped at the time of Dasahara or at the time of the coronation ceremony of a new king. In the olden days many, many animal sacrifices and human sacrifices [*nara bali*] were given. The said sword is worshipped with the mantras of 'Bana Durga'. He [the first raja] also received mohana khanda by killing [the chief] Mohana Kondh, [...] and the Kumari prasad tarabari [*tarabati* = sword, scimitar] which are also worshipped. (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 37)

Ma Kumari as well as Durga and other goddesses in the *chandi* form are worshipped by the raja and Paudi Bhuiyan especially during the Dasara festival - also in their multitude of swords which, as elsewhere in Odisha (Schnepel 2002; Mallebrein 2004), are considered as manifestations of divine power. In fact, referring to the swords, the royal priest (*rajpurohit*) argues that Goddess Durga has a *pitha* or permanent seat or presence inside the fort, i.e. being intimately tied to the territory (see also Galey 1989), while also related Bonai to the mythical account of Sati (e.g. Kinsley 1987, 186). During Dasara, the swords' public display can be interpreted as a re-enactment of a raja's first empowerment, symbolically re-conquering his kingdom, while also alluding to Durga's victory over the demon. However, the chronicles hint at deeper connections. There are ties to the Bhuiyan community, as there are with Lord Baneshwar, and Surendranath Mishra, a former Rajpurohit (royal priest), wrote in his version of the chronicles:

Kumari is the goddess of Bhuyan pitha. She was the tutelary goddess of Samanta [Bhuiyan chief]. The Kadamba [royal] clan established Kumari as the 'Goda Chandi' (Chandi of the fort). (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 260)

The quote hints as much at a link to the Bhuiyan as at an attempt to appropriate a goddess from the Bhuiyan into the royal tradition (though contested by the current Samanto). However, another attempt to appropriate a goddess from the autochthonous population might be found in the relationship between Ma Kumari and Goddess Kant Debi – also referred to as Kant Kumari or Kant Mahapru – who stands out among the goddesses present beyond the fort and capital. She resides in the hills with its rich deposits of iron and other ores, at a periphery in the raja's perspective, close to the Khandhar waterfall, which is also perceived as nurturing mother.³⁰ However, it is concretely Kant Debi who is considered the sister of Ma Kumari.

Unlike other Odishan tutelary deities (Kulke [1984] 2001), she has not gone from the hills to the palace, but rather has a sister there. This sisterhood may hint at a probable, though partial appropriation of the goddess. The late Rajasahib K.K.C. Deo referred to Kant Debi as his 'personal deity' in contrast to Ma Kumari as his 'chief goddess' or tutelary goddess. Also considered to be a *chandi* form of the goddess and a manifestation of Durga she is carried once a year during Dasara from her secret cave to the fort Bonaigarh to visit her sister.

The special tie linking raja, Bhuiyans and Goddess Kant Debi is explained in the royal chronicles (Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 39 ff.). In this narrative she is believed to have come from outside (the neighbouring kingdom of Keonjhar) just like the raja came as outsider. She is directly linked to hills where she and the Paudi Bhuiyan reside, but also to the Pano community, which plays a marginal role in her rituals; to the tutelary *devta* of the raja in the form of *salegram* stones representing Vishnu; and to Durga in the form of a bracelet. These potent ritual objects the raja acquired by killing a visiting Babaji who refused to pass them on to the raja voluntarily. The narrative goes on:

After a few years the place where the Babaji was killed was turned into agricultural land and belonged to a person of Pana caste. One day when that Pana was ploughing the land, he could feel that an iron thing struck against his plough. He put it aside and continued ploughing. [...] Finally he could see that it was something like the iron part [*sama*] of a husking pedal [*dhinki*]. He thought of taking it home to use it in his husking pedal. (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 40)

30 As the report of National Workshop on Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation in India, 2008, 151 states: "For generations, villagers of Bonai looked upon the glittering Khandadhar fall as their mother who cared and nurtured them for centuries" https://silo.tips/queue/national-workshop-on-underlying-causes-of-deforestation-and-forest-degradation-i?&queue_id=-1&v=1633076969&u=MTg1LjQ1LjIyLjEzMQ==.

The narrative goes on to describe the appearance of the Kant Debi, which resembles a small metallic snake with a cobra-like hood and has a peculiar “quaint shape” (Roy 1935, 105), essentially “a roundish fragment of some old metal object”, which, from today’s perspective, appears to hint at the rich ore deposits. According to the story, it is a visiting money lender (*Mahajan*) who recognises the piece’s value and tries to own it, but in the end,

The Pana [...] dreamed that he should give the sama to the King, otherwise his clan will be wiped out. That night the King also dreamed that whatever he sees in the morning, he should worship it. That night a Bhuiyan of Jala also dreamed that he should go to the King early in the morning and bring the sama from the Rajbati. [...] The Bhuiyan kept it in Jala. After some days again the King dreamed that it [the sama] will be worshipped as Kanta Debi. From that day onwards Kanta Debi is visible on the day of pratipada [the beginning of the Dasara festival]. (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 40)

The goddess emerges from the earth in the act of cultivation, with obvious allusions to fertility (ploughing as well as the *dhenki* or grinder indicating sexual intercourse) and prosperity (harvesting as well as the moneylender as an expert). Besides, divine intervention through dreams avoids potential conflict (moneylender, Pano, Bhuiyan and raja) and explains the goddess’ presence in the hills as her preferred locality.

5 Performing an Alliance

The narratives in the chronicles and divine manifestations as idols or temples complement and strengthen one other, i.e., the narratives explain the sacred geography, while the presence of deities gives the chronicles tangibility and a sense of facticity. Both contribute to the tenacity of kingship and the central alliance with the Bhuiyans, which is ritually enacted and renewed in a variety of ways. For example, during the investiture of a new raja, last performed in 2011, the *samanto* as highest Bhuiyan chief puts a *tika* or mark on the raja’s forehead, while he should sit on the *samanto*’s lap. For the *tika* soil from the shrine of the *samanto*’s own tutelary goddess is used. Thus, the *samanto* referred to as *matishwar* or ‘Lord of the Soil’ in the chronicles literally hands over the soil, which stands for the *samanto*’s ‘authority of the soil’ (Skoda 2012) but also serves as a symbol for the kingdom, to the new king, who subsequently reaffirms the exalted role of the Bhuiyans in Bonai. In 2011, the ritual was performed at the temple of Lord Baneshwar, where the Bhuiyan occupy a prominent position

as *pujari* (servitor of the Lord), while the setting closely corresponds to the foundational narrative in the chronicles. And, adding a longer historical horizon here, the scene seems to have been very similar in the early twentieth century described by S.C. Roy in his seminal ethnography of the Paudi Bhuiyans in 1935. He wrote on the investiture:

[o]n his return to his palace, he sits in Darbar where a Bhuiya landholder who is known by the title of Samanta makes a mark of sovereignty on the Raja's forehead with earth and then addresses him as "Raja" and says - "I grant thee such and such (names) a village". The Raja in return says "I grant such-and-such (names) a village to you, and make you my Samanta". (Roy 1935, 130)

A close link between raja and Bhuiyan chief is also visible during Cheitra Parba when the raja sits publicly, though temporarily on his throne and the Bhuiyan chief stands behind him - literally backing him up. Yet, the most important ritual to express the close nexus between Bhuiyan and raja is the annual *dasara* celebrations - *dasara* being arguably the most important ritual of kingship in India (Fuller 1992). However, in Bonai *dasara* is a central performance of a wider, yet partially disintegrating 'sacrificial polity' (Nicholas 2013) which revolves around the goddess(es) and connects the raja with his *praja* (subjects), who offer or used to offer services which were often tied to land grants given to them before independence. A case in point is a role known as Kathi, belonging to the Maharona community, and being in charge of the washing and sharpening of the royal swords. The rituals, thus provided "a role for dependents and graded responsibilities for various castes [or *Adivasis*], [and] physically assembles the *prajas* in ranked roles" (Nicholas 2013, 176-7). Since the "sacrificial polity" has been described in detail elsewhere (Skoda 2020), the focus in the following will be primarily on the Paudi Bhuiyan.

Dasara as a ritual cycle of its own is performed during the bright fortnight of the month of *asvina* (September-October) culminating between the sixth day, *sasthi*, and the tenth day, *vijaydasami*, in the royal capital of Bonaigarh, before ending on the following full moon, *kumarpurnima*. The manifold individual ritual steps include e.g. the so-called *Bel barni* on *sasthi*, when the goddess is first welcomed and kept in form of a branch of the bel-tree, or *Khanda basaa* when a ritual seat is established for the two main swords - namely *patkhanda* and *kumari prasad*, which are subsequently worshipped.

From the Paudi Bhuiyan perspective, the central element of *dasara* relates to Kant Debi. On the second day of the fortnightly cycle the goddess leaves her cave and a group of Paudi Bhuiyan carries her in a procession clockwise to the plains and the fort, and back again. This procession connects not only periphery and centre, but through night halts in various villages it also involves headmen (*naik*) and *ja-*

girdar of the Gond community as essential elements of the political structure of the former princely state, but also commoners, Adivasi and others. In fact, due to the growing popularity of the goddess procession with many people being keen to bring her into their house, there are also increasingly delays in the ritual schedule. The route though is outlined beforehand by the raja in an order including the royal crest with peacock and Kadamba tree and is carried by the Paudi Bhuiyan who had come to the palace already earlier.

On the evening of *astami*, the eighth day, a first climax is reached, when the Paudi Bhuiyan arrive at the outskirts of the fort and meet the raja (or his representative) in order to hand over Kant Debi to him - a ritual known as *kant beth* (meeting the goddess Kant). The handing over of the goddess from Paudi Bhuiyan to raja takes the form of a ritualised dialogue that expresses a form of hierarchical, yet mutual care and has apparently not changed much since the time when Roy (1935, 109-10) documented it:

The Dihuri [...] comes up to the Raja with the image, salutes him, and enquires of him about the health and welfare, first of himself, then of his Rani, then of his children, then of his servants, then of his elephants, then of his horses, and last of all about the welfare of the land (Prithvi or Earth). The Raja answers "yes" to every question; and then in his turn, the Raja asks the Dihuri about the welfare of himself and his children and then of the Pauris generally; and to every question the Dihuri replies in the affirmative.

While not all the items such as elephants and horses are mentioned any longer, the *dehuri's* holding of the goddess in his hands together with the raja remains a symbol of a relationship and both sides inquire till date about the well-being of the raja, *rani* and his kingdom. The raja answered affirmatively and after receiving the goddess, traditionally presented the goddess with a new silver umbrella. Subsequently, the raja passes the goddess on to another ritual specialist known as *amat*, who takes care of her during her stay in the fort until the goddess is returned to the Paudi Bhuiyan a day later. However, as another important step Kant Debi, as the chronicles state, "meets Kumari Debi and stays with her as her sister in the armory (*khanda ghar*) in a cooking vessel filled with blood (*rakta handi*)". (Adapted from Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 41) Slightly deviating from the chronicles, the *amat* actually carries the goddess to her sister's temple where both are left alone, i.e. the temple is closed for the public, and the sisters do their 'talking', as he put it, without any disturbance.

The investiture rituals and even more so the annual *dasara* celebrations connect (Paudi) Bhuiyan and raja in multiple ways, while the goddesses staying in the periphery and at the centre are imagined as siblings. Given the existence of such an alliance, perceived as foun-

dational for the kingdom, it may not surprise that the Adivasis seeing their existence and Kant Debi's abode threatened also turned to the raja for support. The fact that both sides participated in protests around 2007-08 appears to be related to the close relationship and seems to have strengthened the ties. Interestingly, taking part in the protest rallies, the late raja emphasised how his father had stopped the Birla company from opening a mine in 1947, even if he could not prevent it after independence - thus blaming the modern state. Indeed, as reports on mining in Bonai state,

no large-scale felling and commercial exploitation of this forest was allowed during Bonaigarh rule. Even the Britishers did not enter here in keeping with the cultural and spiritual significance for local people. Britishers feared that if they did indiscriminate felling in the forest, it was bound to ruffle the emotion of the local people which might turn into large scale violence, difficult to contain. That is why this forest was kept out of all business and commercial activities till the Government of India gave lease to OMC [Orissa Mining Corporation] for iron ore mining at Kankaragarh under this forest in 1966. This was the first large scale economic activity inside Khandadhar forest which started denudation of forest and created threat over survival of Khandadhar fall which is now aggravated by the arrival of the POSCO mining (company).³¹

The raja was clearly not the only sought-after ally of the Paudi Bhu-nyan in their struggle - in fact, several parties across the political spectrum jumped onto the issue - , but the raja's esteemed position was reflected in the list of signatories to a petition passed during the rally, where he appears first, before the Member of Parliament, demonstrating the growing role of elected officials, followed by his son and other dignitaries such as lawyers and representatives of the Bar Association, ex-MLAs, and others (see Hindtoday website). While newspapers highlighted the involvement of the local Member of Parliament, an Adivasi from Bonai, as an important voice in the anti-mining protest, there was also an undercurrent of mistrust vis-à-vis politicians broadly, who were blamed for the rise of mining and its negative impact. As the Dehuri stated later: "Our leaders are doing those things. In order to take money, they are doing it by force".³²

This multitude of players, barely indicated here, hints at the multilayered character of protests with many stakeholders and agen-

³¹ https://silo.tips/queue/national-workshop-on-underlying-causes-of-deforestation-and-forest-degradation-i?&queue_id=-1&v=1633076969&u=MTg1LjQ1LjIyLjEzMQ==.

³² Interview 2016.

das, which however, does not foreclose that otherwise seemingly contradictory categories such as kingship and elective politics may be bridged.³³ Yet, by stressing the threat to Kant Debi, the protests also referred back to the raja, who – apart from genuine mutual concerns and sympathies for Paudi Bhuiyan – could conceive mining also as potential threat to his own, already somewhat reduced ritual centrality, which would be further reduced if the Paudi Bhuiyans and Kant Debi were dissociated from the palace.

6 Conclusion: Multiple Sovereignties, Multiple Perspectives

The current sub-district and former kingdom of Bonai has undergone substantial transformations and a period of accelerated change since the early 2000s – driven primarily by expanded mining and an industrialisation in the form of sponge iron factories. As detailed above, these extractive industries promoted by governments on various levels and fuelled by global demands have a severe environmental impact, causing multiple forms of pollution (air, water) and threatening the rich biodiversity of the area. Moreover, new mega-projects would further endanger and possibly displace the local communities – first and foremost the Paudi Bhuiyan settling in the hills prized by mining companies for their rich deposits of various ores.

Protests against mining have not only highlighted the environmental dimension, indeed a question of life and livelihood for the local community, but have also foregrounded a cultural dimension – namely the threat to the local goddess, the mother, residing in the hills. Indeed, existing and even more so new projects pose a threat to the divine cosmology as much as to the water, animals and plants as the ritual specialist of the Paudi Bhuiyan stressed in the introductory quote – apparently pursuing a more holistic approach.

Looking at the sacred geography, the various narratives around it, especially those foundational for the kingdom of Bonai, but also the ritual performances of the Paudi Bhuiyan, raja and others one encounters vibrant manifestations tied to localities and ‘myths’ – mutually reinforcing each other. This focus leads into webs of rich relationality and sociality including alliances and relationships of care, which is partially reminiscent of lifeworlds described by Descola (2011, 14 ff.) where humans and non-humans are seen as “separated by mere differences of degree, not of kind” and where an “objectification of nature” is increasingly brought in the form of resource extraction by outsiders rather than being pursued by autochthonous communities.

33 On this point see also Tripathy 2014.

What some consider as “resources” in this logic, are actually “sources of life” for Adivasis (Padel 2012, 50) and a potential loss of the land and displacement of an already vulnerable community, acknowledged as such by the state, may even lead to a “cultural genocide in the sense of a dislocation of the community and total disruption of internal and external community-structures (51).

Yet, protests have been partially successful and prevented a new mega-mine - also by mobilizing alliances (apart from forging new ones), which are rooted in foundational narratives. Ironically, the narratives around the Goddess Kant Debi residing in the hills and revealed to be present in the form of a metallic object, seems to anticipate a certain greed to possess her - which may well be understood as alluding to the resource extraction. This comes to the fore in the story in the role of a moneylender or Mahajan, often stereotypically seen as embodiment of manipulative money-mindedness. Though nobody interpreted the story to me in this way, it is somehow tempting to draw an analogy to the current situation. Therefore, let’s return to the royal chronicles and the narrative around goddess Kant Debi one more time. After a low-caste Pano found the goddess in his field while ploughing, he took her home. A moneylender (*mahajan*) who wanted to collect the loan he had given to the Pano, waited for him in the Pano’s house watching the threshing floor where the Pano had spread paddy to dry. The Mahajan noticed that

as soon that as soon the birds started to peck at the paddy, a snake would come out of the sama [metal part of the grinder / the idol of the goddess] and drive them away. An idea came to him to ask the Pana for the same [...] the mahajan kept sitting there and said that he would not leave unless the Pana returned his money. Then the Pana winnowed the paddy and got rice from it. To the mahajan’s surprise he got the same quantity of rice as much as he had paddy. The mahajan then again asked for the sama telling him that he will relieve the Pana from his loan if he gave it to him. (Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 40)

Finally, the Pana gave in and the Mahajan took possession of the metallic *sama*. But “[t]he same night the mahajan had a dream that, if he did not return the sama to where it belonged his clan (*bansa*) would be wiped out” (Pramanik, Skoda 2013, 40). In further dreams of the Pana, the king and the Bhuiyan, it was revealed that the *sama* or rather Goddess Kant Debi wished to stay in the hills and shall be worshipped by the Bhuiyans rather than being in the hands of a money-lender.

Bibliography

- Biardieu, M. [1981] (1989). *Hinduism. The Anthropology of a Civilization*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Castro, E. Viveiros de (1998). "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism". *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4(3), 469-88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>.
- Cobden-Ramsay, L.E.B. [1910] (1982). *Feudatory States of Orissa*. Calcutta: KLM Private Limited.
- Dalton, E.T. (1865). "Notes of a Tour Made in 1863-64 in the Tributary Mehals Under the Commissioner of Chota-Nagpore, Bonai, Gangbore, Odeypore and Sirgooja". *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 34(2), 1-31.
- Dash, K.C. (1997). *Legend, History, and Culture in India*. Calcutta: Punthi-Pustak.
- Descola, P. (2011). "Human Natures". *Quaderns*, 27, 11-25.
- Douglas, M. (1967). "The Meaning of Myth, with Special Reference to *La geste d'Asdiwal*". Leach, E. (ed.), *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*. London: Tavistock Press, 49-69. Association of Social Anthropologists Monographs.
- Eck, D.L. (2012). *India: A Sacred Geography*. New York: Harmony Books.
- Fuller, C.J. (1992). *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Galey, J.-C. (1989). "Reconsidering Kingship in India: An Ethnological Perspective". *History and Anthropology*, 4, 123-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.1989.9960796>.
- Harvey, G. (2006). *Animism. Respecting the Living World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hylland Eriksen, T. (2016). *Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change*. London: Pluto Press.
- Kulke, H. [1984] (2001). "Tribal Deities at Princely Courts: The Feudatory Rājās of Central Orissa and Their Tutelary Deities (istadevatās)". Kulke, H. (ed.), *Kings and Cults*, 114-36. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Mallebrein, C. (2004). "Entering the Realm of Durga: Patkhanda, a Hinduized Tribal Deity". Malinar, A.; Frese, H.; Beltz, J. (eds), *Text and Context in Orissa and Beyond*. New Delhi: Manohar, 273-305.
- Michaels, A. (1998). *Der Hinduismus. Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Muenchen: Beck.
- Nair, T.P. (1974). "The Peacock Cult in Asia". *Asian Folklore Studies*, 33(2), 93-170.
- Nicholas, R.W. (2013). *Night of the Gods: Durga Puja and the Legitimation of Power in Rural Bengal*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.
- Padel, F. (2012). "How Best to Ensure Adivasis' Land, Forest and Mineral Rights?". *IDS Bulletin*, 43, S1, 49-57. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/7547>.
- Pramanik, R.; Skoda, U. (2013). *Chronicles of the Royal Family of Bonai (Odisha)*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Roy, S.C. (1935). *The Hill Bhuiyas of Orissa*. Ranchi: 'Man in India' Office.
- Schnepel, B. (2002). *The Jungle Kings: Ethnohistorical Aspects of Politics and Ritual in Orissa*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Skoda, U. (2012). "Texts, Centres and Authorities. The History of the Royal Family of Bonai". Carrin, M.; Guzy, L. (eds), *Voices from the Periphery. Subalternity and Empowerment in India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 103-31.

- Skoda, U. (2020). "Deities, Alliances, and the Power Over Life and Death. Exploring Royal Sovereignty and Its Tenacity in a Former Princely State in Odisha". Gilmartin, D.; Price, A.E.; Ruud, A.E. (eds), *South Asian Sovereignty*. London: Routledge, 179-218.
- Tripathy, J. (2014). "Indian Environmentalism and its Fragments". Slovic, S. et al. (eds), *Ecoambiguity, Community and Development: Towards Politicised Ecocriticism*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 71-84.