THEIR VOICE OR MINE? DEBATING PEOPLE’S
AGENCY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF
INDIGENOUS ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIES

Gauri Bharat
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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the process of construction of an indigenous architectural history by positing the differences between an architect-researcher’s point of view and the perceptions of the indigenous community being studied. I analyse the outcomes of participatory fieldwork engagements and the production of my own narratives of architectural history to suggest that though they are rooted in different epistemological orbits, they are both inextricably linked to the dialogic process of fieldwork. I argue that to recognise the role of villagers in these dialogues is to attribute them with a greater degree of agency in processes of knowledge production.

A DISPLAY IN THE VILLAGE

It was 9:00 am in morning and the village street was abuzz with excitement. Villagers were milling around a display of my photographs and architectural drawings of their houses and village that I had exhibited in the village street. This village was one of the three case studies for my doctoral research among Santals who are an indigenous community in Singhbhum in south Jharkhand in India. In my project, I study conceptions of space and place are studied by looking at dwelling and settlement as both sites and processes. Built forms are considered as objects that – in a phenomenological sense - emerge through processes of engagement with the environment, and also, as settings for everyday life. I further examine how dwellings, settlements and the context of Singhbhum have transformed and construct an architectural history along these lines. During fieldwork, I carried out architectural documentation of dwellings and the settlement and conducted ethnographies of everyday practices. However, I also wanted to explore in more explicit terms what people considered important in their environment and used a number of participatory visual techniques such as guided photography and drawings of the village environments by children. I also did a public display of my visual documentation in the case study villages that I discus in detail in this paper.
For the display, I framed approximately forty photographs, which included images of the village surroundings, institutions such as the central street, sacred grove of worship and the village school, important everyday places such as paddy fields, grazing pastures and water sources, dwellings and interior spaces. I had previously sought permission from the village headman and informed the villagers about my intention to put up a display. As I was laying the photographs out against the wall of a house on the street, people began gathering to take a closer look (Fig. 1: Display in the village street). There was much discussion about the images and exclamations when people spotted something familiar. The choice of displayed images drew from a combination of what interested me as an architect and researcher and things that villagers had pointed out as being important in the course of our interactions. I also put up two axonometric drawings of houses that I had measured and drawn to give some idea about the nature of architectural documentation to the villagers (Fig. 2: display images). In short, this display was my attempt at representing the key aspects of the built environments of the village. It was also an opportunity for the villagers to engage with self-representations of their environment and more specifically, with my research project itself.

Fig. 1: Display in the village street
Once the display was set up and people had had a chance to look at the images I posed a question to the people. I asked them to choose – individually - five images that they considered most important, significant or beautiful in their everyday lives or representative of the life and culture of their community and village. The range of questions – important, significant, beautiful and representative – were intended as different registers of evaluation that the villagers may wish to consider. To order to further help them make choices, I proposed a hypothetical scenario. I asked the villagers to imagine that if they had to curate an exhibition about their village in Jamshedpur (the nearest city) then what images would they choose to represent their lives and culture?

It was interesting to note that there was considerable similarity in the choices. First, an almost unanimous choice from the villagers was the image of the *jahira* or sacred grove (Fig.3: *Jahira*). People pointed out that this was the most important place in the village since this is where they offered worship and carried out prayers and ritual activity. They compared it to Hindu temples and said that to them, this was the equivalent of a temple. For these reasons, it was the most important place in the village. Another popular choice selected together with the *jahira* was the *manjithan* which is a shrine dedicated to ancestral
headmen of the village (Fig.4: Manjhithan). This shrine is usually located in front of the headman’s house in the central street of the village. All auspicious events in the village begin and end with seeking the blessings of the ancestors at the manjhithan. As one of the villagers pointed out, the manjhithan and the jahira were the “No.1” places in the village. In addition to the shrine locations mentioned above, another image commonly chosen from the display was that of the village school. If the shrines were unanimous first choices, then the image of the school was nearly always selected next (Fig.5: School). The reasons for selecting the school ranged from it being a sign of development (“we indigenous people study, we are not backward in our outlook”) to it being a clean and beautiful place (“it is clean/it is nice”). This choice was interesting and even ironic given that the school was not a particularly well run institution. Yet, people maintained that was an important site in the village. The next two choices – of cattle and water sources – were identified as being essential for everyday life in the village and therefore very important (Fig.6: Cattle and Fig.7: Water sources). In both cases of the image of cattle and of the village pond, villagers said they ‘give us everything’ and so their images must be selected. Images of greenery such as fields ready for harvest or trees in the vicinity of the village also drew appreciative comments from most villagers (Fig.8: Greenery). These images were considered as ‘beautiful sights’ and were pointed out as the things worth photographing in the village.

Fig.3: Jahira
Fig. 4: Manjhitan

Fig. 5: Village school

Fig. 6: Cattle

Fig. 7: River as one of the water sources in the village
To summarise, people chose images of places of worship (the *jahiras* and the *manjhitans*), the village school, cattle, sources of water and greenery around the village as the objects or places that are most significant, important and representative of their life and culture in the village. What was conspicuously missing from these choices – with the exception of the school building – were built forms. I asked the villagers why they did not choose dwellings for instance. People responded by saying that there was nothing remarkable about the dwelling; as one woman pointed out - “everybody knows people in villages live in mud houses and have thatched roofs. Everybody knows they use brooms, fishing traps, and agricultural implements. So why would I choose such images?” At the time of the display, this was a distressing realisation since I was exploring Santal relationships to their environment largely through their dwellings and the settlement as a whole. For the dwelling to not feature in people’s choices suggested that it was not considered as one of the more important places within the environment. The doubt that lingered in my mind was that in making dwellings the focus of my research on how Santals phenomenologically saw themselves in the world, had I picked the wrong sites to study?

**AN INDIGENOUS ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY**

It is useful to take a detour and this point to discuss why and how the dwelling is central to the construction of an architectural history narrative in my project. I mentioned earlier that my project focused on two things – first, dwellings and settlement as both sites and processes and second, shifts in architecture and everyday practices in relation to broad changes in the Singhbhum region as a context.
Through these two foci I attempt to construct a trajectory of transformation of dwellings since the mid-nineteenth century in Singhbhum.

I began my research with the architectural documentation of houses across three case study sites. I measured and sketched the houses in the form of plans and sectional drawings. I also took photographs to document the distribution of activities within the house. Based on this documentation, two sets of observations emerged. First, it became evident that Santal houses across the case study sites have some common features. They all have orthogonal layouts, are built in mud using cob-wall construction techniques and have pitched roofs with thatch or tiles as roofing materials (Fig.9: Typical Santal house). The layout of the house typically comprises an entrance space, rooms organised around a courtyard and a backyard. In some cases, the house comprises a single volume and only has a backyard. Within these common features, there are however subtle differences in plan configurations and construction techniques, which are explored later in relation to the issue of architectural transformation.

The second observation pertains to these differences in that the documented dwellings may broadly be classified into three types – *orak* or single volume dwellings, *ath-chala* or dwellings with two concentric volumes having hipped roofs, and courtyard type houses (Fig.10: Four types of Santal dwellings). The types are not distinctive categories but rather, may be considered as three ways in which spaces are organized. Houses are typically amalgams of these three types. These observations raised an important question – within the similarity of building materials, construction techniques and functions, how did three different layout types emerge and co-exist within the building tradition of one community? This was answered through the process of constructing a history of Santal dwellings.
Fig. 9: Typical Santal house

LEGEND
1. ENTRANCE
2. COURTYARD
3. VERANDAH (CHALI)
4. BHITAR
5. ORAK (ROOM)
6. CHULHA (EXTERIOR)
7. COOKING AREA
8. ANIMAL SHELTER
9. BASTI
10. PLACE OF OTHER DEITY
11. BACKYARD
12. VEGETABLE GARDEN
In the course of interrogating building practices during fieldwork, people in one case study site pointed me to the oldest house in the village. This was a courtyard house where one part was a structure with a hipped roof. This hipped roof structure was the ath-chala. It was clear that the ath-chala was much older than the other spaces around the courtyard that had been added later. Going through the other documented houses, it became evident that this was the case in many dwellings where an older ath-chala was incorporated into present-day courtyard houses. It was interesting to note here that ath-chala type houses were only found in some villages and not the others, which only had the courtyard houses. What accounts for the absence of ath-chala houses in some villages is the age of the settlement. Villages that existed prior to the mid-nineteenth century as recorded in the colonial survey and settlement maps from the time appear to have examples of ath-chala houses. Villages that do not appear in the records and therefore may have emerged after the mid-nineteenth century do not have any examples of ath-chala houses. One may argue then that sometime between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the practice of building ath-chala gave way to courtyard houses as the common dwellings layout type.

While it is established that ath-chala houses are an older building type, villagers also pointed out that it was typically only built by wealthier families and was not the commonly built dwelling type. What was commonly built was the kumbaha, which the older people in the village described as being built out of
panels of woven branches and thatched with leaves. (Fig.11: Conjectural view of *kumbaha*). While no examples of a *kumbaha* were documented in the Santal case study villages, a similar structure was observed in a Birhor settlement. The Birhor houses were built with panels of branches and thatched with straw and leaves in a manner similar to the descriptions of the *kumbaha* but because the families had remained in the same location for a considerable length of time, they had begun to plaster parts of the walls with mud (Fig.12: View of Birhor house). Considering the Birhor house as a close equivalent of the *kumbaha* provides some definite insights into what early Santal houses may have been like. For instance, the interior space may have been small and used particularly for key functions i.e. as a *bhitar*, which is the spaces for worship of deceased ancestors and household spirits, and for sheltering the family and their domesticated animals if any. All other activities such as cooking or socializing must have been carried out in an open yard in front of the house. Villagers also suggested that these structures were smaller and quick to construct so that if families needed to move from one place to another, they could do so with ease.
I have established now that of the three layouts observed earlier, the *ath-chala* and *kumbaha* are older house types and were probably in currency in the mid-nineteenth century. Given that neither the *ath-chala* nor the *kumbaha* type dwellings are built today, it is evident that they gradually transformed into the present day *orak* and courtyard type houses. What needs to be established is the nature of transformations that took place. I now compare the building material and the plan layouts across the dwelling types to suggest how they constitute a trajectory of architectural transformation, and by extension, a trajectory of shifts in Santal relationships to their environment.

In terms of layout Santal houses today typically have spaces designated as a *bhitar* (inner space for worship of deceased ancestors and household spirits), a cooking area, a sleeping area, a place for storing grains and shelters for animals. In the *kumbaha, ath-chala, orak* and courtyard house, these functions were variously accommodated. In the *kumbaha* that had a small single volume, the *bhitar* was located at one end while people stored their valuables and slept in the other. Cooking was carried out in the open possibly on account of the wooden panel walls of the *kumbaha* presenting a fire hazard. Socialising and other activities were carried out in the *racha* or open yard in front of the structure. In the *ath-chala* houses the internal spaces were larger and more functions were accommodated within its concentric volumes. The inner volume of the *ath-chala* was designated as the *bhitar* and was also used to store grains. The outer volume had corners for cooking, sleeping and sheltering cattle. Socialising continued to take place in the *racha* (yard) in front of the house. In the present day *orak* and courtyard
houses however, different functions are located in different spaces or rooms within the house. In the orak, the rooms are fewer since widows or small families typically build these houses while courtyard houses occupied by larger families have more rooms.

Comparing the layouts, three significant shifts become apparent. First, in the kumbaha layout, both grain storage and animal shelters are not mentioned and the small size of the structure may not have permitted the accommodation of those functions. I argue that these functions are typical of agricultural communities and may be missing from the kumbaha on account of the these dwellings belonging a pre-agricultural Santal past. This point is developed later when I discuss changes in building materials across the dwelling types. Second, as one moves from the kumbaha to the ath-chala and to the present-day orak and courtyard houses, interior functions increasingly get differentiated into distinct spaces rather than taking place in within the same or continuous volumes. So from minimal functions in the single volume kumbaha the dwelling shifts to becoming an elaborate layout with multiple spaces and differentiated functions in each space. Third, the interior and exterior spaces in the kumbaha and ath-chala houses is present a clear dichotomy where the former in intended only for family members while the latter is used for socialising with outsiders. The emergence of the courtyard in the later dwelling types blurs this distinction since it becomes an open yet interior space of the dwelling. In short, Santal dwellings transform from being single volume structures with a clear distinction between the interior and exterior space to more elaborate layouts with differentiated spaces and a more complex interiority on account of the courtyard.

The issue of interiority requires further discussion in terms of the thresholds of interaction that change with the emergence of the courtyard. In the kumbaha dwelling, I mentioned that outsiders were allowed access into the racha (yard) while family members alone entered the interior of the dwelling. With the emergence of the courtyard however the distinction between interior and exterior and between different kinds of outsiders becomes nuanced. This was evident in my own interactions with families during fieldwork. On initial visits, I was met at the door and if the families were not at home, then I was discouraged from sketching or taking any photographs of the house. On subsequent visits however, I was permitted to enter the house and was free to sketch and take photographs of the courtyard. The rooms
however remained out of bounds until much greater familiarity had been established between the families and myself. The pattern of interactions between families and other villagers was noticeably different. Other villagers walked into each other’s houses without any apparent constraints while I – as a complete outsider – experienced various grades of access. That the later dwellings begin to differentiate between different kinds of outsiders vis-à-vis a clear dichotomy between the family and all other people is an important shift in the sense of dwelling and the relationship with the community and the outside world in general. This shift, as I suggest later, is linked to broad social and political changes in indigenous societies in the Singhbhum region at large.

Another key shift across the four dwelling types is that of construction material. I mentioned earlier that the *kumbaha* according to villagers’ descriptions were built using panels of wooden members or branches and were thatched with leaves. In the Birhor example, such walls were slowly being plastered with mud when families remained settled in the same place for a considerable length of time. Given that present day Santal houses are built in mud, one may argue that the wooden walls came to be plastered in mud and eventually gave way to mud wall construction on account of the gradual sedentarization of Santal communities. Two points needs to be noted here. First, while wooden construction is characterized by speed of execution and a relative temporariness of structure, mud is a much more labour and resource intensive and permanent construction material. Santal dwellings transformed from the relatively temporary *kumbaha* into more permanent mud structures. The shift is not just of material but rather of ecologies of procurement and practice, of building knowledge and, more broadly of the sense of dwelling as a permanent setting. It is important at this juncture to situate these transformations within the broader changes in the Singhbhum region in order to understand why and how they are registers of Santals’ changing relationship with their environment.

Based on people’s narratives and colonial land records that I discussed earlier, the dwellings transformed between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth century after which the courtyard houses gained currency. This period is also one of considerable social and environmental change in Singhbhum and significantly affected indigenous communities such as Santals. Through the nineteenth century, Jharkhand witnessed significant non-tribal incursions on account of its forests and mineral wealth. The
thickly forested landscape that the indigenous communities lived in was increasingly cut and cleared to create terraces for paddy cultivation. The dispossession of indigenous people from their traditional habitat escalated towards the middle of the nineteenth century in the wake of industrial and mining activities in the region.\textsuperscript{xvi} Traditional rights and usage of forests by became curtailed with non-indigenous Hindu landlords and the colonial government claiming large tracts of jungle land (Damodaran 2006, 180-181).\textsuperscript{xvii} Broadly speaking, indigenous communities such as Santals transformed from being forest dwelling communities to becoming agricultural and industrial labourers.\textsuperscript{xviii} In relation to architecture, this indicated a shift from the relative mobility of a forest dwelling existence to the settled ways of living of agriculturist communities.

The architectural transformations of the four dwellings types must be examined against this key shift in modes of living. I outlined earlier that the dwellings transformed from being single volume structures, almost temporary structures to more elaborate and permanent structures with complex thresholds of access. I argue that the increasing elaborateness and permanence of the dwelling corresponds to the broad shift from forest dwelling to settled agricultural living among Santals. The material changes from wood to mud similarly correspond to the depletion of and reduced access to forests while mud now becomes available as a building material that may be dug up from people’s own backyards. Finally, the emergence of the complex interiority and the differentiation between various kinds of outsiders i.e. people from within the village community vis-à-vis complete outsiders may be attributed to increasing densities of settlements and the general climate of conflict that pervaded Singhbhum in the early twentieth century. Santals were no longer living in a vast forested landscape but were now in the midst of more densely populated villages and frequently in contact with non-indigenous – and often exploitative – outsiders.\textsuperscript{xix} The architecture of the dwelling correspondingly becomes more elaborate and at the same time more introverted as well.

DIFFERENCES AND DIALOGUE

It is evident from the above narrative that Santal dwellings transformed in relation to other social, political and environmental changes taking place in the Singhbhum region at large. This foray into an architectural history was necessary to underscore the proposition I made earlier in the paper. I
suggested the dwelling was register of shifts in Santal relationships with their social, political and natural environments even though – during the display event - villagers did not choose the dwelling as being important in the self-representation of their environment. I further suggested that the initial impulse was to place villagers’ choices of sites of significance in opposition to my own focus of studying dwellings. This disjunction cannot be ignored but rather, needs to be critical examine and if possible, the two voices put into dialogue with each other.

The oppositional nature of people’s choices and my own narratives is rooted in an assumption of objectivity that characterises much of architectural fieldwork. As Kellett points out, architectural researchers ‘rely on short visits in which hard, ‘factual’ and visual data is collected’ and in the range of skills employed to collect this data “objectivity’ is privileged over personal responses’. Consequently, our analyses and interpretation of fieldwork data tend to consider the material in absolute terms. In practice of course, the ‘field’ is ‘not an autonomous and bounded set of relationships and practices which exists independently of the fieldwork through which it is revealed’ but is constructed through the researcher’s immersion in and engagement with the myriad relationships, spaces and social worlds that constitute it. Fieldwork data and the narratives that emerge must be seen critically within the context of the interactions that produced it. Therefore, before concluding that people’s choices from the display event highlight important places in the village in definitive terms or that my architectural history is irrelevant or unimportant to the villagers, it is imperative to understand the various factors that mediated these narratives of Santal environments.

I begin by examining the display event as the context in which people chose particular images as being important or significant. First, it is important to remember that these choices were not made from a near infinity of objects, places or images. They were made specifically from the set of images that I displayed. I make this point not to discredit the choices themselves, but to underscore they must be seen as situated within my representations of the village environment. In other words, the choices were a response to my engagements with the village as an outsider and a researcher. As a corollary then, had the nature of my engagements been different or focused on other aspects of the village, the choices may have been different as well. Second, I argue that the display event did not just represent places within the
village, but added another layer to the villagers’ experiences of those places. For, when else would the villagers have to evaluate the significance of a pig-farm vis-à-vis the sacred grove of worship or a fishing net? Both the display and the act of making choices were – for the villagers - a hitherto alien conception and evaluation of the built environment. Third, given the above circumstances, it is apparent that the displays operated at a particular ontological level. Compared to my own architectural gaze where the sites of study were registers of historical change, I contend that villagers’ choices were mediated by the rubric of identity. In choosing images that best represented themselves, Santals were ‘constructing narratives of inclusion and exclusion that define [their own] communities and ways in which these latter are rendered specific and differentiated’.

So the jabira and the majhihan became distinguishing markers of Santal village communities while the school became a marker of belonging to a more universal developed world. It is evident then that the two points of view – the villagers and mine – were both negotiating being-in-the-world but the ‘existential immediacies’ that we each considered were different.

I was looking for shifts in practices and built forms that suggested broader changes in people’s relationship with their environment, while the villagers were identifying sites that marked their continuities with the past and their imaginations of the future. Obviously then the differences in voice are rooted more fundamentally in differing epistemologies. Rather than placing these two voices in opposition to or as detracting from each other, the different epistemological routes may each evoke senses of place and Santals relationships to the environment in their own way.

To return briefly to the point about fieldwork as a socially constructed act, it not only explicated the differences between people’s perceptions and mine, it also iterated that the architectural history narrative that I was developing was rooted in inter-subjective engagements in the field. Two obvious pointers in this direction were the emphasis on people’s descriptions in order to reconstruct architecture and everyday life in the past, and the analysis of my own gendered/ social presence and its influence on access and interaction in the dwelling for instance. Beginning with people’s descriptions, it is apparent in the architectural history outlined above that these were central to conjecturing everyday life and domestic space in the past. More so, accounts of everyday life among indigenous communities are few though other histories of rebellion and dispossession are easily found.

In order to understand the transformations of everyday life then, one has to be present and engage with domestic practices and
develop a sense of how these things occurred in the past. The second point of gendered and social presence gets linked with this. Just as I was interrogating everyday life in the village, my own presence was being constantly evaluated and framed by the villagers. My other identities as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law inadvertently led to greater interaction with Santal women and therefore to more conversations about the domestic realm in general. Many of the insights into the texture of domestic space and practices are framed within my own experiences with doing housework. 

This is not to suggest that a history of domestic architecture may only be written by women or by those who carry out domestic chores themselves but rather, that the production of this particular narrative is inextricably linked to my empathetic relationship with Santal women and their interactions with me as one of their ‘kind’, other differences notwithstanding.

CONCLUSION: RECOGNISING PEOPLE’S AGENCY IN CONSTRUCTING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

The process of reflecting upon, recognising and analysing the differences between villagers’ perceptions of their environment and my architectural point of view, and further, the realization that both are rooted in the meshwork of fieldwork moments, suggests the simple yet critical idea that architectural historical narratives are fundamentally dialogic and need not be singular. This both questions the authoritative voice of the architectural historian and validates the possibility of different evaluations of built environments. While such critical reflective positions are mainstream in anthropology for instance, they are yet to gain currency in architectural discourses. Such realisations also imply a greater degree of agency for research participants i.e. Santals in this case as it recognises their role in the production of knowledge through dialogue.

As the next steps in the research project, I continue to return to the case study villages to discuss my research findings. While this process is presently underway, some interesting insights have emerged regarding the villager’s perceptions of an architectural history of their own environment. Though villagers are aware of building practices in the past, the construction of a narrative that puts these descriptions into a trajectory of transformation was revelatory to them. The narratives of transformation and correlation between shifts in domestic practices and broader changes in the Singhbhum region
seemed to suggest connections between individuals, communities and popular dominant histories of the region. In other words, for the villagers, the architectural history was potentially creating a new understanding of their own pasts. These are initial insights however and people’s responses to an architectural history will be developed further through a series of interactions planned for later this year. And in this manner, it is hoped, that the dialogue between the different voices will continue.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


ii I refer here to Tim Ingold’s writings on phenomenology where he suggests that built forms may be considered as organisms that are co-relational with their context. In other words, organisms and the environment lie in a dialectic relationship where they each continuously transform and inform each other. See Tim Ingold, *The perception of the environment: Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

iii I carried out fieldwork in three villages in the Singhbhum region in south Jharkhand and put up such displays at the end of each fieldwork stint.


v The villagers and I typically conversed in Hindi, but in this case, the term used was “No. 1”.

vi It is useful to point out here that the village school was an image in each of the three case study villages where I put up displays.

vii Personal conversation with S.Tudu in Chauda in March 2013.

viii The display discussed in the first section focuses on one of the three case study villages, while the section on architectural history includes all three case study villages.

ix *Orak* is a Santal term for both house and spaces within a house. This conflation of the whole i.e. the dwelling and the parts i.e. the individual spaces is discussed later. Here the term *orak* is used for houses that have a single volume (that may be internally sub-divided) and a single open yard at the back, as compared to a courtyard house that space arranged around a central yard and a separate backyard.

x For instance, many *orak* (single volume houses) have a *kumbaha* like structure

xi This suggestion was in response to my question about how dwellings were built in the past.

xii The records I refer to are maps of the Singhbhum region titled "District Singhbhum ([Surveyed by] Captain J.E.Gastrell and G.C. De Pree, Seasons 1859-65)," *Singhbhum, BIlbar (District) - Maps* (Calcutta: Survey of India Offices, April 1891).
The case study village of Bhagabandh for instance is first recorded in the early twentieth century according to the villagers and this village has only courtyard houses. The neighbouring village of Pipa is found in the records and has a few examples of atl-chula houses.

Personal conversation with Mr. G.Singh (headman of Bhilaipahadi village in East Singhbhum district) in July 2013.

Birhors are a different indigenous community and are considered as a ‘primitive tribe’ as per the state government’s classification ENVIS Center Jharkhand, [World Wide Web document], March 18, 2014, http://www.jharenvis.nic.in, March 18, 2014, accessed July 2014. By suggesting that the Birhors today build in the same manner as Santals did in the past, I do not intend to classify the community as being backward or primitive. Rather, the Birhors are as much a part of the transformative milieu of Singhbhum as the Santal communities discussed in the paper. However, their trajectories of transformation are different and for various reasons, they continue to build in a manner that is similar to Santal building and dwelling practices from the past.

As described by elderly people in the case study villages who recollected having seen kumbaha structures in their young days.

Personal conversation with Mr. M.Das (Practising lawyer and scholar of indigenous land legislation in the Singhbhum region) and Prof. D.Hansdah (Santal scholar) in Jamshedpur in March 2013.

In personal conversation with Prof. D. Hansdah in March 2013 and July 2013.

It is well recorded in Santal scholarship that they lived largely as forest dwelling communities at least until the mid-nineteenth century. See for instance Sanjukta Das Gupta and Raj Sekhar Basu, Narratives from the margins: Aspects of Adiwasi history in India (Delhi: Primus Books, 2012).

See Sanjukta Das Gupta and Raj Sekhar Basu, Narratives from the margins: Aspects of Adiwasi history in India.


See Bandopadhyay (1999)

Academic scholarship and fictional writing about Santals is replete with references to ëkus, which is the term used by Santals to describe foreigners and carries with it a connotation of exploitation and mistrust.


Vered Amit as quoted in Peter Kellett, Living in the field, 341

For instance, I carried out fieldwork between January and April i.e. during the non-agricultural season. Had I visited the village at other times in the year, agricultural activities may have been more visible.

In an interesting piece of considering collections of objects from a phenomenological perspective, Moutu discusses an exhibition of the tsunami in Papua New Guine. He says that the exhibition did not merely represent people’s experiences of the disaster, but added another layer to their memories of the event. This was because when engaging with the display, people may not necessarily be re-living the moments of the tsunami but remembering it in hindsight, from a distance and with the accumulation of memories since the event. Andrew Moutu, "Collecting as a way of being," in Thinking through things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically, 93-112 (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2007).

This understanding of identity is drawn from B.J. Graham and Peter Howard, The Ashgate research companion to heritage and identity (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, 5).

The term ‘existential immediacies’ is used by Csordas to explicate being-in-the-world and to set it apart from the idea of representation. He suggests that this is not a ‘synchronic moment of the ethnographic present’ but a ‘temporally/ historically informed sensory presence and engagement’ and is different from understanding culture as an ‘objectified abstraction’ (P.10). Thomas J. Csordas, "Introduction: The body as representation and being-in-the-world," in Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self, 1-24 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Ethnographic accounts of indigenous societies such as Santals have been extensively written over the past century, but tend to be definitive and generalising as was the practice of the time. Nuances of domestic work for instance are rarely communicated in these accounts. See for instance P.O. Boding, How the Santals live (Bengal: Royal Asiatic Society, 1940) where he discussed the domestic life of Santals. Boding does not however specify which village communities he drew the inferences from. Given that
everyday practices are significantly shaped by local circumstances, it is inappropriate to assume that the specifics of domestic life may be similar in different villages. It has not been possible to elaborate on the gendered nature of fieldwork in this paper except to highlight that some instances such as the nature of thresholds that became evident on account of my access into dwellings being mediated by my gender. It may suffice to suggest that a male researcher may not have had the same degree of access into the interior spaces of dwellings in order to understand the nature of their transformation over time.