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This photo essay seeks to illustrate the life of two Birhor brothers: Biru, the village pahan (priest), and his younger brother Phagon. By adopting metaphors of entrapment and entanglement, this piece explores the impact of a Government resettlement program on a nomadic community in central India. The State's development strategies, which attempt to bring this Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) into Indian society, highlight misconceptions about the nature of hunter-gathers. Through the prism of the Bihors material culture, the themes of primitivism, vulnerability, and entrapment will be discussed. To further highlight why the Bihors have been labelled primitive, and display how their material culture traditions have changed, I will draw parallels with the first major ethnographic account of the Bihors by Sarat Chandra Roy. This contrast with Roy will also serve as a counter narrative that celebrates how Biru and Phagon's community has maintained and adapted their traditions. Roy predicted the Bihors disappearance a century ago. By celebrating their endurance this essay seeks to place the Bihors own agency at centre stage rather than paint the tribe as perennial victims in an anthropology of suffering.



Before a party can depart for the day's hunt nets, snares, and traps must be readied. Hunting is vital for the Birhors. The Birhors are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) who live in Eastern India. The tribe mainly live in Jharkhand but other communities can be found in Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Chhattisgarh. Biru and Phagon live in Hazirbargh, northern Jharkhand, and have spent most of their lives as nomads. Their *tanda* (village/community) was resettled ten years ago. This essay focuses on their experience of resettlement. As the state becomes increasingly intrusive, ethnographers have to respond and analyse how it affects the people they study (Michel- Rolph Trouillot 2001). And the act of resettlement is the State at its most invasive. Despite this, the Birhors continue to hunt and forage. Biru -the older brother- talked me through each piece of equipment needed for the day's expedition.



The bag and the net Biru holds aloft serve as good visual metaphors for his *tanda*'s current situation. Each of the ropes used has a different colour and thickness which highlights their differing provenance. The salvaged modern materials were refashioned into traditional Birhor designs: an act of negotiating, and then domesticating a changing material world. Despite the shrinking forests and their resettlement, Phagon and Biru have not given up on hunting. Rather, they have diversified their

income streams and adapted their material culture to a changed environment. Whilst the Birhors may have chosen -or been forced- to live at the edges of forests and in the hills, it would be a mistake to ascribe their resettlement as the act that incorporates them into Indian society. The Birhors have always been part of Indian society, but they have participated on their own term. Just like the multi-coloured net Biru holds up, the Birhors' lives are intertwined with those of the neighbouring tribal, Hindu, and Muslim communities.

When James Scott reviewed Jared Diamond's latest book *'The World until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?'* Scott critiqued Diamond's idea that hunter gathers tell us about the distant past (2013). Instead Scott argued, they are 'up to their necks in the 'civilised world''. I would like to reiterate the point: the Birhors are not a source of living history. While this point may perhaps be obvious to anthropologists, this idea of hunter-gathers as 'living ancestors' totally reliant on nature has entered the popular discourse on indigenous rights. The Birhors are occasionally subject to a particularly Indian slant on this discourse; they are held up as an example of a pre-Vedic forest dwelling culture. Although the Birhors depend on the forest for income, they depend on rice and axes, products of the 'civilised world'. Roy's ethnography contains over two hundreds mentions of rice –the crop was deeply embedded in the Birhors cosmology and economic life. They may never of been a time when the Birhors did not consumer rice.

While the Birhors have lived on the margins, they have continually sought out other communities for trade. And it is naïve to picture exchange as lacking cross cultural interactions. While full and thorough cultural histories of Jharkhand are few, the State's archaeology bears witness to the cultures the Birhors have encountered. Hazaribagh displays an extraordinary mix of material heritage: tribal megaliths; Neolithic cave paintings; Buddhist stupas and Taras; Hindu murtis and lingams; churches; mosques; and the graves of early British colonialist who came to hunt tigers. As Scott would put it, the Birhors adopted 'state-evasive' strategies made possible by the dense forests and hills of central India (Scott 2009). When their autonomy was threatened by tribal Rajas, Moghul governors, the Raj, and ultimately the post-colonial Indian State, the Birhors could relocate to more autonomous locations. Their *kumbas* (leaf huts) were essential to their nomadic lifestyle. But now the nomadic freedom of Biru and Phagon's youth has been curtailed by resettlement. Their *tanda* has been enclosed by State development.



When Roy wrote his ethnography: *The Birhors: A Little Known Tribe of Chotanagpur* (Roy 1925), he stated that it was: ‘not only primitive’ customs and institutions, ideas and beliefs, that are fast decaying, but the people themselves would appear to be gradually dying out (ibid 4). So perhaps amidst my focus on entrapment I should insert an optimistic note: the Birhors have survived. They are still hunting in the forests, making nets from creepers, and maintaining their ritual practices. The fibres Phagon holds up in image four are made from *chope* (*Babhinia scandens*), bark fibres which traditionally bound Birhor life together. Roy mentions *chope* forty-three times in his ethnography as an item of exchange, in ritual use, and for the construction of nets and baskets for hunting. Despite *chope*’s low commercial value it was still gathered by Phagon. In an age of decreasing forest produce, *chope* was still available and could be woven into mats to be sold to neighbouring villages.

The two quotes from Roy declaring that the Birhors were amongst the least civilised peoples and that they were fast declining, were to be echoed by the Indian State; it was only in 2006 that the Indian Government reclassified Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). Both these taxonomies echo Roy’s assertions. While the word primitive has officially been discarded, the word vulnerable seems little better. However, the word tribal is taken for granted. While the tribe caste debate is too large to fully explore here, the distinction should never be taken for granted. Roy opens his account on the Birhors with a literature review and suggests that the earliest mention of the Birhors was by Edward Dalton. It appears that Dalton sent out an expedition to trap and

capture a few Birhors for interrogation – a sort of meta hunting the hunter. When they were brought before him, Dalton stated they were ‘the most wretched-looking objects, but had more the appearance of the most abject of one of those degraded castes of the Hindus, the Domes or Pariahs, to whom most flesh is food, than of hill people’ (as quoted in Roy 1925: 2). In other words, to Dalton, they looked more like a caste than a tribe. One wonders how much the notion of tribe and its related terms such as indigenous accurately reflect the experience of the Birhors? Being doubly bound with the terms tribe and primitive has led to invasive development acts such as resettlement.



After a simple breakfast of rice and dal, the hunting party headed into the forest. Because of resettlement, the walk to fresh hunting grounds grows ever longer. The Birhors' methods of hunting are markedly different compared to neighbouring tribal communities. The Mundas and Oraons hunt with bows, and the Santhals are famed for their hunting dogs. By contrast the Birhors rely on nets and snares, their only weapons are axes. Axes have always been used by Birhors as the preferred method of dispatching larger animals - bears, tigers, boar, and deer- that get caught in their nets. Axes demonstrate the Birhors cyclical relationship with other Indian communities. The Birhors need to hunt in order to buy axes, and they need axes in order to hunt. There is no cultural memory or ethnographic account of the Birhors working metal. Axes are trade items which demonstrate their longstanding economic reliance on the 'civilised world'.

Phagon explained that the best hunting grounds are in clearings or at the edges of the forest. It is here where the Birhors thrive, at the margins of the forests and the margins of the State. If the forests of Jharkhand ever recover, and experience reforestation, the young growth of sal trees will provide rich hunting grounds once more for the Birhors. Once a suitable spot was found, the hunting party laid down their bags, axes, poles, and snares, and began unwinding their long nets. A series of nets were stretched in one straight line, suspended between saplings or tree trunks. Once the nets had reached waist height, but remained slack, they were lifted up a few inches further and then placed delicately on top of the poles.



This precarious act of balance, resting the edge of the nets on the poles, is crucial to the hunt. For a century the Birhors have teetered on the brink of extinction as referenced by the earlier quote from Roy. Roy's account in *The Birhors* (1925) is considerably more favourable than his earlier writings where he deemed the tribe to be 'semi-savage forest tribes' on the 'lowest rung of the ladder of civilization' (Roy 1920). Clearly his views softened. Roy spent over fifteen years researching into the lives of the Birhors and documented their rituals, social organisation, economy, songs, dances, and myths. He obviously developed affection for the Birhors but in the conclusion of his monograph Roy speculates on the demise of the Birhors. Roy cited figures drawn from the colonial census that indicated the Birhor's population had declined from 2,340 in 1911 to 1610 in 1921 (a rate of 31%). Currently the Birhors are constrained but not diminished. As Biru and Pagon started beating the bush to drive animals into smaller and smaller areas of the forest, they recounted how the State, Moasist militias, and the mining companies, has driven them into smaller and smaller areas of the forest.



The hunt revolves around a cycle of beating, checking the nets, and if unsuccessful, moving to a different spot deeper into forest. Eventually a hare is caught. One of the younger Birhors shouted for Biru and Phagon to inspect the catch. The hare is pinned to the ground by its ears, and its teeth are knocked out with a pole. This small act of violence allows the animal to be transported alive without gnawing through the bag and escaping. Live animals are unpolluted. And consequently, they fetch a better price when sold to the neighbouring Hindu or Muslim communities. Occasionally, when deer are caught –perhaps in the wrong season- they are killed and dismembered in the forest, so the carcass

can easily be transported hidden from the watchful eyes of forestry officers. During the dry season - when these photos were taken – the forest yields little. Biru deemed a capture of a hare and collecting a bundle of firewood as a good day's work, and we returned to the village with our spoils. Throughout the year the forest yields: quails; rabbits; deer; boar; bears and occasionally panthers; tubers; wild greens and fruit; mushrooms; honey; *chope*; and lac (a resin that has recently increased greatly in value).



Alpa Shah coined the term ‘eco savage’ to describe how contemporary Jharkhandi society viewed the Mundas who lived in ‘the shadow of the State’, (that is those furthest away from Government intervention.) I would go so far as to suggest that the Birhors are ‘eco savages’ *par excellence* due to their foraging and nomadic traditions. While Shah’s account contains intimate breakdowns of the process of winning road building contracts in Jharkhand -a process dominated by patronage, nepotism, bribes, and undercutting costs. The Birhors’ houses surely underwent a similar process. The materials are cheap, the craftsmanship poor, and they are already crumbling. The resettlement of the Birhors has created a trapped resource for those who win the contracts to carry out the State’s development work. Back at the village we drank tea and talked about motorbikes, mobile phones, and the children’s school. The brothers’ concerns over the forest were temporarily abandoned in order to discuss the

universal problems that one will hear in most Indian villages. Phagon showed me round his house and the three papaya trees he had planted. Inside his house the roof towered above him – clearly designed by someone who had never seen a Birhor *kumba*. Kumbas remained important; Birhor women were still encouraged to give birth in *kumbas* so that their children could be proper Birhors¹. This new ritual shows how this *tanda* have adopted their material culture to resettlement without losing their traditions.



A few *tandas* made up of *kumbas* still exist, but they are aware of their imminent resettlement. Biru explained how much easier it was to carry out village exogamy- potential unions were only a phone call away. Mobile phones also allowed the Birhors to discuss the State amongst themselves. What hospitals should they go to for medicine? What new development projects should they expect? What parts of the forest were good to hunt in and what areas should be avoided? Although the village only had two mobile phones and one motorbike, these had helped the Birhors negotiate modernity profoundly. Technology had opened them up to new employment opportunities such as working as day labourers in rice fields and how to take advantage of State development schemes. The problem with being bound with the interrelated terms, primitive, indigenous, tribal, as opposed to say caste – is that their changing material worlds can often be overly associated with loss. If one entered a Scheduled Caste (SC) village where everyone possesses a mobile phone, few would argue against this development. The problem with the Birhors being termed primitive, tribal, and vulnerable is that it presumes the Birhors cannot cope with the modern world. But perhaps the opposite is true. They just

do not have enough of the right technology to engage with the modern world. Perhaps mobile phones would have benefited the community more than resettlement.

The State can no longer be out manoeuvred through a nomadic lifestyle, but through technology the Birhors can start readdress this imbalance – even if the effects are marginal. But the Birhors continue to live on the margin of society. Biru displayed a novel form of pragmatism when questioned about other streams of income. When asked if he ever fished using his nets in the rainy season, he replied that Birhors do not fish. But Biru and Phagon have been seasonal labourers for years working for their Hindu neighbours bringing in the rice harvest. The Birhors had caste like relations with surrounding communities. They had no interest in marrying into other communities; a view reciprocated by their neighbours. Biru and Phagon understood they could not kill the hare because it would be polluted and therefore unsalable. They also understood where they could go in other villages to sell their wares without the stigma of pollution. By entering the day labourer market they experienced life working with other STs and SCs. But the forest allows them to escape the total economic and ritual dependence that has become the lot of so many of the landless lower castes. A good hare -like today's catch- is worth ₹500. At ₹250 a kg its market price is roughly the same as mutton. And the money can be used to buy rice, lentils, oil, tea, phone credit, and cigarettes. The Birhor's also like to purchase rice beer from neighbouring tribal communities. Biru said they rarely eat what they catch these days, despite being hunters their diet is predominantly vegetarian. Recently the *tanda* have started to emulate their neighbours with small holdings. A few pigs and goats now live in the village and the *tanda* have also planted crops of mustard greens on what little land they have. Should the hare had been killed and eaten, its tail would have entered the *tanda*'s stock of traditional medicine alongside fur from brown bears, armadillo scales, and a multitude of roots and barks.



Overall Biru and Phagon said they were happy. They had complaints about their houses, their treatment in hospitals, rising food costs, and their children's school, but these concerns are not unique to Birhor villages. Rather they are emblematic of Jharkhandi village life across caste and tribe. When Joel Robbins wrote 'Beyond the suffering subject: toward an anthropology of the good' (Robbins 2013), he asked when did anthropology become so focused on suffering? It would be easy to frame Biru and Phagon's community as perennial victims. Their daily life is beset by problems, many of which, like deforestation, will only get worse. They have suffered and will continue to do so. But overall, Biru and Phagon stated they were happy. While this might not be the situation of many Birhor communities, I have tried to give an accurate reflection of this one. Roy who predicted the demise of the Birhors would no doubt be heartened to see they have survived. Encouragingly the population appears to be growing, albeit with increased fragmentation (Firdos 2005). Biru and Phagon had overcome the trauma of resettlement and go on with their lives as best they could. And it would be disingenuous to ignore this. While the State may, for better or for worse, attempt to improve the Birhors material possession through providing them with housing, it cannot maintain their culture. By maintaining their material culture, other worlds of cultural knowledge open up. Phagon and Biru are making sure the next generation in their *tanda* know about how to hunt, to build *kumbas*, and weave nets and baskets. They are making them Birhors. 🙏



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ⁱ I had even visited neighbouring Tandas who upon their resettlement built kumbas inside their new government.