

# Toiling without Rights: Ho Women of Singhbhum

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*While the role of unequal land rights in determining the status of different caste and class groups in India has been the subject of much debate, their impact on women's status has generally escaped attention. In fact the patriarchal bias of the social and the legal system gives rise to the assumption that once the men of the family have land, the women's needs are automatically taken care of. This study attempts to place the issue of the denial of land rights to Ho tribal women in the context of women's daily lives, work, struggle for survival and status in the family and community.*

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THIS study attempts to place the issue of the denial of land rights to Ho tribal women in the context of women's daily lives, work, struggle for survival, and status in the family and community. Although the situation of Ho women has certain important exceptional characteristics, it is, by and large, typical of the situation of tribal women.

The role of unequal land rights in determining the status of different caste and class groups in India is the subject of continuing debate. However, the impact on women's status of their land rights is seldom fully comprehended. That is why, on the few occasions when land redistribution programmes have been undertaken in different parts of the country, land has been given in the name of the male "head of the household" while women have almost never received land in their own names. The patriarchal bias of the social and legal system gives rise to the assumption that once the men of a family have land, the women's needs are automatically taken care of. A close look at rural society and family life reveals that just as the landless poor or marginal peasant groups are vulnerable socially and politically because of the marginality of their rights in land, so also, women in rural India are especially vulnerable because of their lack of land rights, and this is true not just of landless poor women but also of women belonging to landed families.

Historically, landholding patterns in India have exhibited great diversity. But, during the last century and a half, this diversity has been giving way to certain newly-emerging dominant patterns most clearly visible in the landholding and family system that prevails amongst Hindu peasant groups in the northwestern plains. Under this system, land is inherited by sons alone. The systematic disinheriting of daughters is accompanied by the practice of dowry. The women acts as a vehicle for the transfer of wealth but is not allowed to exercise independent control over income or property. She is perceived as a burden and as a repository of family honour, but delinked from visible forms of productive work, secluded, and severely restricted in her movements and interactions.

However, there are many communities, especially in southern and eastern India, which display different patterns. Even in north India, the position of tribal women

has been substantially different from that of caste Hindu peasant women. But, today, these minority cultures seem to be moving in the direction of emulating the cultural and socio-economic patterns of caste Hindu peasant groups, thus losing those features of their own society which had positive consequences for women.

An indepth study of these minority cultures is very important in order to understand (1) the points of strength for women in different cultural traditions; (2) how and why these points of strength are being eroded; (3) features that make for a situation of relatively greater or lesser vulnerability for women; (4) the kind of changes that have the potential to help women acquire economic and social strength; and (5) the special implications for women of the spread of the dominant Hindu peasant culture among minority groups.

This study of Ho tribal women will dwell on these issues and attempt to link them to the question of the denial of land rights to women.

Karonja<sup>1</sup> is situated in Singhbhum district, Bihar. This is one of the most richly-endowed parts of India. Formerly, most land in Singhbhum was forested but today, most land has been brought under cultivation or reduced to a rocky waste. Some forests still remain. But the area has witnessed increasing deforestation in the last century. Singhbhum is the site of very large deposits of iron, bauxite, lead, manganese, copper, limestone, sandstone, slate and other minerals. More than a quarter of the total mining activity in India is carried on in this area. A number of heavy industries are located here and major industrial townships have grown up around them.

According to the 1971 Census, scheduled tribes constituted 10 per cent of the population of Bihar, and 7 per cent of the population of India. Yet, tribals have not greatly benefited from the industrial development of the area. Many have been displaced from their ancestral lands and not given adequate compensation. Most lucrative jobs in industries have gone to non-tribals. The few tribals employed in industries work as unskilled labourers, doing the heaviest and lowest paid jobs.

Karonja is, in most ways, a typical Ho village. It has, in many ways, remained

untouched by the economic expansion and upheavals caused by the industrialisation of the district. It is situated in an interior area. Yet, despite its apparent remoteness, the village Karonja has been deeply affected by the happenings in the outside world. The village is inhabited almost totally by Hos who are concentrated in the Kolhan area of Singhbhum, constituting 10 per cent of the tribal population of Bihar. Hos share many common features with other tribes of the area, such as Mundas, Oraons, Santhals, Kharias, and others, yet they retain a distinct identity. In the course of the last century, the process of peasantisation of different tribes has been so thorough that the socio-economic life of tribals today is in many ways similar to that of neighbouring non-tribal peasant groups. Today, the Hos are settled agriculturists. The practice of shifting cultivation which was characteristic of tribals has almost totally died out. They are no longer able to depend on hunting and forest gathering for a major part of their subsistence. The forests are fast disappearing and those that remain are out of bounds for most purposes because of increasing restrictions placed by government. Yet, they continue to engage in regular gathering activities and occasional hunting to supplement their subsistence.

Karonja is divided into upper and lower regions. I conducted interviews in the lower *tola* which has about 100 families living in it. About 30 out of these 100 have converted to christianity but most of them have not given up their traditional forms of worship. The only non-tribal families are a *lohar* and a *gop* family. Both are among the poorer families in the village. Most Ho villages contain a few families from artisan groups who are non-tribals.

Almost all the land in the village is still owned by Hos. An important reason for this is the lack of irrigation facilities and of electricity and the consequent low productivity of agriculture. All the families grow one major rice crop a year which they sow during the monsoon. Some families grow a second, subsidiary crop of wheat and lentils. However, when rains fail or are delayed, there is not even one crop a year. Even one year's monsoon failure causes scarcity. Often, the crops fail for several years in succession. As a result, food scarcity is a

chronic problem for most families.

Land size is usually measured in terms of the amount of rice produced. The local measure is a *bandi* which is roughly equivalent to 400 kilos of paddy or 200 kilos of rice. Most families have to supplement the income from land with other sources of income such as working on other people's land, collection and selling of forest produce, and seasonal migration as casual labour in mines, construction industry, brick kilns and other worksites. The nearest train station is two hours' walk away. Until recently, only two local trains stopped each day at this station. Now, one more fast train has started halting here. The village has no tarred road so there is no bus service. The nearest city is Chakradharpur, about 25 kilometres away. There is no industry or mine within walking distance. Therefore, those who seek employment outside cannot commute daily but must migrate for employment. The nearest forest, where residents go for gathering, and on rare occasions for hunting, is about two hours' walk away. There is a primary school in the village which is run by one teacher. About 60 pupils are currently enrolled of whom about 25 attend school regularly. The nearest secondary school is situated about two hours' walk from the village.

The total number of women interviewed in Karonja was 37. However, of these, only 30 interviews were used in the analysis. Three interviews remained incomplete. Two of the three had to return to their homes to continue their work, halfway through the interview. The third refused to continue, because she suspected that I might be from the family planning department, and would lure her into getting sterilised. Two other interviewees were girls aged about 12, and although they do as much work as an adult woman, I finally decided to restrict the study to adult women aged 18 and above.<sup>2</sup>

The problems these women face are problems that lie at the heart of contemporary Ho culture. The account which follows is based mainly on women's perception of the situation.

### Women and the Economy

It is no exaggeration to say that in tribal villages, the economy functions primarily on the basis of women's labour. The magnitude of the work burden may not be visible to an inexperienced outsider because the pace of work looks very unhurried, except when women are seen returning, half running, from the forest, carrying enormous loads of wood on their heads. If one made a comprehensive list of tasks performed by women and children and another of those performed by men, one would conclude that women and children perform about 90 per cent of the total labour in villages.

Among the few tasks that women do not perform is ploughing. They are ritually pro-

hibited from touching the plough. So strict is the taboo that men do not bring the plough inside the house lest women touch it by mistake. Women are made to believe that their touching the plough will bring ill luck to the whole village, such as a drought. Women who dare break the law are fined heavily by the *panchayat*. In rare cases, they could even be stoned to death. Needless to say, the *panchayats* are composed only of men.

It is often argued that the ban on women ploughing exists because ploughing is a very strenuous activity which women are constitutionally incapable of performing. However, this theory appears unsound because even 12-year old boys manage to use the plough with perfect ease, whereas adult, able-bodied women, who are clearly much stronger, are not allowed to do so. The plough used in this area is of a very light variety which makes no more than a two-to three-inch deep furrow. Thus, ploughing would not be a heavier task than many others that women routinely perform, such as cutting firewood and carrying huge headloads from distant forests.

Even if a woman feels capable of ploughing, she is not permitted to do so. If there is no male in the family, she has to hire a man from the village to do the job. The real purpose behind the taboo seems to be to strengthen male control over the land, even while women perform the bulk of the labour on the land. The taboo ensures that women can never conduct agricultural operations on their own, without male co-operation. It is very common to find that a woman who has no male member in her family finds it difficult to hire male help for ploughing, especially if she is in conflict with powerful men in the village. Even at ploughing time, women are busy. Not only do they carry food for the men to the field, but also walk bent double behind the plough, breaking lumps of earth with a hoe or with their bare hands. They also do weeding at this time. Men hardly ever perform these tasks which are, in many ways, far more strenuous than ploughing. Before sowing begins, women, without any help from men, prepare manure from the cowdung that is collected throughout the year in a big pit near each house. Women make dozens of trips between house and fields, carrying the cowdung compost in baskets on their heads and sprinkle it with their hands in the fields. Transplanting of rice is done exclusively by women. Threshing by hand is considered a women's job. If threshing is to be done with animal power, it is done by men. But hand threshing by women is the preferred method, because the straw can then be used to thatch roofs, while after animal threshing, the straw cannot be used for anything except fodder.

Harvesting of grain is done by women with help from men. Carrying the grain from

the fields to the house is done by women, especially if it is to be carried on the head. In case a bullock cart is available, a man may help with the carrying. However, making big bundles of the harvested rice is primarily a man's job, although women help. This ensures that the man knows exactly how much grain is harvested, even though he may not have helped in the harvesting. This gives men greater control over production than they would otherwise have, considering the marginality of their labour contribution.

Men are supposed to help build embankments and take care of irrigation and water drainage in the fields. But, often, when a man is not available, women do these jobs.

In addition to fieldwork, women gather forest produce such as *sal* leaves, *datuns*, medicinal herbs, wild fruits, berries and nuts. Almost every woman has to routinely go to the forest to gather firewood and *sal* leaves (which are used as plates) for her family's use. Firewood is the only form of fuel available. Men do not help to gather fuel for the family. They help occasionally when big logs of wood are needed to build or repair a house. Men usually carry wood in a bullock cart. Men never carry firewood on their heads although they may carry it on their shoulders. Women are not supposed to drive a bullock cart.

Due to continuous deforestation very few villages are close to forests, so forest gathering has become increasingly strenuous. A number of women also have to gather firewood for sale, especially in the lean season when less well off families exhaust their stock of rice and depend on firewood sales for subsistence. In times of acute scarcity, women's gathering activities assume great importance for family survival.

Sometimes, the women travel ticketless but they then have to pay a small bribe. They also have to spend money buying food and rice beer in town. On these journeys, the women often carry with them their little babies, especially those who are being breastfed. They also usually carry some rice and a cooking pot so that they can cook a meal at the railway station on an improvised *chulha*. Women of a village usually travel in a group to the town market.

In the market, women also undertake bartering activity, exchanging grain, poultry, lentils, *mahua* fruit, oilseeds, for soap, salt and oil. Since most families do not have a grain surplus, the women have to gather forest produce such as *karonji* seeds used by sweet-meat sellers in cities. One measure of *karonji* seeds is bartered for 30 measures of salt, equivalent to a couple of kilos at most. *Karonji* sells at about Rs 60 a kilo and salt for about Rs 2 a kilo. Not only is the exchange unequal in value but the amount of labour that goes into gathering *karonji* is mindboggling. It takes a woman several weeks to gather about half a kilo of *karonji* while she is collecting firewood and leaves.

Women from Karonja usually do not go to the nearest weekly market because women from farther off villages go there. Karonja women go to Chakradharpur or Rourkela market. If a woman is carrying firewood for sale, it is difficult for her to travel in a train or bus because these are usually overcrowded. So they walk long distances to market.

A noteworthy feature of marketing activity in this area is that while women conduct most of the petty trade, the more substantial trade is in the hands of nontribal men. In the weekly markets, women sell field or forest produce or handmade goods. The non-tribal men either bring manufactured goods from outside and sell them at a profit or buy the women's produce and take them to city markets to be resold at a higher profit. Women are never involved in this level of trade, because very few women would have the capital required. Such trade also requires extensive dealings with a market economy dominated by non-tribal men who tend to be more crafty in their transactions. Illiterate tribal women who have developed skills mainly for the barter form of trade would be likely to be cheated and to lose their business.

Even though Ho women are more active than men in agricultural and marketing activities, they have to do all the household work without much help from men. Although the Hos do not consider it degrading for a man to help with housework, as do upper caste Hindu peasant groups, yet such help is extended only in times of crisis, as when a woman is seriously ill. Because of the primitive nature of the economy, simple chores such as preparing paddy for consumption involve an enormous amount of work. The one job men do is thatching the roof. Like ploughing, this is tabooed to women. If a woman defies the taboo, she is liable to punishment by the community. The taboo seems to be another way of ensuring that a woman cannot take care of her survival needs if she goes beyond a point in defying male opinion in the village. A house is thatched once in several years and the roof needs repair not more than once a year. In comparison, the tasks connected with the everyday maintenance of the house are left to women. Men also help in the occasional tasks of building a fence, putting in wooden doors and so on.

Childcare is mainly a woman's responsibility. She is helped by her older children to take care of the younger ones. But when infants are being breastfed, women often carry them on their backs when they go to work in the fields or go gathering in the forest. The nature of women's work does not allow for any break whatsoever. The household would starve and the village economy come to a halt if women ceased working even for a few days. Since most families do not grow enough food for year round consumption, women must work every day to make both ends meet, especially if the man does

not have a cash income. Most Ho families are nuclear, so there may not be another adult woman to take over when the wife falls ill. Few women can afford the time to get themselves treated when ill.

Kairi Digi of Karonja has a very serious skin disease which is due to an allergy to the sun. She is unmarried, aged about 30, and lives with her old mother and a young unmarried brother in his twenties, who does nothing to earn a living. She is the main worker in the family. On her own, Kairi would never have been able to make time to go to a doctor. The woman social worker managed to persuade her to go, see a skin specialist in a nearby town. But she could not continue the treatment, first, because she could not afford the Rs 50 a month it would cost, but, more important, because the doctor told her to stop working in the sun for a few months.

Children's illnesses have to be similarly neglected, even when the mother is aware that such neglect will, in all probability, result in the child's death. A 13-year old boy was seriously ill. When I asked his mother why she did not take him to the doctor, she reasoned thus: "Children I can get any time but where am I supposed to get the time and money for his treatment? If I leave the work and go to get him treated, all the other children in the house will starve and die. It is better to let one die." And, indeed, he died in a few days.

In comparison, the few tasks that men perform such as ploughing, building roofs or hunting game, require a one time exertion spread over a few days, between long intervals of inaction. These jobs can easily be taken care of by hiring someone for those few days in case a son, brother or husband is not available. However, it would be impossible to substitute a woman's labour with hired help.

Even the festivals do not bring much relief to most Ho women. Most writings on the Hos draw a picture of the gay abandon at festivals like Maghe Parab, as if all participates uniformly. In fact, festivals add to the workload of married women who have to entertain guests from neighbouring villages, clean and decorate the house, and prepare extra rice beer. They may join in the dancing and singing for an hour or so in the daytime but the festival does not really mean for them a break from the work routine. Only unmarried women take a full part in the dancing which goes on for hours on end, throughout the day and the night. This is because festivals are the occasion for courtship and selection of marriage partners. Men, whether married or unmarried, spend all their time at the festivities.

#### WHY MEN'S LABOUR IS PERIPHERAL

There are several reasons for men's labour contribution being so low amongst the Hos and most other tribal groups. Before the tribals took to sedentary agriculture, the

major division of labour between the sexes involved hunting, warfare, and clearing of forests being done mainly by men. This gave man a sort of monopoly over the means of violence. Ho women are traditionally not allowed to use bows and arrows and other weapons. This monopoly strengthened men's power over women. The Ho tribe was patrilineal and patrilocal even before the Hos became settled agriculturists, although the absence of developed forms of private property helped prevent it from being as heavily patriarchal.

However, with British conquest, intertribal warfare ended. The superior military might of the British and the administrative methods they developed of keeping the Hos under control resulted in men slowly losing what used to be important functions. Over the decades, new forest policies and progressive deforestation of the area entailed the imposition of restrictions on hunting. But, at the same time, men were given exclusive individual rights over the cultivable land, and this gave them a new power base.

Women had traditionally taken care of agriculture, forest gathering, marketing and household work. In settled agriculture, they continued the same jobs, with one difference—their position became that of drudges on the land while men were left with little to do. In a Ho village, it is common to see men loafing around, cockfighting, drinking, smoking *bidis*, and chatting, while women do all the work.

D N Majumdar, writing in the 1940s, had observed: "... the Ho men enjoy more leisure than women... the women toil hard from morning to night... the men have certain busy seasons in the year... there is no continuous programme of work for men, though there are plenty of diversions. Music, dancing, visiting friends in other villages, attending Hats and fairs, and lounging in the village headman's house form the main routine of Ho men."<sup>1</sup>

While men's labour in today's tribal economy is truly peripheral, one must emphasise that the role of men's labour even in non-tribal societies is usually exaggerated and overvalued. In most micro-studies of non-tribal peasant societies, it has been found that women's total labour contribution exceeds that of men. The bias that makes women's labour invisible and exaggerates the importance of men's labour is in part a result of treating the 19th century British Victorian family norm as a ubiquitous norm. Early ethnographic writings by 19th century British men reflected the bias of the culture they came from, and imposed these as the norm in descriptions of societies very different from their own. These biases have been slavishly picked up by many of the Indian anthropologists and sociologists writing about tribal society.

#### HO WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN LAND TODAY

Whether they are animists, christians or hindu converts, Hos continue to be governed

by their customary law in inheritance. In many ways, this so-called tribal law, in regard to women's property rights, is very similar to unreformed hindu law of the mitakshara school. Under this law, women are not allowed to inherit property, but, as widows and unmarried daughters, they have a right to be maintained from it.

Unlike in hindu upper castes, where the right to be maintained means that the woman is economically dependent on males, tribal women such as the Hos, because they play the key role in production, are not maintained by the men's labour, but get the right to cultivate a portion of the land in their lifetime. After their death, it reverts to men of the family. This is called a usufructory right.

The Hos and other tribals in the Kolhan are governed by the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act which was passed in 1908. The purpose of this act was to check the alienation of tribal lands by non-tribals. It prohibits tribals from alienating land by sale, gift, will or transfer except with the permission of the deputy commissioner. Rights in the land are "hereditary and inalienable and must descend to his sons; and if a Ho has not direct male issues, the land goes to his brother or next of kin; and if no kith or kin, to the village community represented by the Munda."<sup>4</sup> In practice, the last situation usually means that powerful families in the village grab the land.

As soon as a daughter marries, she loses her limited usufructory right over parental land, even if the marriage turns out to be a nominal one. A married daughter thrown out by her husband cannot claim shelter in her parental home as a right, although some women are given temporary shelter by their brothers. An unmarried daughter has the right to work on and be maintained from her family's land. But she does not inherit as a son does. He has an inalienable right similar to the right of male coparceners in hindu joint family property. A daughter is not given an equal portion of land with sons. She is usually given a piece of land for her maintenance which is much smaller than the ones sons get. She may live with her brothers or demand a partition of the land and live by herself. If an unmarried daughter is raped or has a sexual relationship with a non-tribal man, she loses her usufructory right to the parental land. If she gets pregnant by a Ho man, she loses her right just as she would if she were to get married.

A widow's usufructory right in her husband's land is similar to that of an unmarried daughter. She does not inherit the land but has a right to be maintained from it. She may live with one of her sons or she may demand a partition of the land in which case she would get a much smaller portion than a son gets. In practice, very few women's customary rights are honoured. D N Majumdar observes: "The widow if she

remains with a married son becomes a drudge in the latter's family."<sup>5</sup> If she remarries, she loses her usufructory right over her dead husband's land which goes to her sons, or if there are no sons, to the husband's male agnates.

Ho women are also denied a right in other forms of family property. Daughters do not have a share in the family's cattle or house. A married woman does not even have a right to the cattle that may be given to her father or brothers as her bride price.

The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act defines *khuntkhattidar* and *mundari* rights that create different categories of tenants, giving primacy to those who originally cleared the forests and established villages. Although it prohibits alienation of land by the tenants, it has several loopholes which have allowed land to slip away from the hands of tribals. First, land can be sold or transferred with the permission of the deputy commissioner. This means that significant amounts of land get illegally transferred with the connivance of the government machinery. Second tribals are allowed to mortgage land. Two kinds of mortgage are prevalent. Under *bandhak* mortgage, a sum of money is paid by the mortgagee to the mortgager, and a piece of land taken in exchange. The land is returned only when the sum is repaid. Since poor tribals can rarely collect the cash to repay the debt, a *bandhak* transfer is sometimes a sale masquerading as a mortgage. Under *thika* mortgage, land is loaned for a fixed number of years in exchange for a sum of money. If the debt is not repaid, the land reverts to the original owner after the lapse of the time period agreed upon. If the mortgager is able to repay the debt any time before the fixed number of years have elapsed,

he or she can take back the land. Tribals prefer to mortgage land on *thika* but, in times of distress, they are forced to give it on *bandhak*. Legally, tribals are allowed to give land on *bandhak* or *thika* only to other tribals, but, in certain areas where there has been an influx of hindu peasants from north Bihar, the latter draw the tribals into various fraudulent mortgage arrangements. This has led to large-scale alienation of tribal lands.

A male tribal can mortgage his family land whenever he wishes to. He can do this without consulting his female relatives who have a usufructory right in that land, because the land is registered in his name. But a woman, because she has only a usufructory right, cannot mortgage her part of the land if her male agnates disapprove. This arises a paradoxical situation wherein a man may give away his family land on *bandhak*, and use the money for his personal benefit, thereby depriving the women members of the family of their means of subsistence, without even consulting them. But an unmarried woman or widow will find it difficult even to give her land on *thika*, to tide over a crisis, unless her male agnates agree to her doing so which they rarely do.

#### STATUS OF A WIFE

Ho women's land rights as wives are the most precarious of all. At no point of her life can a woman claim a share in her husband's land in her own right. She is only allowed to claim a right through her son, if she has one. The concept of joint property is totally unknown. The wife's status is in many ways similar to that of a landless labourer. If a man decides to be considerate, the wife may feel she is part of a joint enterprise. If not, she has no power, economic,

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social or political, to resist maltreatment. If he takes away all the earnings from the land, leaving wife and children without enough food, she cannot demand a portion of the land to feed herself and the children.

Of the 22 married women interviewed, the situation of 17 was, in some way or other, rendered more vulnerable because of their lack of rights over their husband's land. All 17 had problems trying to enforce their usufructory right under customary law. Jasmani's story illustrates the dual insecurity of Ho women in relation to the land of their natal family and marital family, which makes their situation very precarious, despite their enormous labour contribution. Jasmani is about 25 years old and very small built. She has four brothers. Her father died when she was a child. Her mother died a few years before Jasmani married. She says: "We could not get much land from my father's family because my father's father died very young. Therefore, my grandfather's brothers took away most of the land and left a very small share for my widowed grandmother." After her mother's death, Jasmani was compelled to leave her natal home because two of her brothers gave away the family land on *bandhak* and went away to the city. Jasmani was not consulted and her usufructory right as an unmarried daughter was ignored. She did not get any of the money that her brothers raised through the mortgage. In anger and frustration, she left home and migrated to Rourkela. There, she was employed by a contractor working for the steel plant in the only occupation allowed to tribal women—that of a headloader. She used to earn about Rs 7 to 8 as a daily wage labourer. While in Rourkela, she met her husband, Saluka Sundi. This is how she describes their marriage: "He used to work in the same place as a coolie. One day he came to my hut and said to me: 'I have a lot of inconvenience cooking my food. I don't even have proper utensils. Let me live in your hut. That way, I won't have to pay Rs 7 as rent for my hut.' " So they began to live together. After a year or two, he decided to come back to his village and Jasmani accompanied him. In all, she spent four years in Rourkela. When I first met her in 1981, she had already lived for about three years in her husband's village.

Jasmani and Saluka constitute a nuclear family. They have no children. Saluka has inherited three *bandi* land from his father. He has studied upto class six. Jasmani is illiterate but extremely intelligent and lively. Since she came to Saluka's village, their relationship has changed. Now she is living in his house, feeding off his land, and he spares no occasion to remind her of this. When they came from Rourkela, Jasmani brought with her Rs 400 that she had saved over the four years of working in Rourkela. All of this money was spent by Saluka on repairing his house, getting a new thatched roof and buy-

ing seeds. So Jasmani is now totally dependent on his land. He is neglectful and violent in his behaviour towards her. He beats her up often and on the slightest pretext. She dares not retaliate even in self defence because she fears he may hack her to pieces in his anger. He actually takes out his *tangi* every now and then and threatens to cut her in pieces. Once, she had a narrow escape—he came to attack her with a sharp weapon she ran for her life and took shelter in his brother's house.

He also threatens to bring another wife. She says once he brought a woman home from a fair. That morning, he had snatched all the money Jasmani had—about Rs 14 in all—to spend at the fair. Since she had at first refused him the money, he beat her severely. At night, he came with another woman and asked her to serve food to both of them. She refused, saying there was no food in the house. This was true, since she had, in protest, done no work all day. Addressing the other woman, Jasmani said: "You are welcome to live here as his wife. Look how he beats me. This morning, he snatched my money, beat me up and went away to a feast. Now, he comes with another woman. Do you think he will treat you any better?" The other woman got the message, quietly slipped out of the house and went back to her own home.

Jasmani does all the work on her husband's land. Often, he refuses even to do the ploughing. She had brought her brother's 12-year-old son to live with her so that he could plough the land. Her husband hates to work. Occasionally, he may thatch someone's roof and earn Rs 7 to 8 for that day. But, most of the time, he just loafs around the village and the weekly market. On the other hand, Jasmani does wage work in the village wherever she finds any. She does not want to go to the city for work as long as she can avoid it, because she says they make the labourers work very hard, without holidays. Also, there is no prospect of future security there. Like most Ho women, Jasmani prefers to live in the village and work on the land. And, like most Ho women, she has no land that she can call her own. Her only chance is to try and secure some kind of foothold in her husband's land. Her problem is that he can throw her out of the house whenever he chooses. Also, he can do what he likes with the land without consulting her. Let me illustrate by narrating an incident that occurred in June 1984. The day I reached the village, Jasmani came to see me. She was bruised and bandaged. Saluka had beaten her severely because she had opposed his plan to give a part of their land on *bandhak* to a person from a nearby village. He had given the field on *bandhak* to raise Rs 1,000 to pay a bribe to the police. The story of the bribe is as follows: Saluka's elder sister's daughter had been recruited by a local woman who acts as a *sardarni*

(recruiting agent) for a brick kiln contractor in Calcutta. The young woman was molested by the manager of the kiln, as a result of which she came back, pregnant, to the village. In all this, the *sardarni* had connived with the owners and had not come to the rescue of the young woman. She was also cheated out of her money both by the *sardarni* and the contractor. Saluka's family was very angry with the *sardarni* and decided to take revenge. As soon as the *sardarni* returned to the village, Saluka, his sister, and a few others beat her up. She was badly injured and was taken by her family to get a criminal case registered. When the villagers came to know that it had become a police case, they prevailed upon Saluka and his associates to go to the police station at Sonua and surrender. The reason was simple. The villagers knew from experience that if Saluka did not surrender, the police would come to search for him. Once the police entered the village, there was no knowing what they would do. They would have an excuse to indulge in indiscriminate intimidation and extortion. Therefore, the villagers thought it would be better for Saluka to go and strike a deal. When he reached the police station, he was arrested and handcuffed for about half an hour. After that, a deal was struck. Saluka would pay Rs 1,000 as bribe on behalf of himself and a relative who was also an accused party. The police would then close the case. Therefore, Saluka decided to mortgage a part of their land.

However, Jasmani felt that once the field was mortgaged for seven years, they might never get it back. Also, in the seven years, they would have much less food. As it was, they did not have enough for year-round consumption. So she told Saluka to accept the arrest and let the court case continue. Her reasoning was logical: "At best, they will sentence you to a few months in prison. That will mean you will be fed free for several months. We will save some food in the house. So, when you come out of prison, we will have a little surplus, and, of course, the land will be intact. Better that you go to jail and come out in a few months than that we lose our land." This logic, of course, did not appeal to Saluka. So he beat her up and went ahead with the mortgage.

Whenever I met Jasmani, she always talked about wanting to leave her husband. But she had nowhere to go. She said she was willing to leave if he returned her Rs 400. She did not want to leave without any money in hand, because if she fell sick in the city and could not work for some days, she would starve. Her health has deteriorated considerably after marriage. She looks malnourished and has not enough stamina for the hard labour required at worksites. She tries to save some money for herself by hiding a part of the paddy produced in the fields and selling it behind her husband's back. But he invariably snatches away



whatever money she has, since he does not earn any cash himself. She says: "He beats me up less during days of scarcity because if I were to go away, he would find it hard to fend for himself. However, when there is enough rice in the house to last a few months, as after the harvest, his beatings and threats increase and I am often asked to leave the house."

She does not want any children because, as she says: "*Apna to kuch thikana nahin hai, bacha lekar kya karega?*" (I have no security myself, what will I do with a child?) But she admits that her position might have been relatively stronger had she produced a son. "Right now, he keeps saying 'the fields are mine, you leave my house'. Then I could have replied: 'The fields are mine too now'. I would have acquired a right through my on."

#### SON PREFERENCE AND LAND RIGHTS

The fact that land can be inherited only by sons and that daughters have minimal usufructory rights only as long as they stay unmarried, creates conditions of domination by men and also gives rise to a culture of son preference, even when, in most other respects, it is far more advantageous for a woman to have daughters.

The nuclear family is the norm amongst Hos. When a man gets married, he usually separates from his parents and builds his own house on part of the family land. However, the agricultural land is often not divided among the sons until they themselves have sons. The youngest son usually remains in the parents' home and often gets a somewhat larger share of the land when partition takes place, since he has to support the parents. The assumption is that, if a man has no sons, the land he cultivates in his lifetime will revert to his brothers and their sons after his death, so land need not be partitioned. The man is assured of his right over the land in his lifetime, but his wife is in a much more insecure position. After his death, she is dependent on the goodwill of her husband's male agnates. If she has a son, she has a right over his portion of the land, which she can cultivate in his lifetime. Thus, women are forced into a situation of son preference.

It should be emphasised that a mother's right through her son is only a usufructory right, during his lifetime, but is considered more secure because a son is expected to outlive his father. If, however, the son dies, the mother's right through him does not survive. Maki Bui's sons died in childhood so her husband's family did not allot the couple a portion of the land. As long as her husband was living outside the village because of his job, he did not feel the need to demand a share. After retirement, he settled in the village and was allowed the use of a small portion of land. After his death, Maki's usufructory right has been denied to

her by his male agnates.

A woman's staying power is also determined by the age of her sons at the time of her husband's death. Mukta's father died a couple of years ago of cancer. He was survived by his wife, four daughters and two sons, aged three and six. Mukta, aged about 20, is the oldest daughter. The family land has not been formally partitioned. Mukta's father's elder brother controls the land. He has allotted a very small portion of the land to Mukta's family to cultivate, instead of dividing the land into two equal portions. He has a 25-year-old son who has studied up to college level. He himself has lived and worked at Gua mines where he earned a regular salary of Rs 800 a month. The extra income enabled his family to buy farm animals and agricultural inputs. All this has made his family one of the most powerful in the village whereas Mukta's family, with two infant sons, no regular source of income and not enough land, is among the most powerless. Whenever they ask for a formal division of the land, the uncle's family reply: "Not yet, not yet", obviously hoping that the baby sons will die, thus rendering partition unnecessary.

Sona's case shows how having grown-up sons can help a woman keep a foothold on the family land even when her husband abandons her and remarries. Sona is about 50 years old. She was widowed about three years ago. She has two adult sons and two daughters. Her husband was in the police and lived in Tatanagar where he took a second wife by whom he had a daughter, now aged about 20. After he retired, he returned to the village with the second wife and built a separate house for her. After his death, the second wife could not get a share in the land because she has no son. Even her

usufructory right as a widow was not honoured. Thus, it is not enough to have a legal right to land. The ability to enforce the right is even more important. Women who have only daughters or baby sons tend to be relatively powerless in the violence-charged atmosphere of the village. The land of such widows is often snatched away from them by male agnates through force or fraud.

But son preference amongst Hos does not have the kind of fatal consequences for female children that it has amongst some hindu peasant castes. Daughters are more valued by mothers because of their work capacity. A Ho woman's work burden is killing if she has no daughters to help her. Grown-up sons rarely help their mother. Also, Ho girls fetch a bride price instead of taking a dowry so they are not perceived as a burden on the family. Therefore, the Ho type of son preference does not include a dread of having daughters. The sex ratio in the region gives an indication of the relatively more favourable position of females among the Hos. According to the 1971 Census, there were 1,041 women for every 1,000 men amongst the Hos in Bihar. In the northern plains, Punjab and Haryana (874), UP (883), Bihar (956) and Rajasthan (919) have adverse sex ratios for women. Most hindu peasant groups which manifest low sex ratios have a deep-rooted tradition of paying huge dowries to sons-in-law.

Most of the women interviewed categorically stated that they personally preferred daughters. Jasmati, when she became pregnant after several years of a fairly bad marriage, said that even though a son would improve her position *vis-a-vis* the land, she wanted a daughter. Her reasoning was: "Even if I have a son, this man (her husband) may not keep me in his house. If he

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does allow me to stay, what do I need a son for? If our land goes to his uncles or cousins after he dies, what do I care? If I don't have a daughter, who is going to give us some affection and warmth when we are old? A son and daughter-in-law will never do that. When my mother was sick, I cared for her. None of my brothers cared for her.'

Another reason for son preference is that the outside world of education and employment is extremely male-oriented and male-dominated. Therefore, if Hos have to seek a foothold in the mainstream economy, they can do so only through sons.

That the culture of son preference has largely been imposed on Ho culture by patriarchal land relations becomes evident when one considers the attitude of Hos to sons born out of wedlock. When an unmarried woman becomes pregnant, all the men of the village meet to decide who the father of the child is. Daughters born out of wedlock are not as unwelcome as sons, even in cases where the father refuses to acknowledge responsibility for the child. A baby boy whose father does not acknowledge him runs a higher risk of being killed or allowed to die through neglect than does a girl. A boy's life is not seen as worth much if he is not going to inherit land since that is seen as his most important function in life. Also, if an unmarried woman is saddled with a boy child, she will find it more difficult to get married. A prospective husband will not like another man's son in the house as a possible claimant of the land, whereas a stepdaughter, since she will grow up to share her mother's drudgery on the land and in the house, will not be a burden.

#### VIOLENCE RELATED TO LAND

On the surface, a Ho village appears deceptively calm and quiet. Beneath the surface simmers an extreme mistrust and hostility because the relatively more powerful families are constantly on the look out for opportunities to usurp the land of less powerful families. Single women and childless widows are among the most vulnerable. If a woman does not surrender her usufructory right, she may become the target of different kinds of violence. One such case was that of Sumati Kui, whom I met in Chaibasa court in July 1982, where she had come for the hearing of a murder case in which she had been implicated. She is a young woman who lives with her old widowed mother Jugni Kui of Kalmia, P S Tonto. She said she had chosen to stay unmarried so that she and her mother could live off the family land. She had an affair with Dobro Ho and gave birth to a baby which, according to the two women, died soon after birth. But their relatives accused them of having murdered the child. Most of the witnesses against them in this case are Sumati's father's male agnates. This is an ex-

tract from the testimony of Sumati's cousin, Singrai Tubid: "Jugni Kui had filed a case against my father and brother for harvesting the paddy from her field. The case continued for some time. . . . It is true that my father and brother have been quarrelling with Jugni Kui for a long time. Jugni has no son. Sumati is her only child. We are her near agnates. If Sumati Kui were to leave her mother Jugni Kui and go somewhere, then we would inherit all her land. Ever since the land dispute started, I have not been on speaking terms with Jugni Kui. . . ."

Whichever way the case is decided, the women are likely to end up as landless destitutes, because if Jugni and Sumati are sentenced to a prison term, on the charge of murder, the land will be taken over by the agnates; if, however, they are acquitted, most of the land is likely to have been mortgaged to pay the court expenses. They told me they had to spend about Rs 200 on bail and each visit to court cost them at least Rs 20. The only way they could raise this money was by mortgaging their land since they are subsistence cultivators.

Violence against women often takes the form of witchkillings. No systematic study has been made of this phenomenon. Most commentators attribute it to superstitious ignorance. British administrators assumed that spread of formal education would put an end to it. Wilkinson in his despatch of 1838, wrote: ". . . there must be spread of education to put down witchcraft and the institution of *sokhas* who make divinations and indicate(d) some one as the witch" leading to her murder.<sup>6</sup> Even today, most social reformers of the area believe that it is primarily lack of modern health care facilities that makes tribals fall prey to the superstition that various diseases are the result of witchcraft. However, it is important to remember that it is usually against women that the so-called superstitiousness erupts.

My study suggests that often the real motivation for witchkilling is the desire to eliminate the woman and take away her land. I came across several such cases in Chaibasa court, where single women or old widows in vulnerable circumstances had been murdered by their own relatives. In one case, a man who worked as a veterinary doctor in a government hospital was accused of having murdered his two paternal aunts. The two old women were unmarried and lived together, working the land over which they had a usufructory right. He had accused them of being witches and of having caused the death of his wife. A child had seen him murdering them with an axe but he was acquitted by the court. He inherited the land which the two old women had been cultivating.

Maki Bui, the petitioner in the Supreme Court case,<sup>7</sup> was also accused by her husband's male agnates of being a witch. She

felt they were preparing the ground to have her killed, and fled to her married daughter's village.

Another form of violence is social ostracism. Women hesitate to carry the fight for their rights beyond a point lest they be perceived as deviants and outcasted. The severity with which such ostracism is enforced varies, depending on how much of a threat such a woman is perceived to be, by the powerful families of the village. A woman who has been ostracised will not find anyone to plough her fields or thatch her roof. She will not get people to assist her in essential rituals. She will find it hard to procure food loans in times of scarcity or to buy and sell essential goods.

#### (To be continued)

#### Notes

- 1 The name of the village has been changed to protect the identity of the respondents.
- 2 A somewhat larger proportion of christian women came to be included in the sample—17 out of 30. In the village, about 30 per cent of the families are christians. But this does not seriously affect the conclusions since, from my investigations in other villages of Singhbhum, I found that the everyday life, work, marriage and inheritance patterns, even the customs and rituals of the christian and non-christian Hos, are very similar. Apart from interviewing the women, I also accompanied them to market and to the forest, when they went gathering fuel and fodder, and closely observed their lives, work and interactions. Thus, I have good reason to believe that the lives of these women are fairly representative of the lives of Ho women in Singhbhum. Although the information was usually cross-checked by the observations of my interpreter who knows all the respondents and their families intimately, an important dimension is missing since I did not interview the men of these 30 families.
- 3 The problems these women face are problems that lie at the heart of contemporary Ho culture.
- 4 D N Majumdar, "The Affairs of a Tribe: A Study in Tribal Dynamics", Universal Publishers Ltd, Lucknow, 1950, pp 65-66.
- 5 "Final Report on the Kolhan Government Estate", District Singhbhum, 1898, Chapter 1, para 10, letter from R W Collins, officiating secretary, Board of Revenue, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department.
- 6 Majumdar, op cit, p 125.
- 7 P C Roy Chaudhury, "Bihar District Gazetteers", Singhbhum, Gazetteer Revision Section, Revenue Department, Bihar, Patna, 1958, p 253.
- 8 A petition in the Supreme Court by *Manushi*, on behalf of two Ho women, challenging the denial of succession rights to Ho women as violative of the Constitution of India. Writ petition No 22133 of 1982 under article 32 of the Constitution of India.