

**The Curious Case of the Missing Social Movement:  
Why the Korku in India Do Not Protest?**

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## Abstract

Aseem Hasnain: The Curious Case of the Missing Social Movement:  
Why the Korku in India Do Not Protest?  
(Under the direction of Professor Charles Kurzman)

According to the leading theories in the study of social movements, the presence of persistent oppression, grievances, favorable structural conditions such as political opportunities, social networks and organizations make it reasonable to expect a social movement if one is an optimist, or collective protest(s), if one is a pessimist. The Indigenous Korku community is in such a situation and they also exhibit a robust oppositional consciousness. Yet, there is no social movement, no organized protest, and no mobilization around an existing collective identity, not even ‘hidden transcripts’ of resistance. I use ethnographic data to detail out discursive practices deployed by actors in this case and argue that the dominant logic emanating from mainstream theories of social movements does not work all the time. I show that what eventually matters, for organized protests or social movements, is a matrix of several elements, some known, some speculative, and some currently unexplained.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**Scene 1:** 1882. Somewhere in Dartmoore, England. Silverblaze, a prized racehorse has been stolen.

Detective: “Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

Holmes: “To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

Detective: “The dog did nothing in the night-time!”

Holmes: “That was the curious incident” (Doyle 272).

**Scene 2:** A hot summer day in April of 2002. Inside a dilapidated bus, on a bumpy road, between two villages in rural central India.

The bus conductor pushed a group of tired passengers towards the back of the bus.

With seating space for fifty five, the bus has eighty passengers. The conductor wanted to create more space for additional people. Pushed to their limits, the earlier group of people could go back no more. He kicked the ones nearest him. Some fell and got hurt. One of them protested meekly, “what are you doing?” The conductor responded, “move, mother fucker” and threw more kicks. The victims pretended to shift further back. I was sitting in the front of the bus, practically reserved for the better off (AH/March/2002/3). The curious incident in this case was neither the violence, nor

the protest. My curiosity lay in the loneliness of the protestor, and more than that, in the silence of the others being kicked.

Sherlock Holmes knew when to expect a dog to bark. I am trying to follow him. In this study, I explore a phenomenon that did not occur – a Korku (an indigenous community in central India) social movement, or the lack of organized protest. Just in case, I am not comparing the Korku to the dog.

According to leading theories in the study of social movements, especially literature related with the political process strand, it is reasonable to expect a Korku social movement if one is an optimist, or collective protest, if one is a pessimist. The Korku suffer persistent racial oppression by settlers, formally and informally, in public and in private. There exist, grievances, clear identification of perpetrators, and a robust oppositional consciousness among the aggrieved. At the same time, the Indian political system makes available, a variety of political opportunities for excluded groups, including indigenous communities such as the Korku. In addition, the Korku have traditional organizations, and leaders, reflecting solidarity based infrastructure, that might help them to take advantage of these opportunities, if they choose to do so. Yet there is no Korku social movement against racial oppression. There is no organized protest, no mobilization around an existing collective identity, and not even ‘hidden transcripts’ of resistance (Scott 1990). Why not?

I use ethnographic evidence to describe various discursive practices among settlers and the Korku community, while attempting to understand what was going on in the minds of these actors. My data from the region of study shows how negative stereotypes about the Korku are deployed in daily interactions, and how individual settlers as well as

representatives of the state act oppressively, consciously or subconsciously. I also detail out how Korku adults and children absorb, adsorb and deflect such interactions in everyday experience. My aim in this study is to detail out these discursive practices and counter-practices to be able to expand understanding of how racial oppression affects subordinate groups in racialized societies and how protests and social movements trigger or fail to begin.

This case analysis shows that persistent oppression, presence of grievances, availability of favorable structural conditions such as political opportunities, affirmative action, as well as social networks and organizations, do not necessarily produce organized protest or emergence of a social movement. Drawing upon Kurzman's (2004) idea that some movements succeed just because they thought they could, I imagine the reverse- some movements fail just because they thought so. However, why individuals and groups end up thinking in either of these directions is still beyond a convincing explanation. I propose that what eventually matters, for organized protests or social movements, is a matrix of innumerable elements, some known, some speculative, and some unexplainable. In other words, I argue that dominant logic emanating from mainstream theories of social movements does not work all the time.



## **I. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This project begins with the observation that mainstream scholarship in the study of social movements retains structural dominance despite harsh criticisms emanating from post structuralist scholars. Literature on social movements in general and racial movements in particular, point to structural inequalities that generate grievances; organizational resources that help the aggrieved come together; and political opportunities that provide an enabling environment where organized protests or social movements can evolve. In McAdam's (1999) words, "expanding political opportunities combine with the indigenous organizations of the minority community to afford insurgents the 'structural potential' for successful collective action," and that this potential transforms "into actual insurgency by means of the crucial intervening process of cognitive liberation" (p.51). In recent years, critics have emphasized the limits of these structural factors and pointed to the uncertainty involved in explaining non-routine events such as protests, revolutions and social movements. In the following sections, I review these debates.

### **Social Movement Theory**

In this section I review social movement literature to trace structural dominance within mainstream theory and its critique presented by contemporary theorists. The review will show that historically, this scholarship was structural and within mainstream circles,

remains so. However, we will also see that contemporary scholars, who broadly agree in taking a constructionist view, have vehemently opposed this position.

Reviewing both classical and later theories of social movements, Tarrow (1998) agrees that over time, this scholarship has remained more or less “structural” (p.13). In mainstream theory, there has been a focus on three key structural factors that are seen as critical to protests and movements. These key factors are resources, social movement organizations and political opportunities.

Let us look at the primacy given to resources and movement organizations first. Mainstream theorists give immense importance to movement organizations and mobilizational resources in understanding the emergence of protests and social movements. McAdam (1999) favors social movement organizations, “as a prerequisite for action, would-be activists- of either the challenger or member variety- must either create an organizational vehicle and its supporting collective identity or appropriate an existing organization” (p.xxiv). Others (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001) acknowledge resource deficit among challengers and, “instead of pointing to preexisting mobilizing structures.....call attention to the active appropriation of sites for mobilization” (pp. 44-45). Tarrow (1998) sees pre-existing organizations and networks as foundations on which, movements are built (p.1), that convert mobilization potential into action (p.13) and that “make possible the transformation of episodic collective action into social movements” (p.22). Tilly (2004) also finds a prominent role of professional organizers and non-governmental organizations (p.13) though he identifies them as significantly shaping the form and trajectory of social movements rather than being critical to movement emergence (p.53). Meyer (2007) sees social movement organizations as complex repertoires with contradicting potential for both sustaining and

pacifying social movements (p.37) nevertheless, he treats them as, “a critical component of any ongoing social movement,” as the “primary vehicle for any collective action”, and critical to understanding, “political alternatives, strategic decisions, missed opportunities, and the real successes of dedicated efforts at mobilizing” (p.61). While there is debate on criticality of resources and movement organizations, mainstream literature asserts with a consensus that these two factors cannot be ignored in understanding protests and movements.

The other structural factor central to mainstream scholarship is political opportunity. The political opportunity model has been explained in detail by Doug McAdam (1999) as constituted of three main factors- organizational readiness within the aggrieved population, insurgent consciousness (or cognitive liberation as he defines it later) among the aggrieved or the collective assessment of prospects of success if insurgency is mounted, and the structure of political opportunities or political alignment of groups within the larger political environment (p.40). Having initiated and influenced this strand within social movement theory, McAdam (1999) accepts the structural nature of his earlier thesis (see McAdam 1982) on political opportunities and structures. Though he accepts awareness of its limitations and widespread critique, he re-asserts his position, “I embrace this perspective as an accurate rendering of the current consensus and a useful starting point” (p.x). He critiques cultural alternatives as ignorant of the structure-culture link and stresses the continuing importance of structural factors (pp.xii-xiii, p.xxxii), especially political opportunities (p. 39,58). Tarrow (1998) finds political opportunities critical to triggering movements (p.1), in recruiting participants (p.17), and further asserts that, “both the sources of movements’ power, and their limits, are the results of political opportunities” (p.150). Further, he suggests that either there are pre-existing opportunities for a movement to occur or, if there were none, a kindred

movement would necessarily create opportunities if it were to come into being (pp.81-82). Tilly's (2004) bias towards structural factors and political opportunities comes through his view that social movements are dependent on democratization (p.12,36,54,63,137,140), increased political opportunities (p.13) and decreased state repression (p.31). Meyer (2007) has similar views, "Psychological factors, although certainly important, explain less about why movements sometimes emerge strongly than do political factors" (p.2). Once a critic of political opportunities, he now vouches for their almost critical role in the emergence of protest and social movements in various ways. On the attraction of movement ideas he says, "social movement activists sell ideas, to be sure, but how attractive those ideas are is more likely to be influenced by the context than how well the ideas themselves are packaged" (p.2). Further, he states, "This means we need to look at the challenges and opportunities provided by mainstream politics," and he treats them critical "in order to stage a large event" (p.13). These structuralist scholars have recently started claiming to have become sensitive to cultural and subjectivity critiques. However, they continue to accept the central role of structural factors (see McAdam et al 2001, p.43). This ambivalence is reflected in their own words when they discuss "How far have we come" and where they confess, "verbs have replaced nouns" (p.50). Hence, political opportunities remain one of the most important structural factors that mainstream scholarship in social movements continues to discuss.

In the following paragraphs I review contemporary scholarship and how it has challenged mainstream adherence to structuralism. Over the last decade structural bias, especially the mechanistic view of political opportunity has come under severe attack and the basic definition, validity and operationalization of this concept have all been put to questioning.

I begin by looking at criticism aimed at the conceptual and analytical robustness of political opportunity. The catchall nature of the concept has been emphasized by the fact that there are several ways, often divergent (Meyer 2004, p.126), in which political opportunities are conceptualized and that render it an extremely flexible (Meyer & Minkoff 2004) and underdeveloped concept. The diversity of ideas about political opportunities has ensured that scholars have failed to create even a basic framework that can be applied to cases of mobilization (Meyer 2004). There are disagreements on how political opportunities affect movements (Meyer 2004), and no one is sure, “how opportunities translate into collective action” (Meyer & Minkoff 2004, p.1463). The most vehement attack comes from Goodwin and Jasper (1999), who label political opportunities as, “tautological, trivial, inadequate, or just plain wrong” (p.28). They (2004) also see it as a too-broad concept, “any statement that X leads to Y (in our case, expanding political opportunity gives rise to social movement mobilization) is not very illuminating when X includes, as it were, everything under the sun” (p.7). Explaining the currency that political opportunity has gained, they see its conceptual looseness combined with, “an appealing aura of rigor and structure,” that “has encouraged their broad application to social movements” (p.11). Further, they see the concept too overstretched to have even a minimal scholarly consensus as to its meaning (p.27). They suggests that structuralists need to “recognize that cultural and strategic processes define and create the factors usually presented as structural” and add that even strategies are products of cultural learning, and “depend heavily on psychology” (p.28). Poletta (2004) takes a more reconciliatory stand in suggesting that instead of dropping the emphasis on ‘objective’ political structures, “The task is to...probe the (objective) resources and constraints generated by the cultural dimensions of political structures” (p.97). She proposes that if one sees culture

as the symbolic dimension of all structures, one may be able to see that even culture is “patterned and patterning; it is enabling as well as constraining,” and that this conception is useful in grasping “conceptually and empirically the generation of cultural but ‘objective’ opportunities” (p.100). Kurzman (1996) further problematizes the fit-all political opportunity model by adding the extremely important angle of perception, “social-movement theory should reconsider the relation between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ definitions of political opportunity” (p.14). These counter arguments show that the criticism of political opportunity ranges from disagreements with its definitions, fundamental understanding and its eventual usefulness in analysis of social movements.

The overall purpose of the debates captured in this section lead us to a larger question, about the currency of structuralism. Commenting on the ‘barbed’ and ‘outraged’ debates between structuralists and anti-structuralists, Kurzman (2004b) finds their disagreements concealing, “a near-consensus: structuralism is on the outs in social movement theory” (p.111). He sees the current, post-structural, scenario as befitting of a constructionist label since, “it announces the view that people construct their own history- not under circumstances chosen by themselves, certainly, but under circumstances they have the power to change” (p.117). While current theorists sound sure about the decline of structuralist ideas, mainstream scholars still assert loyalty to structural factors. However, we also saw how mainstream scholarship does acquiesce to the relevance of subjectivity and perceptions, supporting Kurzman’s conclusion, “structuralism is on the outs.”

This section presented a review of debates concerning structural factors in general and political opportunity in particular. While there seems to be a general consensus on limitations of the structural approach; the need to move towards social psychology,

subjectivity and perceptions of actors is still not agreed upon across the board and is rather felt by ‘constructionists’ alone. The next section deals with literature on racial movements.

### **Racial oppression, resistance and movements**

A case from India might, prima facie, look unfit for discussion within the sociology of racism. To many, India yet appears synonymous with caste rather than race. However, scholars studying India have increasingly been sensitive about locating caste and tribe as well as ethnicity based discrimination within the international context of race relations. This contextualization has also generated interesting debates (for earlier works on this theme see [Beteille, 1967], and [Verba; Ahmed; Bhatt. 1971] etc, and for more recent work see [Robb, 1995], [Kobor, 1998], [Baber, 2004], [Jenkins, 2004], [Thorat; Umakant, 2004] etc). In the last decade, the representations of minority activists from India in the UN sponsored World Conference on Racism (Durban-2001 and Geneva-2009) and the Indian government’s contestation of their arguments has made the theme more worthy of inquiry. In this light, literature on racial oppression and movements seems appropriate for the present inquiry. This section has two aims. The first is to establish that racial oppression usually creates resistance, and the other is to capture debates on how the sociological study of racial protests connects with ideas in social movement theory.

I begin by documenting how the aggrieved react to racial oppression. In racial societies, dominant groups often attempt to create homogeneity centered on their culture and almost always the goals are only partially achieved. Social and political processes in racial societies have historically been defined on racial lines, and have been articulated along frameworks that can be labeled ‘cultural imperialism.’ While this imperialism attempts to

play out in every conceivable nook of daily life, schools remain one of the most attractive arenas for such projects. Education, both coercive and hegemonic, has been used across the world to establish a homogeneous *Weltanschauung*. Literature abounds on both the coercive and hegemonic ways school education, especially in boarding schools, has attempted to establish cultural imperialism in Australia, USA, Canada and other parts of the world ([Schissel and Wotherspoon 2002], [Tyson 2003], [Hickling, Hudson and Ahlquist 2003], [Coleman 2007], [Terszak 2007], [Raynes 2008]). While many changes do take place, indigenous identities and culture do survive this onslaught substantially, hinting at the robustness of subordinated cultures.

The robustness of cultures and identities is a well-studied phenomenon. Let us review some literature on this aspect. Historically, racial oppression has acted dialectically and has created resistance, oppositional culture, and group solidarity (for older work on this theme see [Stuckey 1987], [Hechter 1975], [Blauner 1969], and [Blauner 1972]). In contemporary work, Omi and Winant (1994) draw upon historical accounts of slavery where slaves resisted racial oppression and maintained counter narratives of their self, using culture, music and religious practices (pp. 79-80). Bonilla-Silva (1997) finds most racialized social systems exhibiting strife or racial contestation that he sees as a, “struggle of racial groups for systemic changes regarding their position” (p.473), and which may be at social, political, economic and ideological levels (p.474). Feagin also recalls the presence of black resistance in America ever since the inception of slavery (Feagin 2006, p.31; Feagin 2001, p.240), either individually or collectively (Feagin 2006, p.8). This evidence helps establish that, racial oppression produces resistance however, what is more important for this study is to understand when such resistance is produced and what factors are crucial for that process.



In an attempt to identify such crucial factors, I review literature that discusses racial oppression and race movements. This scholarship is congruent with ideas in social movement theory – organizational resources, political opportunities and oppositional consciousness. Race scholars echo social movement ideas that focus on organizational resources, as crucial factors in movement emergence. In analyzing collective resistance to racial oppression in America, Feagin identifies collective consciousness, access to resources and organizational efforts of African Americans as important factors (2001, p.34, p.240; 2006, pp.303-304). In Bonilla-Silva's (2006) view, American Blacks lack "organizational capacity and resources," and that explains why they have not been able to bring about drastic changes in the racial order (p.173). Omi and Winant (1994) identify "intellectuals" as leading political projects and bringing about the first challenges to the racial state in the US (p.86). They see the arrival of the modern civil rights movement, at the same time "when southern black organizations .....moved to mobilize a mass constituency in the South" (p.98). Accepting that economic and political resources were essential to the civil rights movement they accept, "The role of such organizations as the local NAACP chapters, and particularly the black churches...exemplifies the centrality of resource mobilization issues (p.98). Camay and Gordon's (2007) analysis of racial oppression and resistance in racist South Africa shows black mobilization, development of social movement organizations and emergence of various social movements in the 1910-48 period, which was marked by availability of resources such as foreign financial aid and NGOs (p.188, p.216). Other studies of Latin American social movements see the presence of international NGOs, donor agencies and financial resources as factors that help in the emergence of local activism and indigenous movements (Jackson, J et al. 2005, p.551, p. 553; Hodgson, D. 2002, p.1088). Thus, resources and movement

organizations are seen as a critical factor across racial movement literature.

Further, in congruence with social movement ideas, racial movement scholarship emphasizes the critical role of political opportunities. While Feagin (2001) explicitly interprets black consciousness, organizational efforts and available resources more important to the emergence of collective protest than political opportunities, his assumptions indicate otherwise. He sees the “spurt in civil rights protests from the 1940s to 1970s” a consequence of “decades of legal efforts and political organizing by the NAACP and other organizations” (p.241). However, his analysis is built on the acceptance that legal and political organizing work was openly possible in the first place. This is an acknowledgement of the presence of favorable political opportunities and their crucial role in pre-movement emergence. Bonilla-Silva (1997) sees resistance and protest becoming collective in some circumstances, “in quasi-democratic situations such as the contemporary United States” (p.473). Omi and Winant (1994) are most explicit about the connections between collective racial protests and political opportunities; “an oppositional racial ideology requires some political space, a certain minimal conceptual flexibility about race, upon which to fasten in order to recast racial meanings and constitute alternative racial institutions” (p.79). They deploy Gramsci’s twin concept of war of position and war of maneuver (see Gramsci 1971, pp.238-239) to explain how racial minorities in America, especially African Americans, maintained secure cultural, political enclaves (p.80) until they, “were able to make sustained strategic incursions into the mainstream political process beginning with world war II” which was an “opening up” of the state (p.81). They accept the crucial role of political opportunities in the emergence of the civil rights movement, which they see coming into being on the basis of national and local support (p.98). However, what they identify as more critical to movement

emergence was “the politicization of black identity, the rearticulation of black collective subjectivity” (p.98). They also see the critical role played by movement leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Moses, in setting up a widely accepted identity of collective opposition, through egalitarian articulations such as, “blacks were, collectively, the moral, spiritual, and political leadership of American society. They represented not only their own centuries-long struggle for freedom, but the highest and noblest aspirations of white America as well” (p.100). This buttresses criticality of political opportunity in American scholarship on racial movements.

The political opportunity and racial movement connection is further bolstered by racial movement research from around the globe. Camay and Gordon’s (2007) study on Black mobilization in racist South Africa shows increased political opportunities as crucial (p.76). Li’s work (2000) on collective mobilization among indigenous groups in Indonesia, establishes the critical role of favorable political opportunities, in the form of political support of elites towards indigenous people (pp.170-174). Veber’s case study (1998) of eastern Peru’s indigenous identity movement locates political reforms, and increase in favorable political opportunities, as the trigger for indigenous communities’ mobilization and articulation of demands (p.384, p.394). Yashar (1998) studies the rise of indigenous identity based social movements in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru and acknowledges the confluence of political opportunities and incomplete state reforms as critical to the emergence of movements (p.24, p.32). She sees political liberalization and the state’s permissiveness for mobilization (p.31) at the root of indigenous movements. In a similar comparative study looking at both successful and failed social movements in Latin America, Cott (2001) finds favorable political opportunities crucial in all successful social

movements (p.54). Other scholars of Latin American social movements ([Jackson and Warren 2005, p.551-553], [Hodgson 2002, p.1088]) see the role of neo liberal reforms in opening new spaces and opportunities for activism that eventually result in indigenous movement emergence. In another study focusing on Canadian indigenous protests, Ramos (2006) finds political opportunities significant to the emergence of protest (p.214). Mitchell's research (2005) on the ethnic Roma community in Europe identifies the collapse of communism and emergence of new political opportunities as critical to an identity-based movement (pp. 384-385). This provides more than enough evidence that racial movement studies treat political opportunity as a critical factor.

The key understanding suggested by this literature is that structural factors are critical to protests and movements. However, contemporary scholars dispute this. The emergence of organized protest and social movements in general as well as in racial contexts are understood to be aided by resources, social movement organizations and favorable political opportunities. However, as we saw earlier in this proposal, contemporary critique of political opportunities questions this connection. Deviant cases of social movements that take place without existing opportunities (Kurzman 2004a) and those where none happen despite the availability of opportunities place a question mark on the robustness of political opportunity as a critical factor in movement studies. Such deviant cases make explanations based on resources, organizational capacities and political opportunities unconvincing. There seem to be substantive gaps and aberrations in the causal claims that such explanations aspire to propose. It is in this tentative and contested area of racial oppression and social movements that the case of the silent Korke community is presented.

## **I. CASE SELECTION**

Please bear with me in some imagining at this stage. Imagine a community with a distinct historical-cultural identity, with a distinct language, living in a specific territory, and having a traditional organizational setup and kinship network. Imagine this community living in a nation with an otherwise impressive democratic reputation, where political opportunities allow (though with contextual variation) most communities to mobilize, express collective identities, assert cultural uniqueness, and qualify all citizens for equitable treatment. Now imagine this particular community being racially oppressed, dominated and humiliated in its day-to-day existence. In the very backyard of this community, live other groups with a comparable history but who have mobilized around collective identities and have improved their status. Our community of interest not only remains quiescent but even aspires to lose its identity. Finally, change the imagination to reality since such is the case that I propose to study.

This case, of the Korku community from central India, is selected since it speaks to literature on social movements in general, and racial movements in particular. This case engages with all variables that constitute the study of organized protest-- persistent oppression, grievances, consciousness, organizational resources and political opportunities. Despite personal and structural discrimination, some Korku express a readiness to leave behind their 'backward' and 'incurable' culture and aspire to assimilate within the

dominant Hindu caste system. This aspiration is expressed despite the apparent presence of incentives for mobilization as well as disincentives against assimilation.

The case is also unusual since the inquiry is located not within a social movement but outside it. There has been no Korku social movement or organized protest so far. I do not even see this case located in a pre-movement stage. That might be too teleological. The best I can do in locating this case is perhaps in an extra-movement space, howsoever fuzzy that sounds. However, case selection is based on research directions identified by contemporary critiques of structural theories in social movement literature. In Kurzman's (2004b) view, political opportunities are not meaningless, rather, he proposes, "opportunity should be operationalized primarily as perceived opportunity." In outlining the task for future research he suggests focusing on deviant cases i.e., "cases in which opportunity exists but no protest occurs (or succeeds)" since "these cases appear to be far less frequently studied...and cases of opportunity without protest address the question: when is opportunity effective?" (p.119). The present case perfectly fits this requirement and its analysis will attempt to answer the question, 'when are political opportunities ineffective?' The following sections detail out the case at hand.

### **The area of study**

The geographic area of study was rural central India. The study was conducted in a cluster of six villages in X block of Harda district in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh.<sup>1</sup> Although Harda is a developed district, the block where the cluster of villages lay is underdeveloped by most development indicators such as health, education, industrialization and agricultural productivity. This is a mixed area having various Hindu castes, Dalits (the

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<sup>1</sup> Exact locations de-identified.

erstwhile untouchable groups at the bottom of the caste system), indigenous groups (called - *Adivasi* in Hindi- meaning old inhabitants, also called Tribals in common usage, and legally listed as ST-scheduled tribes), Muslims and other communities in varying numbers. The Indigenous communities, mainly Korku and Gond (another indigenous group), claim to be the oldest inhabitants in this area while most settlers (all other non indigenous groups) arrived in the area in the last century as either government employees (of the colonial and later the Indian government) or as traders, farmers and service castes. Settlers usually live in villages, which are either local market centers or are adjacent to metal roads. Though in a minority, settlers own most of the fertile land in the area. Most of this land has been procured from erstwhile indigenous owners through legal technicalities, outright sale, or as recovery against debt. Settlers own most of the financial and local resources and consequently have a larger say in local politics and institutions of governance. They have a strong hold on the axis of power with a formidable influence over government, politics, business, education and other institutions. On the other hand, Korkus own some of the most uncultivable, undulating and inaccessible land, practice almost subsistence agriculture and their access to natural resources have been increasingly constrained by law. They are grossly underrepresented in education, politics, commerce, public sector jobs and other institutions of the government. By way of their monopoly over trade and capital, settlers are also the main source of credit for the local population.

Korkus and settlers have significant differences in their culture, religious practices, economic status, political influence, educational achievements and other developmental indicators. Settlers are generally in a dominant position and hold more power than the Korkus. A large number of the settlers, excluding the old-aged, are literate and have a decent

level of formal schooling. They speak, read and write Hindi, which is also used as the main language by the government, traders, other service providers and schools. In practice, command over Hindi is one of the key factors that enable upward mobility in the area. On the other hand, most Korkus, apart from the young, are illiterate and only comfortable in using the Korku language. They do use Hindi for communication with others but this limited use reflects significant disability in understanding and 'correct' usage. Here 'correct' is an ethnocentric perspective of the settlers as they themselves use a particular dialect of Hindi which many urban Hindi speakers might find incorrect. Overall, most settlers see themselves far superior than Korkus on cultural, developmental, economic and political parameters.

### **The Korku community**

Before getting into the details of the case, an introduction of the community may be helpful. The Korku are an indigenous group inhabiting the region around the Vindhya hills in central India in the bordering states of Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Maharashtra. In Madhya Pradesh they live in Chhindwara, Harda, Hoshangabad, Khandwa and Betul districts while in Maharashtra they live mainly in Amravati district ([Deogaonkar 1990, pp.13-14], [Singh 1992, p.225]). Though there are differences on their accurate population estimates in MP, the governmental figures<sup>2</sup> for Korku population in MP is 610,000 as of 2004. In block X, where this study was conducted, they form the largest of the indigenous populations with around 76,000 individuals and are approximately 16% of the population<sup>3</sup>. In the cluster of six villages that I worked in, the Korku constitute upwards of 75% with village wise variations.

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<sup>2</sup> Statistical Handbook of Madhya Pradesh, 2004. Government of Madhya Pradesh.

<sup>3</sup> Census of India, 2001. [www.censusindia.net](http://www.censusindia.net)



Previously, they lived inside forests, were engaged in hunting gathering and practiced shifting cultivation of coarse cereals. However, in the last eight decades, with a significant decrease in forests and diminishing rights over forest resources, they have adopted settled cultivation. Agriculture, agricultural labor, migratory casual labor and occasional hunting-gathering together constitute their livelihood (Deogaonkar 1990, p.26).

Their script-less language is also called Korku. It is classified as the western-most variant of the Munda-language group. It is a spoken language hence it exists only in conversations and oral traditions. The Korku live in the middle of Hindi speaking settlers and the Gond who speak their own language, Gondi. The Korku community is subdivided into clans with each having its unique totem and set of taboos. All clans are patrilineal and exogamous (Deogaonkar 1990).

Apart from non-anthropomorphic gods (like *Kaladev*, *Mahadev*, *Kilar-Muthwa* and *Kheda Dev*), Korkus worship natural entities such as the sun, moon and rivers. Most of their deities are embodied as individual stones or a mound of pebbles colored in black or red paint. These deities have traditionally been placed in the open under specific trees at strategic locations in their villages.

There are several legends and genesis myths in Korku folklore. The most popular is about their creation by the god *Mahadev*, a non-anthropomorphic deity. This legend narrates how *Mahadev* created Korkus from clay on the behest of his faithful follower *Ravana* who wanted to have his followers inhabit the Vindhya hills. A black dog is part of this creation myth for its role in saving the clay figures that *Ravana* created and which a white horse repeatedly trampled into dirt. The figures were finally completed and the Korku came into being when the black dog chased away the horse. In Hinduism, *Ravana* the demon king of

Lanka<sup>4</sup> is evil personified, the chief villain in the religious epic *Ramayana* and the principal antagonist of Lord *Rama* who in turn is one of the most popular Hindu gods in this part of India. This belief of association with *Ravana* is interesting and needs to be examined for its sources. Several Korku elders contest this legend as a lore propagated in bad taste by non-tribal settlers. Though they agree with *Mahadev* being their creator but they refuse to accept the role of *Ravana*. In remote villages, where presence of settlers is low or recent, Korkus believe in a different legend. It narrates that *Mahadev*, the ultimate creator, was unhappy with the conduct of human beings on earth and wanted to create 'good' human beings. *Mahadev* made a man and woman out of clay on the Vindhya Hills (a nearby hilly region) to start life afresh with these new human beings. The new life forms were named Korku, which means 'human being.'

Korkus are believed to have come to their current habitat from the Chhota-Nagpur<sup>5</sup> area as bandits (Deogaonkar 1990, p.9). Having come too far away from their homes and kinsmen, they are assumed to have decided to settle in the adjoining area of the Vindhya Mountains. According to a linguistic interpretation 'Koro' means road and 'Ku' means man. Hence Korku may mean, a street-man or a wanderer. This interpretation supports the possibility that while wandering away from their kinsmen, Korkus may have come to this area. The Korku have a well-established idea of selfhood expressed through their culture, religion and language.

Historically, Korkus have never been recognized as Hindus, rather they have been known as *Adivasi*.<sup>6</sup> They are formally and legally recognized and enumerated as a

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<sup>4</sup> Lanka is a legendary Kingdom associated with the Hindu epic *Ramayana*.

<sup>5</sup> The Chota Nagpur area is a plateau in eastern India, which covers much of Jharkhand state as well as adjacent parts of Orissa, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh states. It is heavily populated by indigenous communities.

<sup>6</sup> *Adivasi* is a Hindi word meaning ancient inhabitants and is used for indigenous/tribal communities.

‘Scheduled Tribe’<sup>7</sup> (ST) in the official Census of India. However, Korkus themselves stand divided on their self-identification as a community. While a considerable number of Korkus living in mixed and roadside villages, express an ambiguous semi-Hindu identity, almost all of those living in homogenous and remote villages consider themselves separate from Hindus. As a ST community, the Korku are beneficiaries of various development policies and schemes administered by the state and central government in the fields of education, health, land redistribution and agriculture. They are eligible to quotas in government employment and elected bodies. Culture, religion, constitutional recognition and the special benefits they are eligible for, all establish their unique legal status and identity. Overall, The Korku, themselves, as well as in the eye of the government and settlers are seen as a distinct group, called *Adivasi* (a Hindi word meaning ancient people) separate from Hindus.

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<sup>7</sup> Scheduled Tribe (ST) is a specific legal status given to some indigenous communities that are accorded special status by the Constitution of India.

## **I. METHODS**

### **Data**

I use ethnographic data based on my own fieldwork conducted in the area of study between 2001 and 2004 as well as interviews, focus group discussions, case studies, area profiles and field journals of two other researchers who were in the area during part of the same period. While my own data comes from observations that I made without an elaborate research plan, the two other researchers were part of a qualitative study conducted in the same area jointly by a Bhopal based NGO (Samavesh Foundation) and a formal research Institution (National Institute for Advanced Studies, Bangalore). The NISA/Samavesh study was conducted with funding support from a European donor agency and followed formal consent and de-identifying procedures. In effect, I will be using data from the following sources:

- My field notes prepared during past fieldwork and later converted into an essay.
- Report of focus group discussions covering thirty five key informants
- Transcripts from twenty-one in-depth interviews
- Daily diaries of two other field researchers, covering twelve months each
- Profiles of three government schools

## **How the data was collected**

### **Personal Fieldwork**

Data from my personal field notes, especially from the first year of field work, was gathered at informal settings where I observed and interacted with informants related with work that I did for my organization. These were agricultural farms, construction sites, community meetings, planning sessions and so forth. However once I had clearer ideas and questions for follow-up, I gathered data by planning less structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions after work hours. These were gathered at private homes, marketplace, roadside cafes, schools and government offices.

As a natural resource manager, I was working with a NGO (2001-2005) and was posted at the research site where my core responsibilities were participatory planning and implementation of a community based natural resource management project. The organizational structure of the NGO allowed me access and participation in other programmes such as community education and governance. My nature of work ensured intensive interaction with the rural community across a cluster of ten villages some of which had mixed population and some had predominantly Korku residents. Work related interactions drew me into local life, culture and politics. As an outsider and member of a non-partisan organization, I was perhaps perceived to have a neutral disposition towards local communities, inter community dynamics and problems. My interest in social sciences, organizational freedom and local acceptance resulted in my undertaking a long and comprehensive, although unplanned, ethnographic research with the Korku community.

During this period, I identified several sites any one of which could qualify as a focal site for a micro level ethnographic study due to the density and intensity of observations

recorded there. These sites were weekly/permanent markets, classrooms within schools, hostels for tribal children, roadside teashops and government offices. My personal observations come from such sites. Although the focus of my curiosity were the Korku community, social interactions with 'others' have an important role in the research hence I draw upon interactions with both Korku and non-Korku informants. On most days I wrote diary entries from my memory based on the day's observations and my interactions with local politicians, schoolteachers, government employees, traders, shop owners as well as my organizational colleagues.

Some of the key informants that I interacted were not chosen by design; they were people I usually met in my work life. Some others were deliberately chosen when I was driven to meet them because of certain curiosities.

The first year of my fieldwork was used in getting a general overview of Korku lifestyle, culture, religious belief, important issues and language learning capabilities. This was an unstructured period where I interacted with Korku as well as other communities in the areas wherever I made work related visits. During this period, I focused on basic information about the area, various communities and issues of importance. Lack of a clear research plan notwithstanding, I took field notes every evening reconstructing all possible details of the day, interactions with individuals and information received from all sources. While I did this reconstruction and recall, I also added my own notes on the observations which, although subjective, included questions arising out of the observations of the day as well as points which needed to be clarified in the future. The initial diary writing overlapped with informal discussions that I had with my colleagues, most of whom were in the area for much longer than I had been, and this shaped future directions for research.

In this period I also created rapport and trust with several Korku and non-Korku individuals in about six villages which later formed my area of focus. All my key informants were identified during this process. Field notes taken during this period mostly included emic perspectives from Korku and non-Korku informants as well as auto ethnographic elements arising from my subjectivity. As I continued observations and interviews, I was drawn into observing and/or participating at local social events, religious ceremonies and situations where interactions and negotiations between Korku and others were witnessed. Initially, this happened with me as a random visitor/guest at particular Korku households but later this became a regular feature. Observations and experiences from such situations helped me understand the role of resources, access and control over them, government policies and development schemes, economic relationships and political dynamics as important factors affecting how the Korku as a group and as individuals thought about their world.

### **Data from other sources**

Data from the Samavesh/NIAS study was gathered in a much more planned and structured way. Settings for data collection in this case were more formal as the participants/subjects knew before hand when and where they were to be interviewed and by whom and for approximately what amount of time. Participants were also aware of the objectives and goals of this research through advance communication sent by the researchers. Schedules were used to guide the data collection process. This formal study focused on processes of inclusion and exclusion from the educational system vis a vis the local indigenous and Dalit communities and produced primary data using focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, classroom observations, case study method, and site profiling. In

addition, the two field researchers, Yogesh Malviya and Bal Kishan Sharma, maintained daily diaries based on their observations.

The data that I have used includes observations from everyday interactions of Korkus with institutions and individuals, in both private and public spaces. It includes conversations, verbal violence and affective consequences both inside institutions like the school, local government offices, banks etc as well as in private spaces like restaurants, buses, market and homes.

### **How the data was used**

While I synthesized my field diaries and discussions held with colleagues into a single note in 2005, I have now built upon it from memory and by using new data that I gathered from the Samavesh/NIAS research. I have sifted through all materials to identify various thoughts, emotions, feelings, articulations, and expressions that constitute my narrative. Several interviews and focus group discussions from the NIAS/Samavesh study report ‘no response.’ However, my fieldwork and the daily diaries draw a picture where these silences cannot be accepted simply as no-response. There could have been un-interpretable processes behind such silences, that I have also failed to interpret. I use the following in-text citation system for my evidence:

Name/M/Y/P: this stands for all entries from the diaries of the three researchers. Name of the researcher is written as initials, ‘M’ is the month, ‘Y’ is the year and ‘P’ is the page number. The names of researchers are: AH=Aseem Hasnain, YM=Yogesh Malviya, BKS=Bal Kishan Sharma. For other documents, I use Name/P where ‘Name’ suggests filename and ‘P’ is the page number.



While going through close to two thousand pages of typed evidence, mostly observations, narrations and verbatim quotes, I was often transported back in time to where I spent several years. While my own fieldwork was in a situation when I had no plans for formal research, it was more of an individual curiosity, reviewing the same data as an apprentice scholar had its own moments- high and low. Reading through grievances and injustice frames often tripped me into teleological traps where I expected the beginnings of a protest movement. However, internalization of injustices and constructed indifferences helped bring me out of such traps. At the proposal writing stage I was armed with much theoretical ammunition and had a healthy curiosity about the reasons for an absent movement. However, sifting through data of unimagined richness, I surrendered to diverse emotions and feelings present in the many interviews, focus group discussions and observations. I have come out of this writing experience much more of an agnostic, as far as social behavior is concerned in general and social movements in particular.

### **Constraints**

Apart from a very basic monograph (Deogaonkar), there is no social science literature on the Korku community that can be cited in this thesis. Data available through the government, clubs together all indigenous groups as ST (scheduled tribe) hence isolating information on the Korku has also remained elusive.

In terms of usefulness, I found my field notes as the trigger for this thesis, it was in this diary that my curiosity, questions, surprises and expectations were born. However, my interactions with people in the area were limited by my main work duties and I was tentative

about the subjective nature of my notes alone. Interviews, focus group discussions, case studies and other scrap documents from the NIAS/Samavesh study were immensely useful in testing and refining my own ideas about the case. However, this secondary data was collected with very different objectives- why children from marginalized groups drop out from the school system- and hence it was not exactly what I wanted. Yet, these documents were very helpful in looking at interactions between the Korku and the education system in the area as well as in understanding the attitudes of teachers towards the Korku. What was most useful to this thesis was the set of daily diaries that the two other researchers, Yogesh Malviya and Bal Kishan Sharma, wrote for the project. These were records of their daily experiences, observations and interactions with people in the research area. Going through all this material and several hundred pages of scrap notes from the NIAS/Samavesh study, close to two thousand typed pages in Hindi, was a task worth its toll.

## **V. FINDINGS**

This section corresponds to literature review that was presented earlier in this paper. I have shown that both political opportunity literature, within social movement theory, as well as racial oppression and mobilization literature suggests that persistent oppression, grievances against oppression, organizational resources or potential sites of mobilization, and political opportunities are favorable ingredients for social movements. In the following sections, I draw upon ethnographic data to show the presence of all these elements in the area of study.

### **Racial stereotyping, oppression, domination, and discrimination**

This section draws upon cultural stereotypes that settlers fasten on to the Korku, as well as how they are oppressed, dominated, humiliated, and discriminated against in their everyday experience. Before getting into evidence, it will be helpful to understand the social context in which this happens.

The Korku are not very fluent in Hindi. Whatever little Hindi they speak is broken and easily identifiable as ‘incorrect.’ They are regularly ridiculed by settlers for the way they use Hindi and the fact that their script-less language does not ‘seem’ to have an order or method of use. This is an important factor in the minds of settlers for stereotyping Korkus as backward, primitive and inferior to themselves. In addition to cultivation of indigenous crops, Korkus engage in occasional hunting gathering to include several herbs, roots and vegetables in their food, which are unfamiliar to settlers. These facts are interpreted by

settlers to judge the technical and cultural status of Korkus vis a vis themselves, eventually reaching the conclusion that they are unskilled agriculturists, consume meat of unclean animals and can be labeled as *Junglee* (wild/savage). Skin color, physical features, poverty, and quality/style of clothing are also used as reasons for propagating the ‘fact’ that Korkus do not bathe regularly, are generally unhygienic and that “they emit a foul smell that can be detected from distances as great as a mile” (AH/ December/2001/11). The Korku consume home brewed *Mahua* (a local flower) liquor, which is associated with important rituals of their lifecycle. It has several nutritional and cultural functions. However, social consumption of alcohol is seen as a vice among settlers. A majority of settlers accept liquor consumption as reason enough to label Korkus as ethically corrupt, socially backward and irresponsible.

Power inequalities and cultural differences between the Korku and others result in negative stereotypes produced and popularized by settlers. The experience of inequalities and community aimed stereotypes in the daily life of the Korku seem to echo what Tilly (1998) theorized, “Large, significant inequalities in advantages among human beings correspond mainly to categorical differences.....rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensities, or performances” (p.7). These stereotypes become part of the socialization of Korku as well as non-Korku children. However, the ball does not stop here. These stereotypes and power inequalities lead to verbal, and sometimes physical, harassment of Korku individuals. Individual settlers such as shopkeepers, moneylenders, bus operators and café owners blatantly humiliate the Korku. The same humiliation, but in subtle form, is dished out by government officials such as schoolteachers, bank officers, agricultural officers, revenue personnel, health service providers and police officers. The Korku are subjected to persistent humiliation and racial oppression at the hands of both private

individuals as well as personnel who represent the state.

### **Stereotypes about the Korku**

Most settlers have strong, often negative, and ossified opinions about the Korku, as many informants in my evidence reflect. Vinod Dubey, a Brahmin farmer from Village M, shared his views, “look, these guys are basically animals. They look, think and act like cattle” (YM/January/2002/37). “I have been living here all my life and have seen generation after generation of Korkus live and die in the same pattern. They drink *mahua* all the time, even their women and children drink *mahua*. You give a Korku fifty rupees and the first thing he will do is, buy *mahua*. He will spend the money on *mahua* even if there are hungry people at home or a sick child in need of medicine. These bastards are incorrigible fuckers.” His son Anil, who was listening in, added his part of the wisdom, “I will tell you something. Have you seen the road that comes to this village? All my life this road has been in such poor shape that it was hard to identify pieces of road between pot holes. We grew up thinking that this road would never change, it would never be repaired. However, this year it was repaired. The moral of the story is that something as hopeless as this road can change, but these Korkus can never change.” Vinod Dubey continued, “Why are you trying to get their children in school? It’s all a waste of time. Nothing will change. These fuckers don’t want to progress. They are only fit for this kind of life.” His son threw in a popular local idiom, “The Korku eat wild berries and are fit for only grazing cattle” (MSPI/8-13).

Yusuf Khan, a Muslim settler, owns a flourmill in village M and is one of the moneylenders who cater to a large number of Korkus from around the area. He makes more explicit allegations, “their women are all prostitutes, they marry whomsoever they want to,

they bathe behind their houses naked, and have sex with anyone who pays ten rupees. I have seen all sorts of men entering and leaving their houses all the time. What else do you expect from people who are drinking *mahua* (home brewed liquor) all the time?” Responding to indirect queries about money lending and the Korkus, he said, “I am a trader and money lending is one of my trades. I lend money to whoever approaches me. But my experience is that Korkus borrow most of the money for unproductive reasons. If a Korku wants to drink *mahua* and feast even then he will go to a money lender and mortgage something. They have no conception of the future, no worry about tomorrow. These fuckers are animals, just thinking about their bloody bellies and their immoral desires. What can anyone do if God made them stupid?” (BK/April/2002/18).

Jairam Seth, the teashop owner, is an old hand in the area. He is one of the few who form the axis of the local power nexus. He is a second generation settler whose family started from scratch in the area and now owns scores of acres of prime fertile land in the area, allegedly duped out from Korku and Gond owners. He belongs to the *Kahar* caste, technically a backward Hindu group but considered upwardly mobile and powerful in the local context. He is forthcoming in his ‘analysis’ about the Korku, “look, there is a government in Bhopal, it has kind hearted people like you. They think they will send resources for the *Adivasi*, Korku and others to help them. They send a hundred rupees, after passing through corrupt officials ten rupees reach the Korku. The Korku are happy in even these ten rupees. They know they are the illegitimate sons of this government which will keep supporting them all their life. So why will they work? They just laze around, sleeping off in the day, without any worry for their agriculture, or their kid’s schooling or their family’s upkeep. These bastards will enjoy a life of such luxury as long as the government is

full of sweet people like you.” Our conversation was attractive enough for several people in the teashop, who were all eavesdropping. Mahendra Yadav, a backward caste Hindu, owner and conductor of one of the local buses, was sipping tea at a table right across our table. He spoke from across the distance, “If you ask them something politely, they don’t respond, they pretend they haven’t understood it. But if you shout and add a couple of expletives, they respond fast.” Responding to my surprise, he added, “don’t think I am making this up; I have seen this for decades. I run two buses here and carry half the Korkus living here in my buses. Ask all these people sitting here” (AH/May/2002/21).

These stereotypes are expressed not just by private settler individuals, they are common to even those settlers- no matter high caste or low caste- that are employed by the government and in a way represent the state. Such government personnel, who supposedly hold non-partisan offices, interact with the Korku in ways that establishes their relative inferiority. The Korku frequently visit banks, government hospitals and other public offices for various official works like financial transactions, realization of tribal development schemes and health needs. These government institutions are expected to function as per predetermined procedural terms, free of individual discretion. In actual practice, interaction between Korkus and employees at such offices reflects the typical settler mindset wrought with stereotypes and biases against Korkus. While non tribals or ‘clean’ visitors conduct their business comparatively uninterrupted and freely, Korkus face social barriers at all possible stages. In offices, they are more probable to be denied entry, delayed and exploited. While at banks and administrative offices interaction between employees and Korkus, no matter how rude, remains somewhat bearable, it becomes extremely personal in government hospitals where doctors and nurses treat Korku patients in a more intimate setting. Here, perceptions

about their ‘unhygienic’ state, clothing and drunkenness result in humiliating behavior aimed at them. Mrs. Khanna, the nurse appointed at the block level health center, shared her indignation, “I was earlier posted at a Bhopal Hospital. It was a good place to work. I must have committed a sin that I was transferred to this rural dispensary. Now I just get these dirty villagers to treat. Believe me, it’s a daily torture working here. I feel so helpless. I never imagined that I was becoming a nurse to end up serving these wretched Korkus” (BK/September/2001/14). Mr. Dwivedi, a retired clerk of the revenue department and who lived in village C, spoke with the authority of a man who ‘knows.’ He summarized his three-decade field experience in the region, “what I have gathered from my experience is that the Korku are not serious about improvement. They send their children to school to kill time and to collect the three kilograms of wheat that the government sends. Actually, they are not interested in development itself. They do not want progress. They want to stay where they are. Even when people start living on the moon, these guys will keep waving to them from their wretched village” (BK/March/2002/5).

Mixed schools run by the government, one of the most critical sites for socialization of the young, form key sites of racialization. Formal education in the area is monopolized by the government and comprises of an elaborate network of primary, secondary, middle and high schools. Teachers, posted in these remote schools, belong to nearby areas. They are often inadequately trained for teaching mixed classes of tribal and non-tribal pupils in multi cultural settings. Though teachers in these schools have representation from several social groups but they are overwhelmingly non-tribal in numbers. Most teachers have similarly negative stereotypes about Korkus as individual settlers expressed.

Village M is the epicenter of all activity in the middle of numerous ‘morose’ habitations. It



has a metal road, a bus service that connects it to towns in two directions, it gets power supply at least one half each day (considered a privilege), it has all the shops where you get what you need, and above all it has the coveted middle and high schools. The catchment for these schools includes several small villages in a radius of roughly fifteen Kilometers. All teachers in these two schools are settlers, none is tribal and just one of them is Dalit. They have strong, often negative, and usually unchanging views about tribals in general and for the Korku in particular. Reports from discussions with the school teachers in this village revealed that they had a consensus on the ‘fact’ that, “the Korku neither have any *sanskaar* (literally meaning high or refined culture, but may also mean values) nor can they cultivate it. They are wild” (AH/June/2002/34). This statement about Korkus reflects both an ethnocentric obsession with a particular cultural capital as well as hardened prejudices against them. Mrs. Pandey, a middle aged Brahmin who teaches Hindi and Math, shared her belief, “they can’t speak Hindi, what else can they do in life? Understanding Math and Science is just a dream if they can’t perfect Hindi first. Nothing is going to work, it’s all a grand waste of government resources” (KB7/3). Mrs. Vaish, from a middle caste, shared her commitment to social path dependence, “when parents are born in the dust, children can only end up in ashes” (AH/August/2003/39). Mr. Verma, a Dalit teacher sounded marginally empathetic, “these kids are hopeless because they don’t get any academic support from their illiterate parents and siblings” but his empathy was drowned in the sarcasm of his other colleagues. Mr. Soni, another middle caste Hindu, added his ‘wisdom’ sounding like a death sentence, “one who comes to the school unbathed, dirty and without a proper dress, cannot be expected to learn anything.” Mrs. Shukla, a young Brahmin teacher, added, “if you eat meat and consume alcohol, it’s impossible to take the blessings of *Saraswati* (the Hindu goddess of knowledge)”

(RMSK/10,28,41). Mr. Soni explained, “look, it is a fact that these guys have a slow brain, and on top of that they are always thinking of the forest and their cattle. You have to understand that there is no natural tendency to learn. When a child sees immoral behavior such as crime, sex and drunkenness in the house all the time, it is impossible to have a learning attitude” (EGSRB/5,31). Another strand of stereotypes among all settlers, including teachers, is along the line that Korkus don’t want their kids to be educated. “They are either busy in farming, sleeping or are drunk. Most of the time they put their children at cattle grazing. They don’t care if their kids go to school regularly,” said Mrs. Vaish (EGSRB/41,42). Mr. Soni claims, “Eating, drinking and reproducing, that is what the Korku want. Schooling is not their priority.” The principal, Mr. Pathak, smiled benevolently in the middle of these opinions, as if approving the finality of these stereotypes (BK/June/2002/38). This is the environment, where Korku kids encounter the school, education and teachers, and this is where they see themselves through the eyes of settlers.

### **Humiliation in schools**

This section includes the in-school experience of Korku students. While Korku students are direct victims of racial discrimination and humiliation, non Korku children also participate in the process either directly or as spectators. Korkus rarely speak Hindi in their homes and so their children in school, face language related problems from the beginning. The situation further deteriorates as both teachers and non-tribal children ridicule Korku children on their Hindi accent as well as on their efforts at reading and writing Hindi. Classroom observations show that teachers remain concerned only with select students in each class who are ‘smart’ enough to ‘follow’ teaching and who demonstrate ‘educational

promise' for the future. In most cases, these students belong to the settler community, which is aware of the usefulness of formal schooling and ensures that their children necessarily complete basic education. In situations when teachers turn their attention towards Korku children in the classroom, it is for emphasizing their poor performance, lack of hygiene, limited ability to follow teaching and social inferiority. On the contrary, children from settler households have the desired cultural capital, and are forcefully established as role models for Korku children. Evidence presented in the last section showed stereotypes carried by school teachers. These stereotypes manifest in teacher's behavior during their classroom performance. The effects of such discriminatory behavior are evident through how Korku children imagine themselves.

Somlal is a seven year old Korku student in the third grade. He is the first person in his immediate family to attend a formal school. "I am a bad student. I don't remember things. I am unable to do math and cannot spell right. Everyone says I am hopeless. I understand Hindi but I cannot write it well" (KB7/4). Another Korku girl, Kamla, is nine year old and is in fifth grade. When asked how she likes the school, she looks down and remains silent. But her clenched jawbone says it all (AH/February/2003/49). Prakash, a settler school kid, is forthcoming about what happens in school. "Korku kids get beaten up the most. They don't speak and write good Hindi so teachers always punish them. They also do the cleaning in the campus. They behave like cattle" (RMSK/8). Amar Singh, an adolescent Korku dropout, reminisces, "I went to school for two years before I dropped out. I did not like most of the teachers; they made fun of me all the time. Every morning, Mrs. Shukla (a Brahmin teacher) asked me to read from the book and laughed on my diction. My classmates also made fun of me. No one stopped them. Mr. Yadav (a teacher from a backward caste) made me kneel

down on pebbles whenever my homework had mistakes. I hated it. All of us Korku students were a butt of joke” (RPSK/43). Paras Ram, an adolescent and one of those rare Korku students who have remained in the school, had incisive experience to share. “Dropping out is very common in my village, remaining in school is difficult. I struggle every day, I work harder than many *Mahajan* (settler) students, but I still perform poorly. I don’t ask many questions. The teacher insults me every time he can. They just don’t understand that we need more attention because we have to learn Hindi in the first place” (RPSK/34). Meena, a six year old Korku student, shared her indignation because the teacher never let her drink from the water cooler, “everyone can drink from there, except Korkus and Dalits. She forbids me even when I am always neat and clean. If I drink water from the tap, kids behind me in the queue wash the tap before using it” (PSSI/3). Jamuna is the first girl in her extended Korku family to attend school. She is in fourth grade and resolute about continuing schooling despite discrimination. “I reach school on time everyday and I make sure I wear a clean uniform. If I don’t, madam will throw me out. Only Mr. Thakur (an upper caste Hindu) is good to me. I have learnt not to ask questions. Why should I give the teacher an excuse to make fun of me and punish me? I ask my elder brother at home whatever I don’t understand” (MSSI/2,5). Several classroom observation reports and interviews made it clear that within the school, inter-student socializing was largely caste based, but there were also some inter-caste friendships especially when the castes were comparable in status and purity. However, for Korku and Dalit students it is almost impossible to make friends across community barriers. Revaram, an otherwise gregarious kid in his own village, remains sullen faced in school. He said, “I eat my food alone. *Mahajan* kids don’t include me. I don’t have friends to

play with here. My friends are all back home. I don't like being here" (RPSK/10). Not surprisingly, the drop out rate of Korku students is extraordinarily high.

In addition to this sense of discrimination, there are other factors that favor a high dropout rate among Korku students. One such aspect is the school calendar, which is disjointed from the lifestyle of Korkus. The schools close down for long vacations in the summers when there is no agricultural work to be done. However, during sowing and harvesting seasons, when agricultural work is hectic, classroom teaching continues. Most settlers can afford to engage wage laborers in agricultural work and their children attend school regularly while financial constraints force Korkus to engage their own family members, including children, in the farms. As a consequence, Korku children lag behind settler children in following the school curriculum and in achieving educational milestones. Similarly, when Korku families migrate to distant areas for wage work, school examinations take place. Accompanying children are unable to sit through exams, resulting in high failure rates. All these factors ensure that after some years of struggle, most Korku students drop out of school with negative imprints about settlers, teachers, school and even about themselves.

### **Everyday humiliation in public spaces**

Evidence shows that insults and personal humiliations are directed towards the Korku in public places such as buses and cafes on a regular basis. Humiliation is often garbed under reasons of hygiene, ritual pollution, drunkenness, moral conduct etc. For perpetrators, such behavior comes naturally as many of them have grown up seeing similar behavior directed towards people like the Korku, Dalit (the erstwhile untouchable Hindu castes) and other indigenous communities. Lack of substantive protest and active resistance may also be

feeding this 'racist common sense.' Most verbal insults go unchallenged until they transform into pushing and shoving or other violent forms. In such cases, the protest is meek and is directed at the perpetrator with a demand for stopping it. Rarely has any such protest made news by becoming substantive or organized. During such events, most non-Korku remain aloof as spectators, leaving the perpetrators and the victims isolated.

Apart from schools, the local bus becomes one of the most important spaces where Korkus and others interact on a daily basis. The area does not have public transport and privately owned and operated buses form the backbone of all travel. Twice a year, Korku families leave their villages, for a month each, to migrate to nearby areas where canal irrigation and intensive agriculture provides seasonal employment opportunities. During these periods, Korku adults and young children travel in large numbers with their luggage. In the absence of any actual regulation, service standards are poor and passenger density per bus remains very high. Buses built to seat fifty five adults carry more than hundred adults, children, goats, roosters and freight balanced on all possible surfaces. Although the behavior of bus staff towards indigenous people in general and Korkus in particular is extremely rude year long, it becomes worse in such periods of heavy traffic. Each journey resembles a nightmare. This starts from the point, Korkus enter the bus. While all 'clean' passengers (settlers) are let in decently, Korkus are shoved in physically, assuming that they will be awkward or slow and may waste time in getting in. If there are ample seats available, then chances are that there would be no further insults but such occasions are rare. The distribution of passengers within a bus closely resembles the local social hierarchy. The front, near the driver's seat is the most coveted as it receives the least shocks on bumpy roads. It is practically reserved for government employees, school teachers, nurses, non tribal

visitors etc. The middle is for local traders, and other settlers. The last third of the bus is for the lesser human. The bus conductor and assisting staff continuously force non settlers especially the Korku towards the back of the bus to make room for other passengers in the front and middle. In the process, Korku women and girls are physically harassed, unabashedly. Gonds are not treated likewise as they are articulate, look less 'vulnerable' and are likely to protest. Non-Korku passengers ignore such violent and insulting behavior meted out to Korkus. In three years of regular travel on this bus route I have rarely seen any Korku providing any substantive resistance to such behavior, apart from the customary grunt. In the unusual case that someone has protested loudly, the person stands isolated with none to her support and the tension fizzled out amidst the noise of the engine and bumps from the road.

Excerpts from field journals of other researchers made several observations on the bus ride. Bal Kishan, a researcher from urban Punjab, recorded, "The bus seems to have two parts. The front half is like any overcrowded rural bus. But the back half is like a poultry van with Korkus piled one on top of another" (BK/June/2002/12). Yogesh Malviya, the other researcher from the local area noted, "I counted all passengers in the bus, there were one hundred and sixty one humans, two goats, atleast seven roosters (I could not count the ones inside gunny sacks), and fifty five seats" (YM/July/2002/4). His diary also has several observations of the conductor misbehaving with Korku women. One such observation was, "the conductor is shameless, he always fondles Korku women. Today he grabbed a woman's breast and pushed her so bad, she fell through the seats and it tore up her clothes. She was crying and abusing him while the conductor glared at her. No one said anything, I was so ashamed I wanted to step down, quit my job and go home" (YM/January/2002/16). In another observation he wrote, "the conductor kicked so hard, several Korku people fell on

top of each other. One of them shouted, what are you doing? In the middle of all this, the school teacher kept reading the newspaper as if nothing had happened” (YM/January/2002/34).

Shops in the regular market in Village M and town K as well as the weekly street market in village M are important sites where Korkus interact with settlers on a regular basis. Most interactions have exploitative outcomes. Settlers monopolize the market as owners, salesperson, agents, quacks and other service providers. Korkus, from faraway villages come to town K and village M for supplies, which are not available in their village markets. They are seen as one of the most gullible customers. Fancy packages, with details written in Hindi & English and the intimidating conversational style of traders ensure that very few questions are asked while Korkus explore and buy products. They often end up buying materials that shopkeepers thrust upon them while being told, “c’mon fellow you don’t know anything” (AH/May/2002/2). Inappropriate pesticides, expired medicines and obsolete machinery are sold almost exclusively to the Korku. Several traders specialize in buying obsolete items from distant cities and supply them to shops in the area. While shopping, they are often made to wait, so that ‘others’ can be serviced first, assuming that Korkus can be made to wait endlessly without any negative effects on business.

### **Domination by government representatives**

In an earlier section, I presented evidence showing how government employees, defacto representatives of the state in this remote rural area, share and express negative stereotypes about the Korku. These stereotypes drive how they behave with subordinated communities in general and with Korkus in particular. During interactions with the Korku,



these officials draw upon negative stereotypes and pass off moral judgments masked in official language. In line with the colonial ways of administration, officials from various departments make field visits and camping trips to monitor implementation of development programmes and schemes. In this area, as in many rural areas, government officials are respected, feared and hated, all at the same time, due to their perceived authority. In the absence of effective mechanisms for transparency and accountability, these officials can be discretionary in decision-making and hence, are considered as deities or dispensers of benefits or punishments. During such village tours, monitoring and other official work is usually followed by a 'discussion' with villagers where officials dispense sermon like monologues on 'development,' 'progress,' and 'duties.' These speeches, at one hand describe the virtues of education, modern health practices, general awareness, modern agriculture etc and at the other hand prove the self-fulfilling prophecy that Korkus fail to catch up due to their own problems like drunkenness, irresponsible nature and resistance to development. Examples of such interactions can be seen when nurses, doctors, engineers etc make visits. In the area of study, most frequent among such visits are made by local agriculture extension workers who visit Korku cultivators as part of their plan to modernize agricultural skills and practices in the area. These workers, mostly settler males, 'scold' Korkus for their 'primitive' & 'incorrect' farming practices and encourage 'scientific' practices based on mechanization and chemicals. Evidence on such visits abounds, however I will present only a small selection below.

Earlier when evidence on negative Korku stereotypes, among government employees, was presented; I shared a lack of surprise on my part. I was not surprised because those views were expressed in one to one interviews or during informal chats, and in settings that could

not be seen as strictly official. These opinions were expressed in the flow of conversation. However, when these stereotypical beliefs translate into action in public, it is a different matter altogether. I present two particular occasions when such stereotypes were translated into public speeches by government representatives, in most shocking ways. The shock did not come entirely from the fact that the speakers were senior government employees but by the fact that both these occasions were public, with a considerable audience as well as the presence of local journalists. The first instance was the official celebration of Indian independence, in village M, where government officials deliver symbolic speeches. In one such speech the district collector (the senior most government representative in the district), in addition to a lot of things, said, “I tell my Korku brothers that times have changed, and that you cannot remain the same. Learn some hygiene, bathe daily, use soap, and wear clean clothes. I ask them to act maturely, become responsible, and take care of their families. Today from this noble dais, I request them to send their children to school; don’t send them to graze cattle. I repeat my advice the hundredth time today, stop being alcoholics. See where the nation is going, follow it. Don’t live this wretched life. I am here; the whole government is here for your salvation. Today, pledge along with me that you will commit to progress. Thank you, long live India” (AH/August/2003/3). The same official was once at the center of a similar controversy when he was being interviewed about diarrhea deaths among Korku children in the region. At that time he had said, “Not only are these fellows dirty, but also super foolish. If their children die due to diarrhea what can the government do?” (RMSK/31).

Another public occasion when a similar speech was made was during the ‘village contact’ programme in July of 2002. The event was part of a periodic campaign organized by the government to connect with rural citizens. Teams of officials from various departments

visit a number of villages each day of the campaign and hold quick meetings in each village, gauging local problems, complaints and often doling out prescriptive advice on everything. Mrs. Tambe, a middle caste Hindu, and chief of the regional children's and women's health programme, was addressing audience in village B, having a predominantly Korku population. She was discussing the relevance of constructing toilets in the village. Among a maze of technical information that she shared about various schemes, came the message, "the government wants all of you to build toilets in your houses. Each house should have a toilet in the backyard. The government will subsidize the cost. I don't understand why you don't make toilets even when the government pays you almost all the cost. Why do you want to defecate in the open, are you animals? Only cows and buffaloes should do that!" Amidst laughs, sheepish grins, suppressed anger and un-interpretable silences, she continued, "I ask all Korku men sitting here, when will you build toilets? Are you men enough? Why do you let your women, wives, and daughters defecate in the open? What if someone abducts your women? What if their dignity is compromised?" and she put the final nail, "do you have no shame? When will you get civilized?" (YM/July/2002/27). On both these public occasions, the stature of the speakers, their official role, and the entourage of accompanying officers symbolized the state. And the presence of order, audience and a group of attentive journalists provided the veneer of legitimacy to this discourse, resembling what Stuart Hall (1986) calls a 'racist common sense,' and that is diffused throughout social relations in the region.

While the above two examples demonstrate a racist common sense transforming into 'soft repression' (see [Davenport: x] and [Ferree: 138, 139]), what also follows is outright exploitation, harassment and even violence. Once when I was returning alone from a proposed reservoir site in a village, I met another colleague of mine, Avani, and joined her

for the walk back to our office in the neighboring village. She worked in the women's self help programme and was very popular among Korku women in the area. It was early evening and we wanted to reach office before it was dark. We were about to pass the last rows of houses when a woman called her name. The caller was leaning out of a thatched hut. Avani stepped in while I stayed outside waiting for either being called in or being told to proceed on my way. I was soon invited in the house. The Korku woman was sitting on the floor either drunk or too disoriented. She was wailing and talking intermittently, "they destroyed me, they fucked me, paraded me naked in the forest. When I resisted, they clubbed me so hard I couldn't walk for a week. Tell me, what had I done? What was my fault? I went to the forest to get firewood like always." This woman was raped and assaulted by three forest guards in the neighboring forest a week ago. The incident was known to all including me but I was unaware of the victim till then. Later, her talk turned to sobs while Avani kept talking to her in low tones. That is when I first heard a shuffle in a corner of the one room hut. Laxman, the woman's husband was squatting on a cot, and motioned me towards him. "Sir, you sit here. Don't worry too much about her. All this keeps happening here in the villages. Will you have tea?" Aghast, I probed his indifference, and was told how this hopelessness had developed over years of helplessness and neglect. "See, this is a small place, so far away from everything that even the government thinks twice before visiting. There is police, but had we called them, there would have been a drama that everyone is too familiar with. They would have rounded up everyone, delivered expletives, talked with all the influential people in the area and would have threatened all of us, including the victim, with a long period of police custody while they sorted things out. In the end they would have proposed the only way out, that is- paying them cash. So all parties would have paid them, including us. What's the use

of calling the police? They are not here for the Korku or any *Adivasi*. It's like this here. They beat you, fuck your wife, molest your sister and then you end up paying the police because you don't want a lengthy court case." I asked him why he or others in the village did not confront the forest guard or the *Sarpanch* (elected head man of the village) directly. He gave me a lost look, looked at his wife who was still sobbing, and stepped out. It looked as if he was about to cry (AH/May/2002/7). I later gathered that sexual harassment of Korku women and girls, was a common but rarely reported phenomenon.

### **Religious domination**

Korkus have historically maintained their unique religious practices, which seem to be on the out as they adopt Hindu gods and practices. Walking by a dilapidated sacred site with one of my Korku acquaintance in a village, I asked why Korkus didn't tend to them as in the past. The reply was, "our deity is now outdated and is no more effective" (AH/December/2001/3). This metaphorical failure of Korku gods has major consequences for not only Korku society but for the whole polity. It is reflective of a new *Weltanschauung*. At one hand this emerging 'truth,' coupled with adoption of Hindu rituals and piety practices, introduce the Korku to an elaborate hierarchical society, different from their own comparatively egalitarian one. On the other hand, it makes the Korku; pawns in the Hindutva project (a militant ideological campaign run by the right wing Hindu cultural organization- RSS and its partner, the Hindu nationalist political party-BJP), which sees India as constituted of two binary communities, Hindu and non-Hindu, and eventually aspires to a homogeneous *Hindurashtra* (Hindu nation).

Throughout my fieldwork, I was able to observe the Hindutva project rolling out in the area in various social domains. This political project was being carried out formally through RSS preachers, BJP members, and other political entrepreneurs as well as informally through the actions of individual settlers. ‘Hinduization’ is fast underway wherein Korkus are changing their customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a ‘twice-born’<sup>1</sup> Hindu caste. Across the area, especially in mixed villages, traditional festivals and rituals are waning, local deities remain neglected and the native priest is ignored while Hindu rituals are increasingly being adopted and the *Brahmin* (the top most group in the Hindu caste system, having monopoly over religious and ritual matters) is gaining new ground. Under the influence of right wing Hindu missionaries, as well as like minded individual settlers, an increasing number of Korkus have started participating in Hindu rituals where ground for their assimilation is prepared. The Korku are initiated into such ritual observances with rewards such as increased social prestige such as inclusion in the Hindu fold. *Navratra*<sup>2</sup> and *Ganesha Puja*<sup>3</sup> are two such Hindu festivals, which have been adopted by Korkus in the last decade. Both these festivals are observed for nine consecutive days and nights ending with the immersion of the deity in a lake with much fanfare. Suggested behavior for the entire period of these festivals includes abstinence from consumption of liquor and meat, both being considered ‘impure’ and ‘sinful’. These festivals have taken the shape of a major event in their lifestyle with men, especially youth, taking active part every year. Groups of young Korku boys collect donation in thousands of rupees and setup elaborate *pandals* (a ceremonial tent or makeshift temple). Twice a day, *Aarti* (highly ritualized public prayer) is

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1 The term refers to one of the members of the first three varnas in the Hindu caste system- Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas who are assumed to be born twice and are hence respected.

2 Navratra can be translated to nine nights. It is a festival devoted to nine forms of the mother goddess in Hinduism

3 Ganesh Puja can be translated into ‘Ganesh Worship’. Ganesh is the elephant god in Hinduism and is worshipped while beginning any new work

performed either by a hired *Brahmin* priest or by an upwardly mobile Korku elder who aims to achieve and demonstrate piety. Korku individuals involved with organizing these events are looked at with respect by other Korkus.

While the public Hindu festivals and recruitment of Korkus in the Hindutva project are visible, they are harder to pin down in terms of sponsors and promoters because of their informal location. Another site where the onslaught of Hindutva can be observed and recorded in formal space is the *Adivasi* hostel (government run dormitories for indigenous students). Due to the high incidence of poverty among indigenous communities and the differences between their lifestyles and school requirements, *Adivasi* (popular term for indigenous groups) children often drop out of regular schools in the initial years itself. As a response to this situation and in adherence to affirmative action policies, the government manages residential schools exclusively for indigenous students. One such hostel was covered in the area for non-participant observation in the NIAS/Samavesh study. Data shows that this hostel lacked overt racial discrimination due to homogeneity of its population and close monitoring by supervisors. However, this space was inadvertently used to recruit children within a clear Hindu imagination.

Since children from both Gond (another indigenous group) and Korku tribes share the hostel, Gond children formed the point of reference and were presented as role models for Korku inmates. The history of acculturation of Gonds within Hindu rituals is comparatively longer than the Korkus. It is also interesting to note that the lone Gond Member of Parliament was a member of the BJP (Hindu nationalist political party). A profile prepared by Yogesh Malviya, field researcher in the NIAS/Samavesh study, presents a picture of this hostel. “Being residential, these hostels provide round the clock interaction between inmates

and staff, which actually surrogates the process of socialization normally received through parents and members of the extended family. These hostels are managed by usually non-settlers who bring along the dominant Hindu culture. Rituals, foreign to Korkus, such as worshipping goddess *Saraswati* (Hindu goddess of knowledge) in the morning, religious fasting (promoted both for cultural and cash saving purposes), celebrating Hindu festivals etc are imposed on children. Imposition is subtle and packaged as a good practice.” Hindu rituals, especially *Saraswati* worship, are so ingrained within rural educational institutions that they are perceived as part of the curriculum by students, parents, as well as by many teachers. His profiling continued, “older inmates and staff members actively initiate new children in these practices every year. Conversation in native languages is discouraged and Hindi usage is encouraged. While most staff is not trained to communicate in Gondi or Korku languages, they do believe that these script-less languages are ‘primitive’ and useless. While on the one hand, little contact with one’s family and community results in inmate’s losing touch with their language, on the other, they also ‘learn’ that it has no value in the outside world” (CSKGH/4,7,11). Bal Kishan Sharma, the other researcher in the NIAS/Samavesh study, also made notes in his diary about the same hostel, “This ‘education’ packaged as *sanskar* (high culture) gradually alienates Korku children from their own culture. Surprisingly, the more these children become distant from their language and culture, the more satisfied their parents seem with their ‘progress.’ During vacations and home visits, these students carry their new ‘beliefs’ to their homes and inadvertently initiate other family members in Hindu rituals” (KHFGD/6,9).

Government schools are also similar sites where such dominant practices can be transferred to young Korku children and through them, to their homes. Almost all teachers in



local school display prominent Hindu markers of identity. Observations from field reports and researcher's field diaries were instructive, "The main classroom in the primary school had a table, a chair, an almirah and a black board. Above the Blackboard and on two of the three walls were pictures of Hindu and national figures. Portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi were on the right wall. On the back wall, there was a poster of Shivaji (an emerging symbol of militant Hindutva). On top of the Blackboard there was a big framed picture of Goddess Saraswati (the Hindu goddess of learning)" (RPSK/4). He adds from another observation from another school, "The day began with a prayer. The headmaster was sitting on the chair while Mr. Sharma recited the Saraswati *Vandana* (a Hindu ritual offering to goddess Saraswati). All students repeated after him" (RMSK/13). Bal Kishan's diary recorded his visit to the middle school in another village, "The principal's office has a silver colored statue of Goddess Saraswati. There were fresh flowers and incense near it. It seemed I had come not to a school but a Hindu temple" (BK/July/2002/9). Interviews and focus group discussions throw light on daily practices followed in educational institutions. "When I came here there was nothing resembling order and education. I started the tradition of morning prayers. Now everyone is so well trained, they pray on their own without even a reminder" shares the tribal hostel warden, with clear pride (IWW/3). Mr. Sharma at the middle school in a Korku village complained, "these idiots will not learn anything till they learn to recite the prayer properly. I ensure that all students recite the prayer before they open their books" (BK/August/2002/17).

This section and its subsections enumerated a sampling of observations, events, anecdotes, conversations and discourses, that help understand the form, content and variety of discrimination, oppression and domination that is dished out to the Korku in the area of

study. This section also helps make sense of actors in the narrative. These actors range from settler individuals to traders, teachers, and defacto representatives of the state. These descriptions were also meant to orient the reader about the spaces where such oppressive interactions and discourses play out. The next section is about the reactions to these discourses, especially among the Korku. These reactions are mixed, as they include both grievances against oppression as well as internalization of domination in several cases.

## **Grievances against oppression and internalization of domination**

### **Views of the Korku about themselves**

In an earlier section, I presented negative and often ossified stereotypes that settlers have for Korkus. It is hard to say with accuracy what part of these negative projections are adsorbed, absorbed or deflected by the Korku. But what appears certain is that there is a combination of reactions to these negative projections. This can be said on the basis of diverse expressions that the Korku made about themselves, their situation and the social milieu that they live in and that were captured during a number of focus group discussions, interviews, informal chats and observations. A sample of these reactions is presented below.

Budiabai, a middle aged widow, is the head a household of three sons and two daughters in law. Her family lives in village D and owns fifteen acres of farming land but still falls short of food for half the year. Her point was, “We are lazy? We don’t work? What can we grow from this land that we have? We had ten acres of land by the river and grew wheat, corn and lentils. We had so much food, we sold one third for cash. That bastard Mahendra Dhillon (a settler who is the key villain in many Korku grievances) cheated my husband of all that land. We took a loan of three hundred rupees and he made it thirty

thousand rupees within two years. Whatever land we have now, is what we earlier kept aside for grazing our cattle. It is all rocky and won't produce anything but grass, howsoever we toil. We are not crazy to work that land all the time" (AH/September/2002/4). Kalibai, another Korku woman in her forties, spoke about the Korku way of marriage, "in our community, the girl and the boy choose their own mates. If they like someone, they elope by mutual consent and then comeback after a week. They stay either in the forest or at a relative's home. On their return, the Korku *panchayat* (assembly of elders) assembles and approves the marriage. Sometimes the parents of the spouses have an argument and the *Patel* (traditional leader) will then ask them to pay compensation. Then the whole village has a feast, people drink *mahua* (home brewed liquor) and there is a feast. Its good fun!" Responding to changes in the marriage ritual, she sounded sad, "Times have changed. Now Korku see what the *Mahajans* (settlers) do, they want to have arranged marriages like them. I don't like that personally but if the concerned parties are fine why should I have a problem. The *Mahajans* don't understand our ways; they think a girl eloping with a boy is bad. They are different folk. I don't imagine marrying someone whom I don't like!" Kalibai's husband, silent so far, spoke at length about how settlers harassed Korkus whenever they could. He ended with a question, "Are we not humans like others?" (YM/November/2001/56).

Panu, a middle aged Korku, is an elected representative in a mixed village. He shared his grievances about the functioning of the *gram panchayat* (village based local self governance units instituted by the government in the sixties) and the levels of corruption. "I am powerless and feel hopeless. I don't know what I can do for other Korkus. No one listens to me, the *Sarpanch* (elected chief of the *gram panchayat*) is Korku but he is illiterate. The secretary is a settler and he fools the *Sarpanch* all the time. He gets his sign on everything

and dupes the whole village. I don't have the authority to challenge the secretary. If I become the *Sarpanch*, I will show everyone how a *Panchayat* should function" (PPI/12).

Once when I was speaking to a group of mostly settler men in a roadside café and they were trying to convince me of how stupid Korku essentially are, one of them addressed a couple of elderly Korku men sipping tea on a nearby table, "Hey old men, when will you guys become smart?" While one of them responded in resignation, "our people are like donkeys," I still remember the other one's retort, "If we become smart, who will work in your farms?" (AH/February/2002/12). Shivlal, an elderly Korku, was once an influential man. He was the *Patel* (traditional Korku leader) for ten villages and was once sought after by all. He has seen better times on which he reflected, "look we have been a community that has lived in the forests for a long time. Earlier the forests were rich with food. Our ancestors cultivated a couple of coarse crops and the rest came from the forest. We had little need for cash and clothes were one of the few needs we came to the market for. Things were good then. These bastards (the settlers) say we are animals, wild. These settlers are crazy. The government thinks we are dirty, perpetually drunk and lazy. We live in remote villages with no power, no piped water and still bathe in the river every day. We have been drinking mahua for hundreds of years; and have been living healthy, happy lives all the time. What do they know about us? The settlers came here just fifty-hundred years ago because the government sent them here to populate villages and towns. We worked as much was required, the forest gave us everything and we grew what we needed" (AH/April/2003/7). His grievance, though general and seemingly inarticulate, actually covered the process of internal colonization, neatly.

Everyone among the Korku does not share this kind of consciousness. Sukhlal, a Korku man in his late thirties, lives in a mixed village with several non tribal families. His views about the past and present are in line with settler projections, “in my opinion the Korkus are generally leading a better life now. Earlier we were wild people living in the forests and eating all sorts of herbs and coarse cereal. Now we eat wheat, rice, and vegetables. We were illiterates and didn’t even know that we were illiterate. Now at least we know we are illiterate. Many Korku kids and adolescents can read Hindi now; my elder kid can even read some English. I can sign my name on official papers. I think our ignorance will slowly diminish” (MSPI/6). Rewatibai, a mother of two school going children, also agrees with this argument, “the arrival of Hindi has been good for us. We speak better now. Earlier we were in a world of our own. I send my kids to school every day. My elder daughter complains about severe punishment at school. She says that the teacher often hits her on her knuckles and ankles. I console her but also tell her she has to keep going to school to learn. If she learns at school she will become a *pooravasi* (full human). We are *aadhavasi* (half human), you know” (AH/March/2003/9). This last sentence from Rewati Bai is critical to the local racist discourse. While *Adivasi* is a Hindi word literally meaning ancient inhabitants and is in wide use both in common use and government lingo, I heard many settlers and Korku individuals use a variant of this term. The variant is *aadhavasi*, literally meaning half resident but used in the sense of half human. The binary opposite of the term is *pooravasi* used in the sense of fully human. I have been unable to trace the usage of the term but I suspect it is a settler slang that also appears to have been internalized by some Korku individuals.

Kaluram, a middle aged Korku farmer, is from a predominantly Korku village, D, seven miles from the nearest metal road. During a discussion on agricultural practices, Kaluram said, “I don’t know anything about agriculture. I am illiterate you see.” When confronted with the fact that he had spent all his life successfully growing various crops and feeding his family, he said, “our practices are very backward, we can’t even grow a simple crop properly. In the past we grew coarse millets. It grew well because it didn’t need any effort and the crop grew on its own. That crop is of no use now. No one buys it. We grow soybean now but it fails every time. Sometimes the rains are delayed, sometimes there is a bug attack and sometimes we fall short of fertilizers and pesticides” (PPI/8). Another participant in the discussion, Mewaram, added “our’s is a fool’s world, we are incompetent and stupid. We can’t speak and read Hindi. A lot of Korkus are not able to understand basic things when you talk to them. I can’t read so I don’t know what is happening in the world. I keep quiet most of the time when any government official visits the village. I feel apprehensive about saying something stupid. If I had attended school in the childhood, I would have conversed with everyone” (PPI/10). Another man repeated what I had usually heard settlers say, “even the roads in this region can improve but we Korku cannot” (BK/May/2002/11).

Amar Singh, a middle aged Korku from the mixed village F, said “actually our community is problematic, we have inherent problems that plague us, we are not built to succeed. A lot of us are drunk most of the time; we will never progress till we quit drinking” (YM/December/2001/56). I also happened to meet Ram Chandra, one of the few Korku men to have finished college and having made it into a government job. He lived in town K, the nearest town and administrative hub. He was a teacher there and lived in a small rented

house. He didn't sound empathetic about his community. "I am ashamed of being called a Korku. I stopped going to my village for vacations. I don't want my children to see how they live there, like wild people" (AH/October/2002/3). An extreme example of this internalization was encountered when two elderly Korku women from village F, narrated a creation myth to me. "The Korku were the first of the humans that God created. At that time God had no practice at such complex tasks. So we ended up dark, short and ugly. After making us he learnt from his mistakes. Next he made people in the cities. Like you. Fair and beautiful" (AH/October/2002/7). Thus evidence shows that the way Korkus view themselves and their situation varies considerably and ranges from oppositional consciousness to extreme internalization of negative stereotypes with several positions in between.

### **Grievances and internalization related with language**

My interactions with Korku adults and children as well as the field journals of the two other researchers suggest that while the Korku have major grievances on being made fun of because of their Hindi diction, the number of people who speak Korku is declining over time. In this section, I present grievances.

Mithibai, the outspoken grandmother from village M, said "these fuckers got the better of us with Hindi. We don't know the language well, very few speak well, and almost none read Hindi well. We got robbed with this new language. The government also uses Hindi" (AH/March/2002/4). Nanu Ram, a middle aged Korku from village D, shared his take on Hindi, "earlier there were only Korku and Gond people in this area. There were no roads, no buses, no doctors and no electricity. But we were fine even then. Settlers brought in all this and Hindi. Hindi is alright but it has made our language useless. Korku language has no value now; everything is in Hindi, at the government office, bus station, market, everywhere"

(AH/January/2003/13). However, several Korkus also expressed why learning Hindi is now necessary. Laxman, another Korku from village T, said “I send my children to school. I will ensure they get educated at least till eighth grade. Most probably they will not get a job but at least they can read the label of the pesticide I buy in the market. Last year the revenue clerk cheated me by overcharging, once my kids learn Hindi, this will not happen” (PPI/2).

Revatibai, an old Korku woman from village T, has travelled a lot as a migrant agricultural worker in the last several decades. “I kept getting on the wrong bus many times and wasted a lot of money. The drivers are bastards, they fool us, they will say yes to whatever I ask them. Now I have learnt to recognize the right bus from how they write the name of my village. I am sending my grandchildren to school. I ask them to learn Hindi. I am fed up of being duped everywhere and by everyone” (PPI/12). Mangilal, an elected *gram panchayat* member from village F, frequents town K often for administrative work. He said, “what can I do? All the government papers are in Hindi, I have to believe the secretary. I sign where he tells me to. Sometimes I ask my youngest daughter what these papers say but she is too young to understand the complicated language of official papers. I feel very embarrassed in government meetings but I am too old now to learn Hindi” (AH/April/2003/3).

Apart from grievances against the displacement of Korku language, Korkus are also seen to be gradually moving away from their language, without a sense of loss. I was able to hear about this phenomenon during a long informal chat with a widely traveled Korku elder, in village C. Kacchu Ram, having just come back from another district, said, “Korkus in Kesla<sup>4</sup> have progressed well, they speak fluent Hindi and their children don’t speak Korku language even in their homes.” While this could have been taken as a statement of fact, I was surprised

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<sup>4</sup> Kesla is a small town in Hoshangabad District in Madhya Pradesh. Canal irrigation and productive agriculture have resulted in large populations of Korkus and settlers to live together in close proximity. Korku in this area are comparatively well off.



by the emotions that accompanied it. The elder said this not with a sense of loss or remorse, but with a certain amount of pride, hope, and an underlying aspiration to have the same situation in his village, in his home, in his family. Trying to satisfy my uncomfortable curiosity, I prodded Kacchu Ram further. He said, “what use does Korku language have? It doesn’t serve any purpose, and then everyone makes fun of it” (AH/February/2002/8). Such articulations underline the fast declining Korku language, as an increasing number of Korku households aspire to not only learn Hindi but also to abandon their native language. This is a distinct possibility in the near future as there is no initiative from any side to document this spoken language. Census figures also show a decline in the number of people who speak Korku language over the last two decades. The other indigenous group in this area; Gonds, make an interesting contrast. The government of Madhya Pradesh had a full-fledged project that had documented Gondi language and had even introduced schoolbooks in Gondi in an experimental school nearby.

### **Grievances against the experience of schooling**

In an earlier section, I presented evidence to demonstrate both negative stereotypes that school teachers held against Korkus as well as how Korku students experience daily discrimination and domination. This section presents evidence covering grievances that Korku parents expressed against the school experience.

Temru Singh, an elected *gram panchayat* member from village B, shared his understanding of school dynamics. His son attended school and the teachers came to see him to get some paperwork signed once in a while. He said, “my father sent me to school and I liked it very much for the first couple of years. There was a Gond teacher who knew my language and was very kind. She taught really well. Later she got transferred and we got

another teacher, this time a *Mahajan* from Indore (a large city in the state of Madhya Pradesh). He was grumpy and angry all the time. I think he was transferred against his wishes; he vented all his anger at *Adivasi* children. A lot of us dropped out. He was very severe in punishing us. But all *Mahajan* teachers are not the same; there are some nice ones too. Nevertheless, a Korku teacher is better for Korku students. He knows the language, and our children learn more when the teacher is bilingual. We should have Korku teachers in primary school at least. Once our kids cross the fifth grade, they usually stay in school, but most of them drop out before that” (MSPI/4). Temru’s opinion about settler teachers can be considered kind in comparison to grievances from other parents. Sundarbai, a Korku mother from village C, seethed with anger at the mention of school, “the teacher in our village school was a fucking bastard. He loved beating up Korku kids all the time. That motherfucker slapped my son so hard he lost hearing in one of his ears. I went to ask him why he did that and he started abusing me. I never sent my kids to school again.” On being asked why she didn’t lodge a formal complaint with the police on this. She answered with a profound question, “you think the police listens to us Korkus?” (AH/October/2002/4). Shivilal, an elderly Korku from the predominantly Korku village, T, shared, “in first grade, most students are Korku. In this village there are very few non-Korku houses but all of them send their kids to school. By the time, grade five finishes, most Korku kids drop out but all *Mahajan* kids stay in school. I am sure there is something mysterious going on there. All the official folk say you Korkus don’t want to send your kids to school, you are irresponsible, your kids are stupid. I say, all that is bull shit. I took a loan to send my kid to school; I bought his books, copies, slate, and two sets of dress. I don’t want to send him to school? You know how much a dress costs? Am I crazy to have bought all that?” His wife asked, “you see that kid sitting

there? He is my son. Does he look stupid? Leave a Korku kid and a *Mahajan* kid in the forest alone and then see after a week who is stupid and who is not” (RMSK/53).

I had a long chat with Soma, an elderly Korku from village M. Among other things, he narrated his view about the schools, “Now there are more schools and teachers than the past. But the school has changed, the teachers don’t like us, they are very harsh to us. Our children are harassed every day. The choicest punishment is for Korku children. My son used to tell me about it. The teachers as well as the *Mahajan* kids make fun of him every day. Schooling is not easy for a Korku. A kid needs a dress, books, stationary and what not. We are hardly able to survive, where will all these things come from? The government has some schemes for us; sometimes our children get clothes, books and even scholarship money. But the amount is so meager and the procedure so cumbersome, that we spend more on travel than it is worth. If a Korku man is able to send his kids to school, he does so on his own resources, let there be no doubt. I will send my kids to school no matter I get government support or not. Even if we take a loan from the *Mahajans* for buying all this school paraphernalia, the teachers ask the kids to wear a clean washed dress every day. We don’t have money even for soap. The teachers sent my elder daughter home so many times because she didn’t have a clean dress every day. They insulted her so often, she eventually dropped out. I didn’t have the heart to send her back to school. Fuck these teachers” (AH/May/2003/11).

Another Korku father in village B, Pappu, told me, “I went to school only thrice in the last five years. The first time was when I went to have my daughter admitted. They made me sit outside the office for three hours. They attended to me when all the *Mahajan* parents were dealt with. The second time was when I was called by the *Sarpanch* for the

Independence Day ceremony. I enjoyed that visit; there were a lot of people including the MLA (member of the state legislature) and many government officers. I got some sweet biscuits and there were speeches. The third time was when I went to see the teacher after he beat up my daughter. My daughter told me they always scold her and make fun of her diction. I went to ask the fucker why he did that, and all the teachers bullied me. They told me, my daughter always came to school in dirty clothes, and that she was stupid, she couldn't learn anything, and that she did not obey them. They also told me that she would never be able to learn anything at school since she never wanted to. I felt very bad but what could I do, they were trying to dismiss me by saying that they did not understand my language even though I was talking to them in Hindi. I am illiterate but is that a sin?" (AH/July/2002/3).

Field journals of Yogesh Malviya, the other researcher in the NIAS/Samavesh team, documented an interaction with a Korku mother in village F. Yogesh met her because she was listed as the president of the village parent teacher association (PTA). Gudiya Bai said, "yes, I think I am the president of the village PTA. The head master and the *Sarpanch* came to my house last year for taking a signature. I signed the document but I don't know what was written on it. I learnt to sign some years ago, but I can't read. I never went to the PTA meeting because I was never told that there is one. Even if I knew I wouldn't go. It's no use. The teachers think we Korkus are useless crazy fellows; they don't want us to visit the school and ask questions about their work. I know what is happening there. These bastards beat up the Korku kids all the time while they rarely do that with other kids. I think the teachers enjoy punishing our kids. I don't go there, I don't know what to go there" (RMSK/65).

Despite all these grievances, many parents agree that the school is useful and necessary for their child's 'improvement.' Excerpts from a focus group discussion with

Korku parents indicate this feeling. Mungeri Lal said, “I have been seeing these schools all my life. Earlier there were just a few of them, the teachers were sincere and they used to come to talk to us about sending our kids regularly. We hardly listened to them then. Very few of us sent children to schools in the past. It was something very new and we were not sure about schooling. Experience has taught us what schooling means today. Our skills are of no use today, we can’t trap game in the forest, we can’t brew mahua openly, and can’t even pick firewood without bribing the forest guard. Our *padiyar* (shaman) has become useless; our crops don’t have a market anymore. Everything from the past has failed. It’s a new world. It won’t do without school.” Another participant added, “the problematic part is that after going to school most Korku kids can’t do hard labor, they become soft. They can’t endure the sun and are no use in the farm. Despite this, I want my kids to be educated. Even if they don’t get a job, they will become smarter. I get cheated everyday at the shop, by the money-lender, and in the *panchayat* office. At least my son can read legal papers. He can read the validity dates on the pesticide label. He can read the newspaper to me. He will be wiser than me and can talk with government officers. I am sure no one will dupe him as easily as we have always been duped” (BK/June/2002/26). Rewaram, a middle aged father of two adolescent sons, shared his struggle with the experience of schooling. “My father never sent me to school. I was the oldest male child. He wanted me to learn farming and taking care of cattle. My younger brother went to school. He studied till tenth grade. When I was toiling in the sun all day, he was either in school or sitting in the house studying his books. I hated it then. But he never got a government job like his *Mahajan* classmates. Now he also works in the farm like me. But he is smart, smarter than me. He can read the newspaper and does all the government paperwork.” His neighbor, Bhukhlal, also agreed, “Earlier we were wild

people, living like animals. Now things are improving, many of us are literate. We speak better. I cannot read but I can sign. I sign my name at the bank now. My daughter taught me signing my name. She is a smart girl. I will send her to school as long as I can afford it” (YM/February/2002/39).

Interviews and discussion reports from the NIAS/Samavesh study show that many Korku children also demonstrated internalization of the positive value of school, education and Hindi, as well as the consequences of not getting an education. This was evident despite blatant discrimination in the school. Such internalization reflected across interviews and focus group discussions with them. Durga, an adolescent boy, had recently dropped out of school because his parents could not afford the recurring expenses on school dress and stationary. He started grazing cattle for people and found a job at the local teashop.

Responding to questions about his future, he said without looking up, “what will I do? I will wash these utensils all my life. There I was at school till three months ago learning Geometry and English, and now I light up the stove in the morning and feed it coal all the time. All day long, I have to make tea and serve water. This is what I will do” (PSSI/4). Another fourth grade dropout, Mahesh, shared his loss, “if I could have remained in school, I would have got some knowledge. I would have got a decent job. Even if I couldn’t get a job, I would have opened a shop or a small business. Now I am ruined. I will plough land like my father and sleep hungry half the time” (PSSI/2).

Apart from grievances against in-school oppression and the acceptance of schools as necessary to survival, several Korku individuals also demonstrated rationalization of such negative experiences. In-depth interviews of Korku parents reflect this process vis a vis severe punishment and humiliation that their children were subjected to. Chiraunjeelal, a

middle aged illiterate Korku, expressed a deterministic path dependence as a matter of fact, “if the parents are illiterate how can you expect the children to be educated? None of my ancestors went to school, we don’t have a script, and no one in my family reads or writes. How will my kids learn at school? All this is futile” (RPSK/35). In Keshu’s view, everyone made fun of Korkus because of their language skills and diction so the teachers cannot be isolated. “The teacher is also human, what if he jokes with kids sometimes. He is doing a noble job, giving us knowledge. As long as he makes my kids learn, I have no problem” (PPI/1). Saligram echoed similar views, “Yes my son told me that everyone makes fun of him when he speaks and that the teacher does nothing about it. I think everything will be all right in a year or so when my son learns speaking well. My son also told me that one of his teachers beats him up often and even twists his ears. My opinion is that sometimes you have to punish children like that to make them learn. Some kids are smart and learn easily, others learn by coercion and through punishment.” His younger brother added, “my kids also complain about punishment at school but I have told them I cannot help. School is like that. I went to his school once and told the teacher- take this kid and teach him and remember that his skin is yours while his bones are mine. I told him to punish him till he learns. I am sure the teacher punishes those who are mischievous. Actually, kids in our community love to roam the outdoors. Perhaps Korku kids bunk classes more often and so they are punished more often” (BK/July/29). Gawli is a widower and his old mother usually took care of his two young sons. He was away from home most of the time, working as a daily wageworker. He sounded accusative of his sons, “these bastards bunk school whenever they can. I tell them in the morning to go to school. I have no idea how many days a week they attend school. My mother can’t check on that, she is too old to walk even in the house. What can the

teacher do but beat them up? Kids in our community are fucking idiots, they will not learn till you hang them upside down. I don't blame the teachers" (YM/May/2002/47). Surprisingly, many settler-created phrases that target Korkus negatively were also repeated by Korku individuals. A mother of three dropout kids said, "everything can be repaired but the Korku." Another parent said, "We are *aadhavasi*, not *pooravasi*. We are not made to learn at school" (EGSRB/42). And another repeated the most popular one, "Even the roads in this area have improved but the Korku can never improve" (BK/July/2002/30).

### **Grievances and internalization regarding harassment, deception and exploitation**

My fieldwork as well as secondary data suggested that though everyday humiliations, deceptions, and harassments of the Korku went generally unprotested generally but they formed part of conversations and memories that the Korku kept amongst them. This section presents evidence from focus group discussions, interviews and informal chats including such grievances, as well as rationalizations of oppression.

Kewalal, a middle aged Korku farmer from village D, owned seven acres of low fertility land on a hillock. Most of his land was taken away by money-lenders years ago. He had some years of schooling before he dropped out. "My father sent me to school hoping that I would get a job and bring prosperity to the family. I was very enthusiastic and worked hard to pass grade tenth. At that time there was rarely a Korku with that kind of education. I thought my days of penury were over but I was ignorant of how the world moves. I applied for a peon's job in the revenue office. The clerk asked my father for a substantive bribe which he couldn't afford. And here I am, back in the sun and dust. I am back where I belong. Korkus don't get anything even if they get educated. I am sure these *Mahajans* will never let us succeed in their world." He added, "my sons go to school, I will educate them till I can



afford it but I have no hopes about their future. They will end up tilling this rocky land all their life.” His old father added from where he was resting, “I thought he would become somebody. Now everything is leveled, kids from his cohort who went to school as well as those who never cared to, are all in the same boat. All are poor, hungry and barely able to survive. There is nothing for the Korku” (AH/September/2002/14). Munnibai, a Korku woman in her forties, recounted, “My father had seventy acres of land. It was very fertile. He used to harvest just one crop a year and we used to eat well all year round. We had a good time; he bought me new clothes every year. All is gone now. When soybean came to this area, everyone said we should replace our crop with it. My father and brothers took seeds, fertilizers and pesticide on loan from the *Mahajans*. They trapped us. Within five years we were left with just twelve acres of land. The *Mahajan* took away everything. They still cheat us every day. I tell my sons, whatever you do don’t get in the *Mahajan's* trap. Starve but don’t take a loan from them, they will auction even your skin” (AH/December/2002/6). Bhikudas, another Korku farmer shared, “These bastards own everything and everyone. The police act as their servants. I took a bag of seeds on loan and put my thumb print on a paper. They took away half my land. I went to the police; they threw me out of the station. Later I thought of going to the collector’s office but the police took away my elder son on fake charges and threatened me. The *Mahajans* had bribed the police. I don’t want to go to the court, if one goes there his life is spent running between the village and the town. I don’t have resources to pursue a court case. All these guys are united against the poor Korku” (RMSK/18).

Semlibai has lived in the area since she came here as a bride thirty years ago. She recounted vividly, how the weekly market operated, “Earlier we used to walk twelve

kilometers to the weekly market to buy salt, spices and other things of daily use. I used to take millets, black rice and roosters to sell there and to be able to pay for what I bought. *Mahajans* used to snatch away our stuff outside the market and forced us to take stuff from their shop. Those cheats ruined us every week. No one helped me. Now the market is closer and there are more traders and stuff. But the cheating has also increased. They cheat us even in front of the police constable. Everyone thinks we are idiots and they can fuck us whenever and wherever” (AH/January/2002/2). In a rare conversation that I had with a local trader, these allegations were confirmed. Bholay Shankar, the travelling trader of a middle Hindu caste, told me, “these *Adivasis* are idiots, they bring a bag of whatever they grow to the market. Many of us sit on roads that lead to the market and we take the stuff from them. Some traders are fair and some cheat them. First, the weighing is done using a tampered scale and fake weights, then the rates are quoted below the market rate, and then the total amount is calculated incorrectly. What can we do, they have no brains. Our job is to make a profit, we also have a family to feed” (AH/November/2003/9). There are scores of traders like Bholay Shankar who travel from one weekly market to another in the area and make a living out of such enterprise. A Korku elder from another village vented his anger at the travelling traders, “these fucking cheats, their ancestors came here in conditions worse than that of beggars. We gave them land to set up shops, we gave them food and shelter when they had no place to stay. And, see what they do to us. These bastards now own land, houses, motor bikes, gold. Whatever they have, was once our. Now we live like beggars. They have sucked our blood dry, motherfuckers.” His son, a young man in his early thirties, said, “we can only cultivate our land and work in other’s fields. If a Korku tries starting up a small business, these sister-fucking *Mahajans* ensure that he fails. A Korku man cannot buy stuff cheap and

he cannot even sell easily. The *Mahajans* control the weekly market. Even if someone tries hard, he fails after sometime. No one buys from him. Not even the Korku.” His father added, “nothing can change. They have manipulated us in the past and they will manipulate us in the future” (AH/March/2003/7).

Experiences shared by several Korkus suggest that the police and the law & order machinery did not exist as far as the Korku were concerned. This feeling is repeated across several interactions recorded in the area. Dhani Ram, from village B, was a Korku *Patel* known to command respect across several villages for his conflict resolution skills. He had an acute observation on settlers and the nexus of exploitation, “look, I have seen all this since my childhood. My father was also a *Patel* and he knew the ways of the world. *Mahajans* settled in the area as part of the design to finish us off. The British brought them here to make men out of us ‘wild people’. They said they wanted us to live a life like them, become educated and learn new farming methods. We used to live in the forest and there was no tax. The government took over the forest, sold all the timber and wanted us to pay revenue. The government, the police and the *Mahajan* are part of the same family. They actually wanted to make us their lifelong servants, take away all that we possessed. In the forest they couldn’t cow us down. In villages and town they are more powerful. You ask me why we don’t go to the police. I will tell you. The police are their prostitute, they pay the police bribes. The police can catch a Korku any day, lock him up and beat him up whenever. They always catch a Korku and no matter what, they will win. We have always distilled liquor from the mahua flower in our homes. Now mahua liquor is illegal, but every Korku home has mahua and the distilling equipment. They will catch a poor Korku and slap him with bootlegging charges any day. It will be proven in the court. The court is also sold out. Now tell me who will go to

the court or the police. I will tell you. Go to them if you are rich. If you are poor, you can do nothing.” He added after a pause, “I keep telling my people, avoid the police, avoid the court and above all, avoid the *Mahajan*. I know it is not possible. So see for yourself, what is happening now? But, I have nothing else to tell my people. Everything has failed” (AH/September/2002/4).

The indignation of being cheated, dispossessed and exploited was not found to be equally shared among all Korku represented in our data. Many saw these experiences as common sense and natural. They rationalized such experiences in various ways. Macchu Ram’s analysis of his poverty reflected such rationalization. He was a middle aged Korku from village M. He said, “earlier, there used to be ample rain, there was a lot of land and we had plenty to eat. The crops were good every year. Now the fertility of land has decreased, no matter how much you toil, the return from crops is low. Times have changed; the seeds are also not as vigorous as before. Their quality has decreased over time. It may be because of the declining forests. Rains have also decreased. I don’t know what has happened. Perhaps the rains will become better again.” His elder brother added another perspective, “Korku people are forgetting how to cultivate crops. Everyone just listens to the radio and television. They waste all their time sleeping. One needs to work hard for a good crop. People have become lazy” (MSPI/3). A young Korku farmer from another village found my questions about mediocre returns from agriculture among Korkus, absurd. He asked me, “how can illiterate people do good farming?” He continued, “most of our Korku people don’t know anything about agriculture. You have to read the newspaper to know what crop to plant, which seed to buy, which pesticide to use, when to add fertilizer etc etc. I keep in regular touch with the agriculture office, they give me all the information” (AH/April/2002/5).

Tithibai, an elderly Korku woman said, “everyone keeps complaining of being cheated and fooled by the *Mahajans*. What’s the point of complaining? Go and become smart like them. People cheat the Korku because we are stupid. We can’t speak Hindi. You have to be smart if you want to be successful. My grandchildren go to school, they will become smart.” Her husband quipped, “see, there is always a hierarchy in the world. Someone is more powerful and someone is less powerful. The tiger eats the deer. The deer cannot eat the tiger. It can just run away or hide to save itself. The world goes on. Life is like that. What can you do?” (MSPI/34). Ram Gopal, a landless wage laborer shared how he had rationalized his situation, “Korku people are *aadhavasi*. *Mahajan* people are *pooravasi*. There is a big difference. How can the *aadhavasi* become *pooravasi*?” (AH/February/2003/6).

### **Grievances against governance practices**

This section focuses on grievances and rationalizations vis a vis the Korku experience with gram panchayat (government instituted local self governance institutions at the village level). The gram panchayat is one of the most critical organizational setups that may be available for a takeover, if one were to imagine a local social movement. These are elected bodies with regular elections. Further, these bodies have a certain quota of membership reserved for indigenous and other marginalized groups, as part of official affirmative action policies. In this sense, they also embody political opportunities that the mainstream political process provides for. Hence, grievances against these institutions as well as the rationalizations for accepting their performance are very crucial to this case.

During my field work, I was once working with my NGO colleagues conducting a survey among Korku villages. The purpose was to collect the variety of problems they faced

in the *gram panchayat*. During one of these interactions in village B, I met Samar Singh, a middle aged Korku. When asked about his panchayat experience, Samar Singh gave a vivid recreation of the last panchayat meeting that he attended with other Korku neighbors. “It was the peak of summer just before the sowing season. I went to the *panchayat* meeting with my wife, daughter and son-in-law. That meant a loss of one hundred and twenty rupees from wage labor. I went because everyone said it was an important meeting and many government benefits were to be delivered. I was in the waiting list for land distribution. My neighbor’s case for a house construction subsidy was also on the agenda. It was indeed a large gathering; I have never seen so many people in the *panchayat* meeting. There were many Korku and Gond people also. There was a newspaper reporter and some people from your NGO also. That was the only time when the *Sarpanch* looked uncomfortable. I was very hopeful that cheating us would be impossible that day. But they again cheated us. The secretary whispered something to that fucker *Sarpanch* who in turn declared that he had a family emergency and had to leave. The meeting was postponed even when the quorum was in place. Everyone was very angry and talked loudly but we were able to do nothing, no one knew the rules.” Amar Singh’s wife, listening in to the conversation, blurted “we are mother fucking idiots, all of us. I don’t participate in the *Panchayat*” (AH/October/2002/14).

In another similar interaction, the mere mention of the *panchayat* triggered Dukhlal into an endless monologue, “the *panchayat* is a farce, and these fuckers are there for their own good. Yes, I heard there are many government schemes for us at the *panchayat*. But I have never seen them. Some poor families get food grain every month. Go ask them, they feed it to their cattle; it’s not worth human consumption. The secretary sells the good food grain in the market and replaces it with rotten stuff. Everyone knows that, the clerk in the

block office gets a share, everyone gets a share. I think the district collector also gets a share, while we starve here. I go to the meeting sometimes; the secretary reads from the papers, I don't know what it means. I just know that when twenty thousand rupees were sanctioned to my neighbor for building a house, he got only eight thousand and even that took two years. Most Korkus who were elected as *panchayat* members are powerless. It's the secretary and the *Sarpanch* who run the show. I think it's only the secretary who runs the show, the *Sarpanch* is just nominal, he is a poor Korku like me. Everyone is just fooling him, they salute him and he feels so happy, he signs whatever they thrust at him"

(AH/October/2002/19). Levaram, another middle aged Korku from village C, told me about his village. He was from a predominantly Korku village but the *Sarpanch* was a settler.

Listening to my questions, he asked me, "What Panchayat? What benefit? I don't know what the panchayat means. My seven year old son cannot go to school because he has to work at the tea shop for a paltry wage. My youngest son died within a year of his birth because we never had adequate food. I live in a house, an animal would refuse to live in, but the *panchayat* doesn't consider me as poor. My name is not in the BPL (below poverty line- a government definition that is used to identify people as poor) list. The *Sarpanch* has fifty five acres of land, all his fucking family is in the BPL list. Is that justice? This is what the Panchayat means to me?" (AH/November/2002/5).

Phoolwati, a young and outspoken mother of three, added, "the government sends many schemes for poor people like us. They send a lot of money but it never reaches us. These bastards eat away from our share at each level. Eventually what comes here is so little that it is of no use. Yet, the *Sarpanch* and the secretary take away a part of it. It's all a joke. If we still survive, it's on our own accord." Phoolwati's husband also chipped in, "our secretary

is a *Mahajan* and I never expected him to be fair, his community survives here by sucking the blood of poor folk. But the *Sarpanch* is a Korku, we voted for him hoping him to do something good. That bastard is also sold out. Do you know about Betibai in this village? She is a Korku widow in this village and she was eligible for a government house. We pushed for her case till the end despite the secretary's resistance. In the end, the secretary and *Sarpanch* manipulated everything. The house was eventually delivered but not to Betibai, to the *Sarpanch's* brother. We get fucked all the time" (BK/December/2001/30-31). Betibai, whose story is narrated here, was stoic, "yes I lost a lot of money in trying to get government housing. I took a loan from the village *Mahajan* to bribe the *Sarpanch* and the clerk in the block office. I didn't get the house; it went to that fucker Ramprasad, the *Sarpanch's* brother. I will keep repaying the loan that I took for my lifetime. What can I do? It's just like that." Her daughter in law shared stories about the government food grain programme, "The government sends food grains, sugar and kerosene to the ration shop for us. Wheat is supposed to sell for rupees six a kilo, that bastard shopkeeper sells it for rupees twelve. I have never seen sugar in that shop and I just get half the kerosene allotted to my card, he sells it in the black market. I went to the *Sarpanch* to complain, that motherfucker kept smoking his cigarette, as if he didn't see or hear me. Everyone is fucking us." Betibai added to the conversation, "I have voted so many times always thinking that things would change. We make a person *Sarpanch* but then he makes a fool out of us. This time we voted for a Korku *Sarpanch*, but he also proved to be a sisterfucker. The *Mahajans* have electricity for irrigation while we still spend money on a diesel pump" (BK/December/2001/32-34).

In another village, an elderly Korku who was an elected ward member of the panchayat shared his insider story, "I am just a pawn. I was able to get elected because the



seat was reserved for *Adivasis* and no one opposed me. The *Sarpanch* and the secretary know that a ward member is powerless. Here the *Mahajan* hold power in the panchayat. They have the pen and have the power to write. They can write anything they please, how do I know. To me, all the paperwork looks like black ink on white paper. They can write and prove the sun to be moon. I can't do anything for anyone. I just have to sign documents that they show me. I haven't been able to do anything for anyone. I don't want to be part of this *panchayat* anymore" (AH/November/2002/8). In a focus group discussion with elected members of the *gram panchayat*, several Korku office holders shared interesting information. Rewatibai's name was listed on official documents as chair of the village school committee. She was however, unaware of it, "Me? No one told me I was the chair! Who elected me? I have never seen any papers, no one tells me anything. Even my son has not got the half yearly scholarship that comes for *Adivasi* children. I went to the block office twice but they told me to come later. The scholarship is worth one hundred and twenty rupees per annum and I have already spent forty rupees on the bus." Bhima Singh, who was elected as *Sarpanch* of his village twice in the past and had some exposure to the mechanics of the *gram panchayat*. He opined, "what can I say. I have seen it from inside twice. My family owns just three acres of land, most of which is rocky. We survive by working for others. And despite being the *Sarpanch* I could not get myself registered in the below poverty line list. I refused to bribe the clerk and then he asked for so many papers, I got tired of it all. I told them, fuck off." Another ward member added, "If you do a survey of the below poverty card holders in the village, you will go dizzy. Most of them are actually the richest in this village. The poorest don't even know what a below poverty card is." Belaram, a middle aged Korku from a village T, told me, "I have been running between my village and the block office for four

months now. Last summer my house was destroyed in a fire and the *Sarpanch* told me there is a scheme where the government compensates you in case of a fire. I paid a bribe to the *Sarpanch* and the secretary for endorsing my application. They have done their job but the file is still sitting somewhere in the block office. I went to see the fucking clerk there several times. Half the time that bastard is not in the office. Rest of the time he tells me about a new procedure or a missing document. I am illiterate so he keeps fooling me all the time. He has been demanding a bribe but I will not pay him anything, I have already paid the *Sarpanch*. You know, all these fucker *Mahajans* think that we are crazy. We are not crazy, we are just poor” (AH/October/2002/11-19).

A notable feature of this section, grievances against local self-governance institutions, is that there is almost no rationalization of perceived injustices, discrimination and dispossession. Unlike other themes on oppression covered in earlier sections, there is no evidence of Korkus either justifying corruption within the gram panchayat, nor rationalizing injustices committed against them.

### **Reactions to religious domination**

The preceding section had surprising results, in having only grievances and lacking any rationalization. This section too throws its own surprise, however, in a reverse fashion. Observations on changing religious practices and other life cycle rituals show almost no grievances emanating from the Korkus. Instead, an increasing number of Korkus, individually as well as collectively are adopting Hindu gods, rituals and practices while at the same time they are seen to leave behind their own traditional practices. Further, they justify

this change through hyper rationalizations through which, they defend these new practices. This section presents evidence on this aspect.

Hinduization among the Korku is reflected through several recent changes. The first is the new found support for austere mass-marriages promoted by Hindu reformist missionaries, instead of the traditional marriage-by-elopement. The second is the emergence of a caste like social hierarchy among the otherwise egalitarian Korku community. The third is mass adoption of Hindu gods, ethos and everyday practices. I focus on the third type of change and present evidence to describe them.

In an earlier section, I presented evidence to show hegemonic practices in effect at government schools and student hostels for indigenous groups. Here, I attempt to relate these practices to their effects observed both among kids as well as adults. During a visit to the *Adivasi* hostel in town U, Gudiya, a fourth grade Korku inmate, pointed at her bed stand with pride, “I bought these pictures of gods and goddesses in the weekly market. The warden teaches us about all these good things. I pray to god every morning and evening.” Bhanvri, an eighth grade Korku said, “whenever I go home during vacations, I take posters of gods and goddesses for my family. I have put them on the wall in the living room. My parents were very happy. I also taught them the Morning Prayer. My mother now prays daily” (CSKGH/3). During my field work, I often saw such pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses prominently displayed on walls in Korku homes though they shared space with glamorous posters of Bollywood actors, indicating the, yet, less than sacred stature that they have, among Korkus.

Budhai Ram is a Korku *Patel* from village M. His forehead is always smeared with sandalwood paste, with a prominent red mark in the center, a clearly Brahminic identity

marker. He talked about it proudly, “I started doing this eight years ago after I went to bathe in the *Narmada* river. Kamal Patel (the local leader of BJP-the right wing Hindu nationalist party) had sponsored the trip. He sent two vans and took all of us to the river. I also stopped eating meat since then.” Budhai Ram is also a frequent visitor to public religious rituals that take place in the area. “Everyone invites me, even the *Mahajans*. I am a Korku *Patel*. People from twelve villages listen to what I tell them.” He sees the Korku as semi Hindu, though with some ‘problems’ such as drinking and meat eating (AH/December/2002/8).

A particular event during my fieldwork was instructive in explaining the process of Hinduization among the Korku. Once, while I was driving a motorbike through one of my field villages, I was stopped and invited to join a congregation where several elder and young Korku males had assembled. Everyone was seated on a tattered tarpaulin on an open lot, at the center of which was a red ceremonial rug. In the center of the red rug, a fire was burning in a ceremonial vessel. I could recognize the setting for a Hindu ritual, though I was a bit surprised by the fact that this was a Korku gathering. Then, I recognized a government teacher from a neighboring village, who was sitting next to the fire. I knew the teacher from earlier visits to his school, he was a Brahmin from a nearby town who conducted religious rituals in his free time, for a fee. He looked set to begin with a booklet in his hand, which many Brahmin priests recite from. By then, I had gathered that a relatively well-off Korku family had bought new land in the village and was planning to start construction of a new house. They had engaged the Brahmin for conducting *Bhoomi-Pujan* (prayers before breaking land) to mobilize spiritual support before beginning work. The Korku host sat next to the Brahmin, and I also recognized the *padiyar* (traditional Korku priest) seated near the fire. I was invited to join, both because I was acquainted to everyone gathered there, as well

as because, perhaps, I represented an organization that was known to have often taken side with Korkus. My identity as a Muslim was not considered a barrier in this invitation. Usually, Korkus worship their deities in rituals presided by the Korku priest, but in this case a Brahmin was invited to conduct Hindu rituals, definitely a new practice. In the middle of the ritual, the Brahmin invited the Korku host to recite from the book, with him. However, the host's illiteracy preempted his participation. In his absence, and among a few literate Korkus who were perhaps not confident enough in the new practice, I was asked to recite with the Brahmin. I did recite with him, overcoming both my surprise and shock. It is notable that neither any Korku rituals were followed during the entire ceremony nor did the presence of a Muslim 'co-priest' (otherwise scandalous by orthodox Hindu standards) upset the sacredness of the event.

Later, discussions with the assembled Korkus confirmed that none of them had understood anything that was recited but they were satisfied with whatever took place. The host family was elated since a Brahmin had conducted the service for them ensuring appropriate auspiciousness. My curiosity made me enquire about reasons for not following Korku rituals. The host said, "our deity is now outdated. He has failed" (AH/May/2003/4). The event allowed me to make sense of this religious transition and the tensions within the transition. At one hand, the out of favor *Padiyar* and the presence of the Brahmin priest symbolized the displacement of the traditional Korku cosmos. On the other hand, an active role played by a Muslim individual symbolized the yet shallow anchorage of this new *weltanschauung*. In other words, the hybrid nature of this ritual reflected a situation which could turn any which way depending on actors, motivations and situations.

Traditionally, Korkus are not known to keep their deities within the house. They are instead located at specific public spaces, usually under particular trees or near sources of water. However, during the last two decades, Korkus have started displaying posters, photo frames and statues of Hindu gods inside their homes. These symbols are so placed that visitors can see them easily, usually at eye level on the wall of the living room in their houses. This is more common in relatively well off households where movement towards settler lifestyle is comparatively faster. During my field work, I gathered that these symbols had entered Korku houses through several routes. The first route recounted by several individuals was by outright purchase when they visited village fairs and markets. However, this route had become primary over time and only after two other routes had held sway in the past. Sewak Ram, an old Korku from village M, described the first route. He told me, “I saw these religious posters for the first time, some ten or fifteen years ago, when some people in my village brought them back from Village Buxa.” Recounting a large public event sponsored by a prominent Hindutva leader, he told me, “many people had come from across the region. Most were Hindu but there were many Gond and Korku also. They had invited everyone. An old Brahmin priest recited from the *Gita* (a religious book of the Hindus). I didn’t know him then but everyone said he was a famous preacher. I later heard that he also appeared on TV and was famous among city people. At the end of the programme, all of us got *prasaad* (part of the edible offering made to gods) and a poster each” (AH/August/2002/16). Local Hindi newspapers supported the fact that such events had been steadily rising.

The other route was described by a Korku woman, Devkibai, a middle aged mother of two sons and a daughter. Her sons are day-boarders at the school in the neighboring village

but her daughter studies and lives in the government run hostel for *Adivasi* girls, in town K. She talked about her daughter with pride, “she was smart from her childhood. We decided to send her to the hostel. I do miss her sometimes but console myself because she is gaining so much. She comes home once every three months. The hostel warden there is a very good person, she takes a lot of care of all girls. My daughter has turned out very good, she bathes in the morning, worships the rising sun, prays to mother *Saraswati* (the Hindu goddess of knowledge), before she starts her day. Every time she comes home, she brings us a poster or a framed photo of the gods. See this wall here? She brought most of these posters, and we bought some later” (AH/January/2003/9).

I also observed that *Navratra*<sup>5</sup> and *Ganpati*<sup>6</sup> were two Hindu festivals, which had been adopted by Korkus in the last decade. Both these festivals were special because of their public and performative nature. Both were observed for nine consecutive days and nights ending with the immersion of the deity in a lake with fanfare. Prescribed behavior for the entire period of these festivals included abstinence from consumption of liquor and meat, both being considered ‘impure’ and ‘sinful’. These festivals were gradually emerging as major events in the Korku life-world. They were also special, because they included specific segments of actions and responsibilities aimed at adolescent males, women as well as adult men. For several weeks before these festivals, groups of young Korku boys were seen collecting donation in thousands of rupees for setting up elaborate *pandals* (ceremonial tents). Once the nine-day period began, *Aarti* (public mass prayer) was performed twice a day either by a hired *Brahmin* priest or by upwardly mobile Korku elders. Korku individuals

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5 Navratra can be translated to ‘Nine Nights’. It is a festival devoted to nine forms of the mother goddess in Hinduism

6 Ganesh Puja can be translated into ‘Ganesh Worship’. Ganesh is the elephant god in Hinduism and is worshipped while beginning any new work

involved with organizing these events were looked at with respect by other Korkus and were publicly praised by Hindu missionaries and Hindutva entrepreneurs.

I observed both these public rituals and fervent Korku participation over three years in a row and spoke with several people on this recent practice. Dev Singh, a middle aged Korku, had been part of the organizing team for *Ganpati* in his village for several years now. He described how he became part of it, “I travel for wage work twice a year to Harda city and live on farms of *Mahajans* where I work. I often saw them celebrating this festival and also joined them. Once when I had gone to a *Geeta pravachan* (public recitation of a Hindu religious text), the preacher asked all of us to observe *Navratra* and *Ganpati* properly. I decided to start it in my village. The first couple of years were hard because no one in the village gave any financial support. They were not even aware of these festivals. In the third year, I went to ask Kamal Patel (local leader of the BJP- Hindu nationalist party) for help. I had heard that he gave financial help if someone organized such events. He is a very pious man. He donated five hundred rupees and even came to the village during *Navratra*. After that a lot of Korkus started helping me. Now we have a very good show every year. A lot of neighboring villages are envious of how well we do it” (AH/October/2002/7).

I was myself once part of the team that went to bring a Hindu deity from a neighboring village. In 2002, I was working on a small dam in village C with a group of Korku farmers when Manohari Lal, a middle aged Korku and a local opinion leader, asked us to stop work for the day and help others bring over the deity’s statue. A tractor with an open trolley was procured for our journey. I was told that a Hindu trader, from village M had lent his tractor for free for the ‘noble cause.’ As we were getting into the trolley, Manohari lal reminded everyone of going barefoot, since it was an auspicious task. The rest of the day was



spent travelling to and fro and bringing back the fragile but elaborate clay deity back in the village, where it was installed in its nine day abode with a lot of fanfare (AH). Later, I spoke with Mahesh Kumar, a young Korku, who shared his reasons for enthusiasm, “I don’t know exactly why we celebrate it but it’s good fun. We do it twice a year and everyone takes part. We get a loudspeaker, tape player and there is good music for nine days. I stay near the deity most of the time and help out in the daily prayers and in cleaning up the place. Everyone comes and asks me how the prayer is conducted” (AH/October/2002/11).

Religious rituals imbued with explicit Hindu symbols were promoted not only by settler individuals and political entrepreneurs but also by representatives of the state. I have earlier presented such evidence from the school and the hostel where teachers and wardens begin each school day with the mandatory *Saraswati* prayer, aimed at pleasing the Hindu goddess of knowledge. Here, I recount another event that I witnessed during fieldwork. The public works department is one of the busiest divisions across the board, with continuous construction and repair in motion. With the emergence of local self governance through the gram panchayat, elected representatives also play substantive and symbolic roles in public works. The honor of inaugurating freshly constructed village roads is usually done by the *Sarpanch* in each village. The inauguration ritual is a standardized Hindu practice where a coconut is ceremonially broken on the road, its water sprinkled as if to bless the new construction, and its edible parts distributed for ritual consumption. I was present in Village B when such an inauguration took place. The field engineer was visiting with his team of surveyors and contractors and the whole village had assembled to see the spectacle. This was a Korku village. Kewal Ram, the middle aged *Sarpanch*, was visibly anxious at the ritual which he had perhaps never performed. After a short speech directed at the villagers and

consisting of how concerned the engineer's department had been for this road, the engineer announced that the road would be inaugurated by the *Sarpanch* of the village. When the engineer finally offered the coconut to Kewal Ram, in a decorated platter, he took it firmly in his hand, and in one swift powerful action threw it on the road. The coconut was obviously destroyed with its water splattered on the road. While the *Sarpanch* was pleased at this execution, the engineer was visibly upset. He told the *Sarpanch*, "you Korkus will never learn! I thought you have become a *Sarpanch* and would know how to make the coconut offering. You threw the coconut like you throw a stone, I cannot even see its pieces anywhere, what will we distribute now to everyone here? The offering has to be made gently; the coconut is not to be thrown like you did. You did become the *Sarpanch* but you are still a foolish hillbilly." The engineer was probably prescient of what would happen, he had another coconut. "I always carry more than one coconut when I go to Korku villages. Come on Mr. *Sarpanch*, let me teach you how the offering is properly made." The engineer, literally, taught the ritual to the *Sarpanch*, the coconut was finally broken again, gently this time, and pieces of the fruit were distributed to all present there. Later, a visibly embarrassed *Sarpanch* told me, "it was my first time. I will do it the right way next time" (AH/April/2003/6).

Such evidence describes how the Korkus are adopting Hindu rituals and practices, sometimes under coercion, at other times under persuasion. However, the lack of resistance in this process suggests hegemonic effects. Although the Korku aspire to emulate, and be accepted by higher caste groups within the Hindus as equals, it is likely that they will find this difficult and may have to settle for a low position in the Hindu caste system. Their effort in becoming part of the Hindu system is resulting in the loss of their language, culture and practices and in the evolution of a new 'un-Korku' identity. Becoming Hindu, this way, is

also fraught with another potential risk, of losing the legal ST (scheduled tribe) status and along with it benefits that affirmative action policies promise. However, assimilation still is an option on the table.

This section and subsections presented varying reactions emanating from Korkus towards racial oppression, religious domination and discrimination and exploitation. However the reactions range from anger and articulations of injustice to indifference, rationalization and outright defensive discourses. This variety of emotions and expressions leaves one unsure of how the Korkus think about their situation and the (f)actors responsible for their situation. The following section introduces evidence about the third major element in this case, organizational resources available to the Korku community.

### **Organizational resources**

This section describes organizational resources and potential networks where the Korku have access and some control. These resources are theoretically available for appropriation and mobilization if so needed. The Korku, like other indigenous communities, have a formal social organizational structure in addition to the resilient, but less visible, kinship network that together tie the community. Here I focus on the formal structure alone. The Korku have a multi level, council that they call the Korku *panchayat*, and which has historically been responsible for resolving all their social issues including internal conflicts. This body is usually constituted of Korku elders and has jurisdiction over an area ranging from a few to more than a dozen villages depending on how the Korku population is distributed. The Korku panchayat is pivoted on the figure of the *Patel* (traditional leader). The *Patel* was mostly a mature adult chosen by Korkus in each village. This choice was often influenced by the Patel's hereditary claim to such a position. In the past, most issues were

resolved in local village level councils while only a few cases were considered worthy enough to call for a *maha-panchayat* (grand council). Interactions with Korku elders suggested that even though the Korku *panchayat* was historically an extra governmental institution, it was partially appropriated by the British and then the later Indian government. The government treated the Korku *Patel* as the conduit for maintaining law and order as well as for collecting revenue, thus also allowing him to retain power, legitimacy and influence.

Later, starting with the fifties elected representative bodies (*gram panchayat*) were instituted by the government. Gradually, these new bodies took over most of the social, economic and legal roles of the traditional institutions. The Korku *panchayat* was eventually left with little jurisdiction and influence. However, this has not meant a complete organizational collapse but a drastically diminished form where fewer issues and instances qualify to call upon this organizational setup. Apart from negotiating marriage related conflicts between families, these councils are rarely summoned. Similarly, it is becoming even less common to organize the *maha panchayat* (grand council). During interactions with numerous Korkus, I gathered that a substantial number of young Korku individuals had never participated in the grand council since none were organized in their lifetime. Shorn of past influence, members of the Korku *panchayat* and the *maha panchayat*, called the *Patel*, now live politically inert lives unless they are invited to resolve mundane interpersonal disagreements.

Several Korkus, especially male elders reminisced about the past when the Korku *panchayat* was a strong entity. Ramai Ram, from village M, said “earlier there was the *Patel*, the headman for each village. He used to take everyone’s advice and then dealt with outsiders, negotiating work contracts and other business. We used to have a lot of collective

strength then. No one could trample us, as they do today. All that finished many years ago, the Korku *panchayat* became handicapped with the decline of the *Patel*” (YM/January/2002/28). Commenting on the present situation, another Korku elder, from village B, said, “Now everyone is by himself. People go in different directions, all alone. Cheating them, and exploiting them is easier” (PPI/7). Githibai of village M, an elderly Korku woman known to be outspoken, said “if you had come here forty years ago, you would have seen the glory of the Korku *panchayat*. The Patel used to send a message and Korkus came from twenty five villages to participate in the *panchayat*. All our issues were sorted there and then. Each village used to send its men and it’s *Patel*. All the *Patels* then conferred with the chief *Patel* here in this village. I was a kid then, but I remember everything. Even the police and forest guard did not have the courage to intervene when the Korku *panchayat* was in session.” Her husband continued, “the Korku *panchayat* is still there but it is not the same in strength. There is no chief *Patel* now, we just have village *Patels*, and their advice is valid only in their villages. There is no one who can command all the Korkus anymore. Now, the Korku *panchayat* only deals with minor issues, mostly marriages. No one comes to the Patel for anything else” (RMSK/27-28). Banna Singh, another Korku elder from village B, said “earlier, these settlers thought twice before defrauding Korkus, they were afraid of the *Patel* and our *panchayat*. Nothing is left now. There is no *Patel* and the *panchayat* is toothless” (AH/May/2002/11).

While the decline of the Korku *panchayat* and the *Patel* may be caused by the changes in the techniques of government and the rise of the revenue bureaucracy, many Korkus think otherwise. What is striking is that across several interviews, informal chats and stories, the name of a particular individual is referred to as the chief villain responsible for

breaking up the Korku *panchayat* and the institution of the *Patel*. This person is Mahendra Dhillon, a settler who is now an old man in his late eighties. He came to the area in the sixties and is accused of duping the Korkus of village M, of the position of the chief *Patel*. Across innumerable stories recorded during my fieldwork and through journal entries of other researchers, what appears to have happened is that Mahendra Dhillon fooled the chief *Patel* in village M as well as other Korku *Patels* into signing a legal paper in 1962. He submitted the paper at the district revenue office and became the Chief Patel himself. The paper was a fraudulent request drafted on behalf of the Korku *Patel* and witnesses, requesting the government to appoint Mahendra Dhillon as the new chief *Patel*. Narrating the same story, Ramai Ram, a Korku elder, said “that fucker Mahendra cheated us. He entertained our *Patel* and other Korkus with liquor and food and they signed whatever he gave them thinking he was a well wisher. But look at what the government did, they did not even care to come here to confirm the request. They just replaced the chief *Patel*. That bastard bribed the government officers too. Is it logical to assume that the Korkus would request a settler to be made their chief *Patel*?” (YM/January/2002/14). Rewati Raman, a Korku *Patel* in his eighties also remembers how Mahendra Dhillon took over as the chief *Patel* of the area, “he defrauded us over a cup of tea, a bottle of liquor and a piece of lamb meat. I still remember the day” (YM/January/2002/28). Another old Korku added, “When we came to know, some of us went to the district headquarter to complain. No one listened to us, they turned us away. That motherfucking Mahendra Dhillon had bribed everyone in the office. The police came to threaten us. What could we do? We came back. Now the Korku *panchayat* is only for mediating in marriages. Earlier we dealt with everything- murder, land dispute, marriage, divorce, everything.” His son added, “now others are also trying to interfere with the Korku

*panchayat*. Earlier it was an all Korku affair but now settlers and politicians also want to control the panchayat” (RMSK/29). Mahendra Dhillon’s role in breaking up the Korku panchayat is acknowledged even by some settlers. Vivek Bharadwaj, a retired Brahmin schoolteacher, has lived in village M for thirty years. He corroborated what several Korkus had reiterated, “before the sixties, the Korkus were in good shape, they had their own *Patel* and a strong Korku *Panchayat*. They did what they pleased. But then, their nemesis came in the form of Mahendra Dhillon. He is the most cunning and greedy person I have ever seen in my life” (YM/August/2002/5). While the traditional Korku panchayat has declined in influence and membership, new organizations are also emerging. Bal Kishan, another field researcher recorded in his diary, “Sewakram from village C told me about the tribal welfare committee. It seems like a community organization of Korku members set up for organizing mass marriages among them. I was curious and found that it has been promoted by the local RSS representatives and the current BJP MLA. They have involved several local Korku leaders in this organization aiming to use them later during elections” (RMSK/28).

Interactions with settlers show that they were also aware of the past when the Korku *panchayat* was a formidable institution. They were also aware of its current situation. Jairam Seth, the tea shop owner in village M, was one such person. “They had a panchayat system in the past. It is still there but just nominally. You should have seen it earlier. The Korku *Patel* used to dress up like a peacock. All of them wore large colorful turbans and new clean dresses. The *Patel* used to command a lot of respect, if he were to shout at someone, the person would urinate in one’s pants. The Korku *panchayat* was powerful and all Korkus in the village used to assemble at least once a month. I don’t know what they did in those assemblies but they definitely discussed important matters. There used to be a lot of drinking

after the meetings. All Korkus were obedient to the *Patel* and he could get them to do anything if he chose to. My father used to tell me that even we settlers were a bit in awe of their *panchayat* system. Not anymore, these motherfuckers drowned themselves in all that liquor that they drink every day. Those fucking Korku *Patels* now roam like dogs without masters. No one listens to them” (AH/September/2002/7).

No matter what condition the Korku panchayat is in at present, it seems that settlers are still aware of its potential. This awareness was keenly observed among those settlers who are associated with local politics. Mahesh Tripathi, a Brahmin settler based in the nearby town, is a government employee and is the secretary of the gram panchayat at village M. Mahesh has been in the thick of local politics for over a decade. While most Korkus had grievances against his anti-Korku stand in administrative matters, he claimed to have a neutral position. He was aware of the Korku panchayat, “these guys used to have a *panchayat* system even before the government thought about this formal *panchayat* system. I am from this area and in my youth I travelled a lot in these forests. They had a very effective system of resolving their issues. It has become defunct now. I think it was not suitable for these modern times. Now there is democracy, everyone votes and the *Patel* used to be a hereditary position. The Korku *panchayat* is now dying out. Now no But what still surprises me, is that these Korkus vote en masse during elections. In normal days, they have no unity. If someone abuses a Korku, other Korkus look the other way, they don’t come to help, but during elections, they somehow form a consensus. Every candidate tries to woo them with free liquor during elections” (BK/March/2002/32). Vijay Yadav, another settler who has twice been elected as member of the district *panchayat*, commented, “they look stupid, but some of them are very clever. Don’t get fooled that they can’t speak good Hindi. I deal with



them often. If you want to win an election in this area, you should know which Korkus to befriend. If you have these particular guys on your side, you will get many votes”

(AH/December/2002/18).

Eventually, what seems true about the Korku panchayat is that it is something that can be placed between a fossil and a phoenix. The Korku Panchayat and its key figure, the *Patel* were powerful in the past. Everyone acknowledges that. There are also clear grievances among the Korku against the subversion of these institutions by settlers. There is also awareness, especially amongst the settlers, that the Korku *panchayat* and the Korku community have the potential to unite if needed. However, Korkus themselves do not share this optimism. Despite the legacy of the past, grievances, and the scope for controlling the government instituted gram panchayat, they remain pessimistic about their collective strength. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that the Korku panchayat and the institution of the *Patel* exist and are potential resources that can be mobilized if required.

Apart from the traditional Korku *panchayat*, Korkus also have access to the new, government established *gram panchayats*. Local self-governance legislation since the sixties and later constitutional amendments in the early nineties have provided this village based institution, autonomous constitutional status. Further, affirmative action policies enshrined in the Indian constitution provide a quota system where members of scheduled tribes, such as the Korku, have a certain number of seats reserved for elections. However, the quota is not specifically for the Korku but for all groups within scheduled tribes. This means that in an election, the Korku can either compete with everyone on an open seat or can compete with only tribal candidates on reserved seats. However, actual Korku representation in these government bodies is nominal, at best. While they have significant presence in these bodies

in homogeneous Korku villages, they are fewer in numbers where population is mixed. On the block and district level bodies, Korkus are present only on reserved seats. Most of these *gram panchayats* are directly or indirectly controlled by settlers, either local politicians or the government appointed secretaries. While the secretary is appointed by the government and is a state employee mandated to facilitate local self governance, in reality he is a major power player in panchayat politics as well as in its daily functioning. Evidence from the area suggests that the secretary has defacto monopoly over administrative paperwork and interpretation of law. The situation is more monopolistic in tribal majority villages where literacy is drastically low. However, the traditional Korku *panchayats* as well as the government instituted *gram panchayats* provide a latent organizational base to the Korku community. These are organizational resources that are available for mobilization and takeover when the need arises.

### **Political opportunities**

This section aims to establish that the structures of political opportunities, as defined in mainstream political opportunity literature, are present in India in general, and in the study area in particular. Political opportunities for marginalized groups in India have been available since early twentieth century when the British provided political opportunities to Dalits, Sikhs and Muslims leading to separate electorates and various protective legislations (Hardtmann 2009, p.49). After independence, in 1947, the spread and variety of numerous social movements- peasant, women, prohibition, environmental, and separatist etc- further support this fact ([Omvedt 1996], [Raj & Choudhury 1998], [Ray and Katzenstein 2005], [Kumar 2006], [Arun 2007], and [Hardtmann

2009]). Moreover, the Indian state accepts special status of many marginalized groups, including the Korku, by providing them constitutional protection (as part of the scheduled tribe, scheduled caste, and other backward caste lists) and policy support (tribal development plans, backward caste commissions etc). The Indian state's permissiveness towards identity-based mobilization can finally be seen in the presence of numerous regional, caste and ethnicity based interest groups and political parties.

In the area where this study was conducted, the Korku community has lived in close proximity of two communities important to our analysis, the Gond and the Dalit, the first being an indigenous community very similar to them. While both these communities have different historical trajectories than the Korku, what is obvious is that they have faced and sometimes still face exploitation, domination and humiliation like the Korku. However, what sets them apart is that both these communities are comparatively more conscientized<sup>7</sup> and in better bargaining positions. Both these communities, especially the Dalit, are mobilized around collective identities and articulate highly politicized appeals for rights. Dalits may be considered stronger sources of inspiration for all subordinate groups since they successfully used legislation and legal recourse against humiliation, domination and exploitation. For the Korku, Dalit and Gond mobilization is akin to in-my-back-yard experience, since they live in close vicinity of both these communities, sometimes even in the same villages.

Data from interviews and focus group discussions show that the Korku are aware of their better state of mobilization, collective articulations and increased negotiating power vis a vis politicians, government officials and service providers. Guddibai, a Korku mother of three school going children shared her enthusiasm for school education, "I belong to a village

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<sup>7</sup> (see Freire 2000)

forty kilometers from here. I came here after my marriage. A lot of kids in this village had dropped out of school. In my native village there were a lot of Dalit families and the most striking thing about them was that all their kids went to school. The Dalits are smart, they know the importance of schooling. The government gives them job guarantee if they get education. Many of them are actually government servants. They don't depend on agriculture like us, they get a fixed monthly salary. I decided many years ago that my kids would get an education, come what may" (MSPI/11). Mewaram's son attended high school in a distant village. He spoke about what his son must have told him, "Dalit children are very hard working. They know if they pass tenth grade, they will likely get a job. I don't know any Dalit personally but I have heard they have a strong *panchayat*. I know of a village nearby where ten thousand Dalit people assembled last year. They had meetings and speeches all day for three days. There was a lot of feasting and slogan shouting. The local MLA also went to speak with them. The government even sent a police force to help them. I think someone from Bhopal also came to speak. I don't know what happened there but it must have been something important. Their strength is in their unity" (YM/January/2002/18).

Pacchuram, a well-travelled Korku elder from village D, commented, "unity is what you see among the Dalits. Touch them and then see the consequence. Even the police think twice before harassing them without reason. These folk are intelligent. The first reason is that many amongst the Dalit are literate, and the second reason is that they always stand as a group. I have heard that they have a monthly meeting where someone comes from Harda city to talk to everyone in their community. The law is also with them. No one can easily harass a Dalit." Pacchu's father once lived in a village, which also had Dalit families. He added, "they were treated very badly in the past. I remember they used to live outside the village and

whenever any animal in the village died, they were called to take away the carcass. Their women cleaned toilets in the *Mahajan* houses. Now many of them don't do that dirty work. I think they also have a MLA of their own in Harda city. They have seen some very bad times. But they have become very strong now" (AH/January/2003/8). Saligram, a middle aged Korku from village M, recounts what he heard at the bus stop, "A guy told me from the newspaper, a year ago, that a school teacher was suspended in Harda city because he called a Dalit 'Chamarya' (a pejorative term commonly used for a particular group within the Dalits). All the Dalits surrounded the school and the police station. Their leaders called someone in Bhopal. Korku people should learn from the Dalits." Saligram also makes a contrast between the Korku and the Gonds, "Gonds had a king till sixty years ago; he still has a palace in Khandwa. His heir is now a MP (member of parliament) in New Delhi. He has set up a Gond welfare committee with agents in all villages. If you harass a Gond, he can send a complaint to the MP. They are better united than us. In the *gram panchayat* too, Gonds have a better hold than us. We Korku are the worst, no committee, no unity, and no leader" (AH/July/2002/3). Mithibai lives in village F, which has three Dalit families. She narrated an incident from the school, "the new teacher once beat up a Dalit boy so hard, he started bleeding from the ear. His mother went to the school and made such a ruckus that the teacher just ran away on his motorcycle. The next day four people came from town K to meet her. They were going to the police station to lodge a complaint. The headmaster had to apologize again and again before she agreed to forgive the teacher. And look at us, no one cares if the teacher beats up our children to death, no one would come to help us. We are fucking idiots, we have no unity." Rewaram lived in village B, with Gonds and settlers. He had several Gond friends with whom he hung out. "They are better than us. They have more literate

people than us and they don't fear the *Mahajans*. They also have a strong *panchayat*"(BK/June/2002/11).

The epitome of un-utilized political opportunities was embodied in the *gram panchayat* (elected self-governance council). These councils are elected bodies set up by the government. All villages had a quota system where a minimal number of elected members had to be women or from the scheduled caste/tribe, or other backward castes. In the area of this study, the office of the *Sarpanch* was sometimes reserved for tribals and at other times, open for anyone to contest. These were the most immediate and the most tangible political opportunities available to the Korkus. However, most mixed villages with even Korku or Gond majority had settlers elected for all influential positions. Panchayat statistics from village M were fairly representative of the region and reflected the distribution of power:

Group	% of Voting Adults	Office Holders with influence			
Korku	81.7				
Gond	9				
OBC	4.1		Up-Sarpanch (Deputy Headman)		
Kshatriya	0.4			Treasurer	
Brahmin	0.1	Sarpanch (Headman)			Govt. appointed Secretary
Dalit	4.6				
Sikh	0.1				

In homogeneous Korku villages, though the influential positions were held by Korkus but the secretary, almost always a non-tribal, usually called the shots.

Evidence in this section suggests that there is state permissiveness towards identity politics, there are elected *panchayats* where the Korku can enter and take substantive control of local

self governance, and there are successful cases of mobilization in their immediate vicinity. In other words, if anything close to ‘objective political opportunity’ does exist in the universe, it seems to be present in the area that I studied.

## **Outcomes: expected and the unexpected**

### **Justifying inaction**

So far, I have presented evidence to demonstrate the presence of most of the elements that appear in the political opportunity literature within social movement theory. These elements also appear in the literature on racial oppression and racial social movements. If one were to follow both these related literatures, this section should have had incidences of a Korku social movement or organized protest at the least. However, reality surprised me by continued quiescence. However, this quiescence was hard to place because of the simultaneous presence of grievances, anger, clear articulations of indignation and identification of perpetrators. There were also numerous instances where Korku individuals are expressing rationalization of their oppression. These mixed emotions were hard to pin down. In this section, I present instances from my fieldwork as well as from other sources to describe inaction and quiescence.

The presence of Korkus, and sometime even Gonds, within the *gram panchayat* is nominal. They are either absent from most proceedings or are mere spectators where they are present in proceedings. In evidence presented earlier in this paper, we saw how Korku participation in the *gram panchayat* is manipulated by settler nexuses. Here, I present Korku views on the possibility of using the government instituted panchayat system and the existing Korku panchayat to their advantage. Most Korkus, whom I and the other field researchers

interacted with, shared varying degrees of pessimism, hopelessness and fatalism about both these institutions. Gangaram, a middle aged Korku, from village F, had his own reasons for not participating in the *gram panchayat*, “if we go there, we don’t get anything. If we don’t go there, we don’t get anything. Tell me why should I waste my time?” His wife, Jamna Bai added, “the *gram panchayat* is the domain of the *Mahajans*, it’s not for us. My family has never got any benefit from the *gram panchayat* even when the *Sarpanch* was a fellow Korku” (RMSK/30). Village M has the reputation of being very political if one were to believe local grapevine. However, Korku individuals in the village displayed strong disillusionment with the political process especially with the *gram panchayat* elections. Pithibai, an elder Korku women, said, “I don’t vote. When the government instituted the *gram panchayat*, I voted. Not any more. No matter whom you vote for, nothing changes. In the past we have had a Congress *Sarpanch*, a BJP *Sarpanch*, a *Mahajan Sarpanch*, a Gond *Sarpanch* and even a Korku *Sarpanch*, but nothing changed” (RMSK/31). Bagh Singh, a middle aged Korku, added, “sometimes I vote for the lotus (BJP), sometimes for the hand (Congress). They come every five year and go. I am where I was. What the fuck?” (RMSK/32). Sher Singh, another old Korku quipped, “they are interested only in your vote, they come to trick you into giving it to you. That’s it. Once you drop the vote in the box, you are fucked” (BK/March/2002/28).

Rewaram, a middle aged Korku, added “many years ago, a retired Korku school teacher from village Buxa filed papers for the state elections. A lot of Korku were supporting him. He could have won but then three jeeps, full of people, came from Harda city. They were in his house for half the day. After that meeting he took back his papers and supported the BJP candidate. They must have threatened him” (AH/March/2003/12). Gangadeen,



another politically aware Korku, distilled his experience, “look, Korku people cannot fight elections. That game is too big for us. There is a lot of money involved. Even if the whole community pools together resources, these *Mahajans* will not allow us to win. They will block us at every level. Everyone knows it. So no one even tries to fight these elections” (AH/July/2003/16).

### **Failures**

Evidence shows that while the Korkus have never mobilized for a collective protest against oppression, many among them may be on the path to assimilation within the settler-Hindu fold. However, data showed that there have been a few situations when organized protest or some form of collective mobilization could have taken place although eventually all such attempts fizzled out in the absence of support from the community. This section describes some of these situations.

On one occasion during my fieldwork, I came to know of a Korku *maha panchayat* (grand council) being organized in the forest. I managed to get myself invited through Korku friends who termed the event as ‘revolutionary.’ Although the meeting was at a place several hours away on a pot holed road, I was excited by both the idea of the meeting as well as the fact that it was being held not in a village but a secluded location inside the forest. Wishfully anticipating the beginnings of collective mobilization, I went to participate in the *maha panchayat*. The turnout was less than I was told to expect. There were seven Korku *Patels* and about one hundred and fifty Korku men from about twelve villages. The meeting was a disappointment. The convener, a young educated Korku man, began with articulating various grievances and humiliations that the Korku usually face, and the need to stand united. He went on and on about incidents of exploitation at the hands of moneylenders and neglect

from the government. However, everyone kept sitting without any emotion. There was neither any overt support to these statements nor the customary animated murmuring in small groups. Silence couldn't be more deafening. Several speakers took the dais one after the other with none able to engage the audience. After a couple of hours, someone inquired about lunch, and then there was the much-awaited animated discussion, sadly for a different reason. After lunch, discussion wandered into agriculture, the errant monsoon and personal familial issues. The *maha panchayat* soon ended with most participants trickling away after lunch. When I spoke with the convener later, he shared his frustrations at repeated failures in generating community support, "I have been trying hard for many years, these people just don't think about uniting against injustice, they are hopeless." I asked him what he thought about the local Dalit groups, especially the *Balai* community, that had mobilized into an assertive group. "They are smarter than us," he replied. On pursuing why he considered the Korku less 'smart' than the *Balai*, he had no idea, "I don't know, but there is something that they have and we don't" (AH/September/2003/6).

My fieldwork also includes a particular event that came closest to triggering collective protest, but it eventually did not trigger anything. In an earlier part of this paper, I shared an anecdote about a Korku woman's rape at the hands of the forest guard. This happened in village M. Like many similar villages, women in village M, collected firewood from the nearby forest. On one such occasion, an inebriated forest guard raped a Korku woman. The women reported this at her home, the news spread in the village and several men and women collected at the victim's house. While a few suggested going to the police and many saw the futility of doing so, most of the assembled crowd just could not think of what to do. Most of them came to get the news and perhaps offer sympathy. Geetabai, a

middle aged Korku woman known for her social initiative and organizing skills, spontaneously took up the leader's mantle. Shouting above the din she tried to organize the crowd, convincing them of marching first to the forest guard's office and then to the police station to lodge a formal complaint. While this did create a short period of enthusiasm among the Korkus assembled there, the crowd soon dispersed with the leading woman and some local men sitting alone. In later conversations Geetabai told me, "they just don't want to confront exploitation, I don't know why they don't want to defend themselves. They are cowards" (AH/Date unknown).

Evidence from interviews and field journals show similar pessimism regarding the revival the Korku *panchayat* and collective action against perpetrators. Kaluram, a Korku *Patel* from village D, shared his lack of enthusiasm, "times have changed. Now the *Patel* is a lame man, with no power. There is police and the court for all problems. The Korku *panchayat* rarely assembles. I am a *Patel* but no one listens to me. Every Korku is going in a different direction. The Korku *panchayat* can never be revived" (AH/December/2002/4). In another interview, Kaluram said, "thirteen years ago there was a land dispute between a Korku and a settler in village M. Legally, settlers cannot buy land owned by the Korku but this fucker manipulated the land records by bribing the clerk. Some Korkus were planning to go to the district office collectively. They were very excited and they came to take me with them. But I have been around for a long time. I have seen all this before. I told them to drop the foolish plan because no one would have listened to them. They took my advice; no one pursued the case after that. Now the Korku owner is a landless wage worker and the settler owns a tractor. That's how things are here. But what can we do, if we had gone to the court or police, we would have been in a worse situation" (AH/December/2002/19). Ramavtar,

another Korku elder from village B, said “the only time we Korku try to unite is to discuss the state level elections. Once every five years. Even then, there is no consensus. Some Korkus say vote for BJP, some favor the Congress. In the end everyone votes as they please. I don’t have any hope” (RMSK/33). Bijlibai, a middle-aged Korku woman who was a community organizer for a local NGO, said, “all the land that these settlers own here is disputed. The law does not allow settlers to own land previously held by tribals. If people unite, these bastards will have to run away naked. But our people are fuckers, they don’t want to unite. I run like crazy from door to door to get women together for a thirty minute meeting every week. The Korku will never unite, that’s what I can bet on” (AH/January/2003/5). Bhooray lal, a Korku elder from village M, was equally hopeless, “That fucker Mahendra Dhillon became the chief *Patel* only because we were fools. The Korkus in this village did not have the balls to oppose it. The *Patel* and the Korku *panchayat* was our only strength, and we just let it go without a fight. Korkus didn’t do anything even when their land was taken away by these sister fuckers” (YM/January/2002/39).

Bhaura lal, a young Korku with an outspoken reputation, narrated what had happened in the recent past, “you know that bastard Raja? Jairam Seth’s son? That fucker has been harassing all Korku girls who pass by the shop after dark. I spoke with some Korku men and asked them to come with me. I would have crushed his balls that day. But no one came with me. He is fondling everyone’s daughters and sisters, but we are not even ready to confront him. I also gave up. Why should I worry if these fuckers don’t care?” (YM/March/2002/32). The ‘problem’ of lack of unity makes a frequent appearance across interviews and observations. During an in-depth interview of Korku parents, Brajram, from village B, said, “there is a major problem amongst us Korku. We don’t know how to unite as one group.

Even if someone urinates in the ear of ten Korku men, they will not unite together. And see these settlers. If even one of them has been wronged, they will come together as a crowd” (BK/October/2001/21). Suraj Singh, a young Korku father from village D, added “We were not able to punish that rapist forest guard because all of us were thinking of how we would get free firewood in the future,” and another said, “if we fight the *Mahajans* who will give us the loan for buying seeds in the monsoon? We wont survive without their help” (BK/March/2002/19).

There were contrasting views too. Another Korku man discussed possible reasons for quiescence, “I agree that many Korkus are indebted to the *Mahajans* and that they can pressurize some of us. But all Korkus are not in the same situation. There are many amongst us who don’t take loans from settlers. What about them? Why don’t they stand up? I don’t know how long this injustice will go on” (BK/March/2002/14). Mithibai, an outspoken Korku woman, rubbished the economic dependency factor, “that’s bullshit. Look at me. Who else in this village is more indebted than me? I lost half my land to these settlers but I am not going to be quiet. But the problem is somewhere else. Even if I keep shouting against injustice, no Korku has the balls to stand by me. Not even this old fucker (she gestured towards her husband)” (AH/January/2003/6). And another elder Korku in village D said, “the only way is to unite, come together, choose good leaders and teach these settlers a lesson” (BK/March/2002/14).

Evidence in this section showed a wide range of responses regarding questions for fighting oppression, uniting as an assertive group, and demanding justice. These mixed responses contain the full range of emotions from oppositional consciousness, to hegemony, from anger to submission, from indignation to resignation and from hope to hopelessness.

While some of these responses suggested that that the future could see an assertive Korku community, other responses outweigh this hope with their deep set pessimism and a conviction that the Korkus would eventually fail.

### **Recontextualizing findings**

So far, the evidence that I presented has set the stage for analysis, in a discursive fashion. In this section, I attempt to organize what my evidence suggests, as the starting point for analysis. The key idea that I have been engaging with is about the political process model (McAdam, 1999), that remains at the core of mainstream literature used in the study of social movements in general and racial movements in particular. McAdam's model is constituted of three main elements- structures of political opportunities, organizational readiness, and cognitive liberation. I will briefly discuss each of these elements in regard to the case that I have presented.

The first element pertains to the structures of political opportunities. McAdam (1996) has synthesized various versions of political opportunities to arrive at a "highly consensual" list of dimensions. These are the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, the stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity, the presence or absence of elite allies, and the state's capacity and propensity for repression (p.27). The breadth of these dimensions, especially the second one and their, at once, catch-all and catch-none nature have been a recipient of harsh criticism from various post-structuralist scholars, as I have recorded in my literature review. However, I choose to forget this criticism temporarily and focus on how McAdam (1999) sees expanded political opportunities as facilitating social movements. He sees such expansions as creating one of

the two factors (the other is discussed below) that create an objective structural opportunity, “such shifts can facilitate increased political activism on the part of excluded groups” (p.42). Notwithstanding the fuzzy nature of the dimensions of political opportunities, my evidence shows their presence in the case of the Korku. The currency of identity based political mobilization in the Indian polity, as well as the constitutional protection of historically excluded groups shows the openness of the political system. Existence of formal- ethnicity, tribe, and caste based- political parties that thrive on identity politics, present across India, establish the possibilities of forming elite alliances. The machinations of mainstream political leaders who court ‘influential’ Korku leaders in times of state and national elections reflect the presence of, even if ephemeral, elite allies. Although the Indian state has historically repressed armed conflicts and secessionist movements (for example Punjab, Kashmir, North East and the currently full blown left wing extremist movements), it also demonstrates the propensity for providing discursive and political space to excluded groups and movements that make demands using non-violent methods. Hence, I assert that India in general, and the area of study in particular demonstrate favorable structures of political opportunities.

The second element is organizational. Organizational readiness, in this model, is pivoted on the presence of indigenous organizational strength (p.43), which in turn may be seen as the presence of indigenous structures, associational networks, or indigenous ‘infrastructure.’ McAdam has further detailed this element to include “four crucial resources” namely- members that can be recruited through their existing location within indigenous organizations) (ibid p.44), structures of incentives or “myriad interpersonal rewards” that bind members in a sense of solidarity (p.45), communication networks that can be used to spread news or ideas or cultural items, and leaders who can be called upon to lend their

prestige when needed (p.47). Evidence in this case shows the presence of the resilient, even if considerably weakened, indigenous organizations- the Korku *panchayat* (council) and the *maha panchayat* (grand council). These organizations have managed to exist despite severe structural strains brought about by government introduced gram panchayats (elected local self governance institutions). The Korku *panchayat* is still able to call upon Korku members to assemble when required by social needs such as local disputes and marriage negotiations. Frequent utterances where Korku informants have been recorded as using terms such as ‘we Korku’ or ‘Korku people’ or ‘us’ demonstrates a sense of solidarity howsoever diffused or weak. Further, the institution of the Korku *Patel* (traditional leader) has managed to persist despite the fact that its influence has diminished in comparison to the past. These leaders and their accepted prestige, howsoever diminished, is one of the crucial organizational resources that are available for deployment. Finally, several incidences of getting together as a group before electoral events and other times on the call of the *Patel* have also been recorded in several cases, demonstrating the effectiveness of indigenous communication networks. Overall, this case demonstrates potential availability of organizational resources that define organizational readiness within the political process model.

The third element is cognitive liberation. McAdam sees it as a subjective process “mediating between opportunity and action, and attributes to it a crucial value “this process must occur if an organized protest campaign is to take place” (p.48). He defines cognitive liberation as a mentality where people “collectively define their situations as unjust and subject to change through group action.” Further, he sees cognitive liberation as conditioned by shifting political opportunities that “supply the necessary cognitive cues capable of triggering the process of cognitive liberation,” and existent organizations that “afford



insurgents the stable group settings within which that process is most likely to occur” (p.51). Evidence presented across sections of this paper demonstrates grievances, and myriad indignations among the Korku. They identify perpetrators, and have a clear understanding of the unjust nature of their oppression. Further, several informants share the need for Korkus to come together so as to change the situation, howsoever impossible it seems by the sense of pessimism that other informants share. McAdam is clear that cognitive liberation should be present in at least some part of the aggrieved population, not all of it. This is true in this case too.

Finally, McAdam proposes that in his model “expanding political opportunities combine with the indigenous organizations of the minority community to afford insurgents the ‘structural potential’ for successful collective action,” and that this potential transforms “into actual insurgency by means of the crucial intervening process of cognitive liberation” (p.51). He immediately qualifies all these three factors as necessary but insufficient for a social movement and brings in the role of a fourth element “shifting control response of other groups” that limits the future direction of such insurgency (p.59). However, the point of interest here is that the mentality of insurgency, or of insurgents, is largely dependent on the first three elements. My curiosity lies at this pre movement stage where this insurgent mentality is created. In the present case, I have shown the presence of all three elements- expanding political opportunities, organizational potential, and cognitive liberation. The fourth element-control response of other groups- and its shifting nature may be read in the myriad acts of oppression, humiliation, domination, and soft repression. Although the fourth element undercuts my questioning on, why a Korku social movement is absent, the first three

elements help recenter my main question- why don't the Korku have an insurgent mentality or why don't the Korku protest?

## **VI. Conclusion and implications for theory**

Preceding descriptions of events, interactions, and responses detailed out various processes of domination, humiliation, oppression and hegemony in different settings. Evidence demonstrated how the Korku are subjected to economic, cultural and political oppression by unorganized individual settlers, how they are repressed, softly, by representatives of the state, and how they are coerced and persuaded by organized Hindutva entrepreneurs.

While unorganized domination, by individuals and state agents, was broadly based on racial stereotypes and driven by economic and social interests of settlers, explicitly assimilative practices employed by the organized Hindutva forces were part of a larger project that attempts to Hinduize indigenous communities by carefully manufacturing discursive practices. Taken together, both unorganized and organized domination often seems to create hegemonic effects on the Korku. This is supported by how they rationalize injustice and display pessimism. However, at other moments, this hegemony and pessimism is broken by anger, grievances, and oppositional consciousness. The balance between hope and hopelessness, between resistance and submission is unstable, shifting, and unpredictable. The case presented here and the quiescence that we have observed defies logic established by mainstream theories in social movement studies and racial oppression. These theories would make one expect at least eclectic instances of organized protest, if not a full-blown social movement. However, the expected did not happen in this deviant case.

The idea of hegemony may be productive in discussing possibilities at this point as it aims to describe the dynamics of domination and resistance when ideology is used between groups having inherent power inequalities. Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony (see pages 12,102,104,123,161,178,209,229,230,245,327,334) has been used in discursive ways in the social sciences especially within scholarship on political mobilization, collective action and racial movements. Its reverse concept, has been used with different names and can be seen in Moore's (1978) idea of 'conquest of inevitability,' or in or in Freire's (1990) use of 'conscientization,' or in 'cognitive liberation' proposed by McAdam (1982, 1999), and Nepstad (1997) or in Omi & Winant's (1994), and Feagin's (2001) reference to 'consciousness,' or in Klandermans's (2009) use of 'efficacy,' or in Mansbridge and Morris's (2001) idea of 'oppositional consciousness.' Literature on race has explicitly used ideology and hegemony as explanations of persisting racial discrimination and maintenance of racism. Omi and Winant (1994) use the concept explicitly in explaining how hegemony is fundamentally linked to the process of racial formation (p.56, p.66), and how it has historically been used to undermine political opposition in America, especially since the civil rights period. However, they propose that hegemony is inherently "tentative, incomplete and messy" (p.68) and that in today's politics, racial opposition is distinguished by, "its refusal of the 'common sense' understandings which the hegemonic order imposes" (p.69). While Feagin uses concepts such as racial ideology (2006, p.28 and 2001, p.32), ideological apparatus (2001, p.26) and hegemony to explain maintenance of systemic racism among whites (p.48, p.101), he sees hegemony failing to contain resistance among blacks (p.248). Instead, his systemic theory (2001) echoes Omi and Winant's sentiment, as he sees a dialectical principle in racism, "that oppression creates the seeds of its destruction"

(p.34). Bonilla-Silva (2006) agrees that if a racist ideology succeeds in becoming hegemonic, it has the potential of charming both the ruler and the ruled (p.26), but he also asserts that hegemony can never be complete (p.10). There seems to be a consensus within literature on racial movements on the impossibility of perfect hegemony and its failure to curb collective mobilization.

Discussing two apparently opposing views from scholar who work on resistance may help us understand how hegemony is deployed in the study of oppression and resistance. The first position is taken by Scott (1985) who shows hegemony to be an inherently incomplete project. For him hegemony always fails because the subordinated are never convinced by the dominant ideology (p.310) that does not penetrate the worldview of the subordinated (p.318). This failure is due to the inability of the dominant in meeting conditions necessary for hegemony to succeed (p.337). He also discusses resistance that subordinated groups always produce in the face of oppression, no matter how severe (1985, p.287 and 1990, p.160). Gaventa (1980) has the apparently opposite position in his ethnographic work on mining workers' quiescence in the Appalachian valley. For him, patterns of power and powerlessness, together, can prevent grievances from being recognized, positions from being articulated and demands from being voiced (p.viii). In other words he sees dominant ideology becoming fully hegemonic in certain conditions when certain prerequisites<sup>1</sup> are met (pp. 61-68). However, in describing the case he contradicts his position by showing that there were distinct grievances that mining workers perceived and that they even mobilized during the union rebellion between 1929-1933 (p.84, p.97). Further, he describes how later attempts at striking and rebellion (p.104) were neutralized by a combination of violent repression and corporate control over information flow (pp.105-106), not due to hegemonic processes.

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<sup>1</sup> (See Gramsci 1971, p.161 for conditions necessary for achieving expansive hegemony)

Gaventa accepts that even after the union strikes were over, grievances against the corporation were perceived and articulated even if they did not take an organized form (p.206). In short, this discussion also suggests that dominant ideology can never attain full control of the subordinated, or that perfect hegemony does not exist.

Against this general consensus, the case of the quiescent Korku, may suggest that perfect hegemony is possible. But, evidence in this case shows that it is only possible at times, and in specific contexts. At other times, it may give way to oppositional consciousness. However, this is unstable ground where the Korku seem to oscillate between hegemony and oppositional consciousness. It is perhaps not hegemony at all, it is something else.

At this point it will be useful to revisit the curiosity that has driven this paper. Why do we not have a Korku social movement? Why has there been no sequence of sustained acts of resistance despite decades of oppression? Why has there been no major organized protest by the Korkus? These questions cannot stand on their own might. Remembering their context is necessary. We know that the Korku have had a distinct historical identity with a language, religion, and territory different from the settlers. We know that the Korku have had a traditional organizational structure that helped them regulate their lives and allowed them autonomy in their own affairs. These organizations and the traditional Korku leaders still exist and are potential resources available to the Korkus for mobilization, if the need arises. We know that the Korku have gradually been deprived of their resources, land, crops, food security and what not. We have also seen that they have clear grievances against this recent exploitation. Evidence also shows that they frame their grievances around the idea of injustice and that they clearly identify perpetrators. Further, the government initiated rural

self-governance institutions, the *gram panchayat*, along with its affirmative action quota system is open for Korku and other indigenous groups. Their high population percentage (in many villages) can ensure both electoral wins as well as increased control over decision making in many local bodies. Beyond these enabling ideas and resources, the Korkus have a back yard full of social movement experiences- the Dalits and the Gond are much more organized and assertive than the Korku. The political status and achievements of these communities could have helped imagining the ‘conquest of inevitability’ easier. My questions stand within these contexts.

Finding answers to these questions has not been an easy task. A study close to my work has been done by Twine (1998) where she enquires into the persistence of white racism in Brazil, a self-declared ‘racial democracy.’ Twine shows how Afro Brazilians produce and deploy discourse to avoid challenging persistent white racist practices. However, my evidence shows a high volume of grievances aimed against settlers. Twine sees Afro Brazilians defending their faith in the Brazilian democracy. Korkus have a distinctly opposite opinion. Kaluram, a traditional Korku leader responded angrily to my questions about chances for Korkus amidst recent democratic changes, “Elections? We are fucked every day, by everyone, and you ask about the *Panchayat* !” (AH/November/2002/11). Twine eventually argues that Afro Brazilians do not challenge white racism because “it preserves harmonious relations” (1998, 150). My attempts at articulating an argument for this case have befuddled me, every time. The Korku seem to have no ‘harmonious relations’ with settlers. The quality of relations they have with settlers can best be labeled unequal and extremely negative. One cannot easily think of anything that the Korku were trying to preserve with their quiescence. Remember, that their language is dying, their land holding is

decreasing and they get humiliated without pause. The most audacious that I can get in putting up an argument is that perhaps even the Korku do not know why they have been avoiding organized protest and grievance redressal.

I had several seductive choices for wrapping my conclusion. The first was about deploying ‘durable inequalities’ (Tilly, 1998) to explain Korku quiescence. The second was about placing all factors in a conjectural universe where protests and social movements take place only when all factors fall into certain rare constellations. The third was anti explanation that Kurzman (2004) subscribes to when he says, “human action always retains a healthy streak of unpredictability” (p.4). The fourth was in the tradition of capturing and documenting all possible complexities within a process, that Mansbridge & Morris (2001) call “the empirically oriented path blazed by E. P. Thompson.” I chose to merge the last two. While agreeing with the basic unpredictability of social action, I attempted to ground this unpredictability within the situation. I organized my evidence to situate this unpredictability, and the ensuing failure in explaining, within a mesh of grievances, threats, oppression, opportunities, resistance, indifference, hopelessness, anger, hope and above all in the shifting nature of these elements. I created this mesh with rich ethnographic data from multiple sources, and it is in this mesh that I leave the reasons for Korku quiescence, entangled.

Finally, I argue that even if race based oppression exists and there is opportunity for resistance/protest in the polity, along with the presence of all enabling factors, the emergence of organized protest or mobilization is not as certain as social movement theories seem to suggest. I propose that there may be other elements, known and unknown, which may be critical to movement emergence and which may or may not be explainable. Many of these can perhaps not even be observable. Hence, protests, mobilization and social movements



remain hard to explain phenomenon that continue to evade academic conquest.

## Appendix I:

### Data used

<b>AGGREGATED Data used for this paper</b>			
<b>Type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>No. of respondents covered</b>	<b>Typed pages</b>
Parent Interviews	Reports of structured interviews	10	92
Student Interviews	Reports of structured interviews	9	22
Tribal Hostel Warden Interviews	Reports of in-depth interviews	2	10
Tribal Hostel student FGD report	Reports of focus group discussion	35	12
Village M middle school report	Profile of a government middle school	N/A	79
Village M primary school report	Profile of a government primary school	N/A	49
EGS report Village B	Profile of a government primary school	N/A	57
Field Notes (Aseem Hasnain)	Auto ethnographic notes	Numerous	40
Field Diary 1 (Yogesh Malviya)	Daily Diary from Sep 2001 to Aug 2002	Numerous	658
Field Dairy 2 (Bal Kishan Sharma)	Daily Diary from Sep 2001 to Aug 2002	Numerous	391
Scrap documents	Miscellaneous	N/A	600
<b>Total</b>			<b>2010</b>

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