

‘OUR PLACE IN THE FUTURE’: AN EXPLORATION OF CHALAKI AMONG YOUNG MEN DISPOSSESSED BY A MINING PROJECT

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Minati Dash

ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow,
Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi.
Email: minatidash@gmail.com

Abstract

In the mid 1990’s, Adivasi and Dalit villagers in Kashipur, Southern Odisha, strongly resisted a proposed bauxite mining project through collective struggle. The movement registered many successes but it could not stop the mining project. The struggle waged on for twenty years and eventually declined by 2010. Curiously, as the construction work on the mining refinery accelerated to advanced stages, contours of an emerging socio-economic differentiation became visible. A set of young men, appeared on the horizon, who closely engaged with the mining company and routinely obtained personal economic benefits from it. These men were active participants in the collective action and according to others had ‘Chalaki’ that others lacked. This paper is an exploration of Chalaki as associated with these young men to understand the implication of individual participation in the struggle on the socio-economic differentiation that came about in the refinery area villages as the collective action ceased. Engaging with Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural capital’, I explore how the networks struck and skills acquired during the movement that were used to advance collective action goals, were recast into a coveted form of cultural capital towards more personalised ends. Focussing on the trajectories of three individuals, I offer to make a case for Chalaki as coping in order to improve one’s life-chances in a context where choices are limited and uncertainties of the future loom large. I argue that Chalaki seek to personalise, localise, alter and actively shape the distributional outcomes, even if in a limited way. The ethnographic fieldwork for this paper was conducted over a ten-month period during 2010-2012 and in June 2018.

Keywords: Chalaki; Bourdieu; cultural capital; Sangram; mining; dispossession outcomes

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1. Introduction

In 2012, land acquisition for the UAIL mining project had reached completion and the construction on the refinery site was in advanced stages. The collective action, called *Sangram* that opposed the project from the mid 1990s in Kashipur, in South Odisha, lay in a state of decline. Throughout this period, the mining company, *Utkal* Alumina International Limited (UAIL) had assured the villagers that if they ‘cooperated’, they would get jobs and their futures would be bright. Young men appeared gung ho about their futures when the construction work accelerated. The transformations on ground spurred their dreams and aspirations (Cross 2014). There was a tremendous spike in labour work but there were no jobs for them. Over a short period of time, their assertions of ‘doing well in the future’ had turned to a shrill sense of anguish as futures appeared uncertain. Curiously, they lamented that the *Chalak* young men were ‘doing well’ while they-lacking in *Chalaki*, had fallen behind. In *Odia*, the official language of the state of Odisha, ‘Chalak’ is a connotative noun, implying a positive meaning when used as clever and smart, and a pejorative sense when used as shrewd and crafty. *Chalaki* is an adjective. Who was a Chalak person? How one acquired Chalaki? How it enabled the Chalak persons to do well while others lagged behind? This paper is an ethnographic enquiry into these questions to conceptualise Chalaki and its role in shaping socio-economic differentiation in the area after dispossession.

Studies on impacts of dispossession due to big dams, mining and industrial projects in India demonstrate that pre-existing marginalities in terms of class, caste and gender endure or even, exacerbate (Banerjee, Chaudhury and Das 2005; Baviskar 2004; Dhagamwar, De and Verma 2003; Mathur 2013; Mathur and Marsden 1998; Padel and Das 2011; Pandey 1999; Parasuraman 1999; Scudder 2005). Recent ethnographic works on dispossession outcomes due to Special Economic Zones, compellingly show that aspects of petty rentiership and speculative investment introduce an element of fluidity into the resultant differentiation after dispossession (Levien 2018, see also Cowan 2018; Das 2019). These studies analyse the mechanisms and foreground the role of petty land managers, neo-rentiers, brokers and *Dalals* (middlemen) – which are often, blurred categories and indicative of class hierarchies. These studies map its dramatic consequences for social inequality and rural transformation that ‘distribute winners and losers unevenly across castes and class positions’ (Levien 2018: 202).

Levien’s brilliant work on an SEZ in Jaipur, emphasise that the role of social (social networks around work and caste) and cultural capital (education and business acumen) become

important in making up for the lack of economic capital (landholdings, livestock, tractors and businesses) (2018: 114-116). Similarly, Das (2019) in a compelling ethnographic study of dispossession caused due to urban development in Rajarghat in Kolkata highlights the role and membership of lower castes and Muslims in informal cartels that receive patronage from specific political parties, in enabling them to ‘climb the social ladder to some degree’ (24) through contract works.

I focus on the strategies of the relatively uneducated and economically poor young Adivasi and Dalit men who lack any significant economic capital – dispossessed of their lands, and small and marginal farmers. What other resources do these young men have to better their life-chances? In so doing, I also seek to understand the lesser analysed aspect of implications of individual participation in collective struggle in an earlier period on the overall socio-economic differentiation on the ground after the struggle has declined and dispossession has been accomplished.¹ I argue that ‘Chalaki’ seek to personalise, localise, alter and actively shape the distributional outcomes, even if in a limited way.

In this paper, I attempt to conceptualise Chalaki as a form of cultural capital - a mechanism of coping as the young men challenge their ‘adverse incorporation’ into broader economic circuits due to mining-led rural transformation (Hickey and Du Toit 2007).

The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted over a ten-month period during my 2010-2012 and in June 2018. I attempt to develop analysis from bottom up by conceptualising Chalaki. To do so, I focus on the descriptions of Chalak, Chalaki, Sangrami and dalal that villagers provide to foreground robust analytical discussion.

To do so, I analyse how a set of attributes that developed and were honed through participation in the struggle over a long-term, such as improving one’s ability to speak in Odia, articulate issues in an effective manner before the villagers and the administration, developing the correct demeanour before the administration, which were oriented towards

¹ In India, studies of contemporary social movements began in the 1990s. These studies analysed various aspects of social action and collective agency- mobilisation, leadership, inter-group relations and strategies (some of the notable examples are, Baviskar 1995, Guha 1989, Skaria 1999, Kela 2012, Padel and Das 2010). I build upon this rich literature in analysing aspects of individual agency (see also Thakur 2019).

collective goals in the past were recast towards more personalised ends after collective action waned. To do so, I build on Bourdieu's work on cultural capital.

2. Bourdieu and cultural capital

Bourdieu (1984, 1986) was interested in aspects of social reproduction and stability. Drawing on detailed analysis of the French society, he argued that differentiation among people result from their possession of economic capital, social capital (quantum of network of connections) and cultural capital (knowledge and skills). The last two forms, could translate into economic capital under certain conditions. Together, the accumulated capital determines one's position in the social structure. The amount of 'power' one holds is a function of this accumulated capital. Cultural capital exists in the embodied state- in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body: accent, skills, demeanour, taste, preferences; in the objectified state- in the form of cultural goods: books, theatre, instruments; and in the institutionalised state – as certificates and qualifications. The cultural capital is unequally distributed between classes and class fractions. It actively shapes the differences in the manner different groups navigate particular socio-political contexts, experience it and tap the opportunities offered. The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state, for instance, 'presupposes', 'a labour of inculcation and assimilation that costs time, time which must be invested personally. It cannot be done at second hand' (Bourdieu 1986:244). The social conditions of its acquisition and transmission are somewhat disguised. But it functions by leaving 'visible marks that help to determine its distinctive value' (244). The symbolic profits of cultural capital are typically converted into economic capital (Fowler 2020; Bourdieu and Boltanski 1978: 220-221).

A second important concept introduced by Bourdieu (1977) is that of 'habitus'. It helps to explain how the existing practices reproduce across classes and groups leading to stable reproduction of social structure. Habitus is the 'learned set of durable and transposable dispositions' (77), that people acquire over a period based on their position –endowed accumulated capital. It is the 'trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways' that 'guide' individuals every moment (Wacquant 2005: 318). Habitus is expressed in the context of fields - the locus of relations of force. It is the site of multiple struggles and competition. Agents, with their accumulative capital, engage in actions and strategies that are consistent with their positions in the fields in attempts to maintain or improve their position therein (Wacquant 1989: 37-41). Time is crucial in Bourdieu's toolkit.

The notion of capital, habitus and fields- all emphasise the past - prior experiences, patterns, trajectories, perception of particular environments and ones position in it (Bourdieu 1977: 91), as crucial to shape actions in the present (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 137-139).

Though centrally concerned with social reproduction of relations of domination, change is possible in Bourdieu's conceptual framework (Bourdieu 2000; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; see also Bourdieu 2016, quoted in Fowler 2020). It can take place in two different forms. In the first form, individuals may acquire, accumulate and mobilise different forms of capital, i.e. economic (landholdings, assets, cash) and symbolic resources (education, networks) at their disposal. Such a strategy changes their location in the field of relations. It does not change the actual field and their understanding of the world.

The second form of change, outcome of collective action, is more fundamental: where the fields get rejigged. The actors, engaging in sustained collective political and social actions for instance, might transform the meaning, rules and legitimacy of the field of relations through the logic of practice (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 101-104, 109, 133-136).

Bourdieu (1984:101; 1990) illustrates that groups of individuals with similar forms and volumes of capital end up making similar choices. The logic of the field has more power than individual agency. Individual behaviour is explained in the context of impinging social settings. In such a conceptual framework, how does one explain *chaleki* that is primarily enabled due to participation and experience of the movement, yet which do not necessarily lead to it?

Recent ethnographic work in India has focussed on the nature of political and social practices of young men in context of neoliberalism - associated with rising economic aspirations and narrowing of opportunities (Gooptu 2009, 2013; Jeffrey 2010; Kaur 2016; Krishna 2002). These works explore the related concepts of 'enterprise', *Jugaad* and 'resourcefulness' as crucial ways offering future possibilities where ways of going ahead are formally lacking. The idea of enterprise assumes that individuals should conduct their lives as entrepreneurs of themselves - rationalising their choices in terms of economic sense. *Jugaad*- a popular colloquial *Hindi* word conveys a sense of making do or getting by, putting together ideas of resourcefulness and making do. These studies provide insights into the factors, forces and particular strategies of specific groups, focussed mostly on the urban classes -the middle

classes, lower middle classes and the poor. I look at the strategies of the lesser analysed rural social groups of Adivasi and Dalit young men (see, Krishna 2002). The next section briefly discusses the historical context of Sangram, its unrivalled trajectory and the corresponding transformations that occurred in the refinery area.

3. Kashipur movement and its decline

The anti-mining Kashipur movement arose in the mid 90s' in Rayagada district of southern Odisha, a Fifth Schedule area.² *Kondh* and *Jhodia* Adivasi and Dalit villagers in the proposed refinery area staunchly opposed the proposed UAIL project, which planned to mine bauxite from Baphlimali hills, one of the biggest hills along the Eastern *Ghats*³, and set up a refinery in the Ramibeda valley. In this mountainous terrain, only a quarter of the total geographical area in Kashipur *block* (an administrative unit below the district level) was available for farming (SLUSD 1989).

Historically, landlessness was acute and livelihoods precarious. Lesser fertile lands and hill-slopes were put to farming. Bonded labour and unpaid labour practices were rife. Unpaid labour was banned after independence in 1947, although bonded labour practices continued (Das 2007; Orissa History Congress 1982). Starvation deaths occurred every year. Moneylenders took control of big chunks of Adivasis' lands. The red laterites, inferior soils with low humus content, dominated the landscape. The villagers, primarily agriculturists, grew ragi, paddy, flax seeds, corn, and different varieties of gram and vegetables (Sahu 1942; Senapati and Kuanr 1980; Senapati and Sahu 1966).

In the 1990s', in the refinery area villages, only 30 per cent of the villagers could afford food round the year. Over 80-85 per cent of farmers were small and marginal. In many villages, landlessness was up to 50 per cent, Dalits being worst affected (Taru Report 1996).⁴ There was seasonal migration to industrial sites in the south.

² The Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution designates Scheduled Areas in regions where Scheduled Tribes reside to protect and promote their interests.

³ Eastern Ghats are a discontinuous range of mountains along India's eastern coast.

⁴ Agriculture Census of Kashipur block for the year 2000-2001 and 2010-2011. <http://agcensus.dacnet.nic.in/tehsilsummarytype.aspx>. Last accessed: 23 July 2019.

When UAIL project was proposed, the villagers organised themselves under the banner of Prakrutik Sampada Suraksha Parishad (PSSP - Council to Protect Natural Heritage) to oppose it. Social activists from outside came in and stayed on in the villages for longer periods. From the beginning, construction works and company-sponsored programmes were attacked by the villagers, who sometimes, took hostage the people associated with it. Sangram faced severe repression in the neighbouring centres of trade and administration. Villagers were routinely beaten up by policemen and company hired goons. This changed slowly, after PSSP mobilised villages over a much wider area. In 1996, many villages had accepted the meagre compensation, at the rate of 21,000 to 27,000 rupees per acre, following threats from the administration. The same year, Tata Iron and Steel Company, a partner in UAIL withdrew from the project. After three Adivasi were shot dead in an unprovoked police firing in Maikanch in 2000, pressure mounted on UAIL's other partners including, Norsk Hydro (a Norwegian MNC), ALCAN (Aluminium Company of Canada) and Hindalco (a subsidiary of Aditya Birla Group) to quit. Soon after, the project was suspended.⁵ It seemed that the Sangram had won. PSSP launched a wider programme of political education: starting night schools and addressing the issue of land grabs in the area. Fresh attempts were made to revive the project in 2004-2006. A police outpost was set up amid huge opposition next to the proposed refinery site and paramilitary forces swarmed this area. In 2006-2007, two villages were forcibly displaced to make way for a makeshift UAIL office. After a hiatus, PSSP became active again in 2008. Through a series of sit-ins in 2008-2010, in which 26 villages- which were going to be directly affected by the project, participated, company work was stopped for nine months. Displaced, Landless and Affected Person's Committee (DLAPC) led the sit-ins.⁶ In 2009, a conflict between the villagers and the company over employment led thousands of villagers to vandalise the refinery office and construction sites. Over 18 big company contractors, including Gulf Oil and Larsen and Toubro left, leaving the project to a state of uncertainty. The sit-ins continued for another year before participation of villagers dwindled considerably after several Committee leaders were charged with corruption. After 2010, there was not one incident of collective action. The movement lay in a state of decline.

⁵ Norsk Hydro and ALCAN withdrew from the project in 2006.

⁶ DLAPC was formed in 2007, under the guidance of PSSP, to negotiate the resettlement and rehabilitation and overall welfare of communities in the 26 villages with the company. It worked in consultation with PSSP leaders. None of the PSSP leader joined the DLAPC formally. DLAPC replaced the company constituted Displaced Persons Committee (DPC) formed in 2006.

Curiously, throughout the period of 2009-2010, the work of the company expanded. A class of small non-registered contractors from villages emerged who obtained construction works for developing village roads and drains from the UAIL. It included a diverse set of actors, including Committee members. These contracts ranged from 30,000 rupees to 87 lakhs rupees, in which the contractors earned 20-35 per cent profits. They flaunted a consumptive lifestyle that many young men found attractive. Many young villagers also received monthly allowances ranging between 1,800 – 5000 rupees. Yet, as construction work accelerated, the villagers were left to figure out their own survival strategies. By 2011- 2012, allowances had largely stopped and contract works, hard to get. During this time, the term Chalaki became popular. In the next three sections, I focus on the individual trajectories and strategies of three young men to conceptualise Chalaki.

4. Growing up with Sangram and Chalaki as ‘doing well’

In early 2012, I was on a train with Rajan Majhi, a PSSP leader, going to Rayagada district- 80 kilometers away from Kucheipadar village. A primary school teacher posted elsewhere, he had come home to harvest the sesame crop. He was angry about young men leaving farming and worried about their futures as most of the company jobs had gone to the outsiders. Yet, his eyes lit up as he spoke about his son, Tiri, who, he said, ‘sits across the (UAIL) CEO’s (Chief Executive Officer) chair to demand contract work.’ Gesturing towards the space between our heads, he uttered, ‘the boys know how to deal with the company.’ Such bearing and confidence of the younger people was unthinkable to him. After all, in their interactions with the surveyors, police, local politicians and administration during the early phases of the movement, they were threatened, abused and treated as ‘sub-humans, as objects of contempt and ridicule’ (Baviskar 2001: 366). Vidya Das, an activist, recalled her early experiences of working here in the 1980s, reflecting, ‘during survey, when I knocked at the front door (of a house), they (Adivasi residents) ran away from the back door.’ The older generation spoke Adivasi dialects and were not familiar with Odia. Though these years, inter-generational change have been visible in the area (Baviskar 2005; Shah 2011). The younger generation was relatively more educated. Tiri, for example had education till the ninth class. Many, could read and speak Odia. They dressed in trousers and T-shirts, unlike their fathers who wore a loincloth or a sarong. Curiously, the parents did not seem excited about their children’s education. Instead, some of them seemed proud about their sons’ confident interactions with the company officials (cf. Baviskar 1999).

The local police arrested Rajan Majhi in 1995 for participation in PSSP, Soon, he was suspended from service for over a year. He and his wife, however, remained active in PSSP. This had shaped Tiri's initial experience, 'dynamically inserting him into the social universe of struggle' (Bourdieu 1984: 565,105). As a pre-teen, he and his friends carried lanterns for night meetings; in rallies, they carried loudspeakers, sang movement songs, shouted out movement slogans, and put pamphlets across the villages. The activists gave them books to read and played cricket with them. Tiri recalled that as a young lad, he wanted to grow up to become like them, 'they had answers to all the questions. When they gave speeches, everybody was mesmerised. We used to grade their speeches out of 10.'

On numerous occasions, he and his friends, with other villagers and activists confronted contractors and vandalised on-going work. They sparred with local politicians and administration visiting the area, arguing over the meaning of development. Standing at the forefront of Sangram, these young men were called, '*Sangrami* boys.'⁷

In February 2012, sitting in the UAIL waiting room, I saw Tiri open the CEO's cabin's door and cheerfully enter with two other Adivasi young men. I had a clear view of the cabin. He handed a letter to the CEO. It was a request to approve ITI (Industrial Training Institute) training sponsorship for the boys accompanying him. He stood next to the CEO, who bent sideward's to avoid physical closeness with him. Tiri, however, bent further towards him, continuing to talk. The boys looked puzzled. The CEO agitatedly flipped the letter and curtly told him to get their bio-data. Tiri pointed a finger at the boys before leaving and said: 'Sir, please, these are my boys.'

When I went to see Tiri later in the evening, his house was crowded, as usual, with young men watching TV. Two motorbikes were parked outside. In another corner, Tiri was drinking beer and chatting with his cousin and a friend. They spoke in *kui* - the language of *Kondh* Adivasi. Words, such as 'company' and 'contract' and names such as, 'Satyanarayana'- the Administrative Manager (AM) of UAIL, 'Mohapatra'- UAIL's Human Resource Manager and 'CEO', came up frequently in the conversation. Turning to me, he said, 'did you see sister? Do I have thorns in my body that I couldn't stand next to him? Next time, I will take my bio-data to that mother-fucker,' gesturing an axe.

⁷ Sangrami is the adjective form of Sangram, meaning, a participant in the collective action.

The CEO was peeved because Tiri felt ‘entitled to claim physical space and appropriate interaction time from him’ through ‘a bearing and gestures that were self-assured ... expansive...’ (Bourdieu 1984: 476). After all, Tiri had opened his cabin’s door to enter without permission and made him an audience conveying his’ relationship to the social world and to (his) proper place in it’ (476).

Tiri was trying to get a construction contract of 16 lakh rupees from the company. He had told me that Mr. Mohapatra had made an offer of 50 lakh rupees to him seeking his help in disbursing the increased compensation to the villagers. On another occasion, when I was unable to contact a particular company official, he opened the call log of his mobile phone and asked me to make the call from it. ‘That bastard will definitely pick up my number,’ he giggled. He seemed boastful and smug. Contrary to my opinion, I soon learnt that the boys who had accompanied him got the sponsorships. He also got a construction contract inside the refinery, though of a lesser amount of 7 lakhs. As a contractor, he worked with other sub-contractors under him. A contract work of 10 lakhs for instance, generated a chain of up to 5-6 sub-contractors drawn from the networks of kinship and friendship.

I often spotted Tiri in the company office or spending time in the photocopy shops interacting with people of all hues. At least on two occasions, I saw him in the office with young men with sponsorship requests. He spent the evenings in the house of a prominent PSSP leader watching political satire on television and talking about his interactions with the company officials. He also spent time with his cousins and friends in the village.

He was immersed in inter-relationships and networks of friends, communities and important persons in the area. It did not appear as narrowly tactical ‘maintenance work’ (Bourdieu 1990: 170), yet he might be aware of the ‘rewards of networks’ (1986:250). Krishna (2002) in his study of *naya neta* (new leaders) in rural Rajasthan shows that these young men, drawn from lower and middle castes and better educated than others, made careers out their knowledge of workings of state agencies and negotiating benefits on behalf of fellow villagers. Larger networks and bringing bigger benefits into the village were crucial to consolidate their position (Krishna 2002:11,156). The worth of Chalak men was instead, determined by what they could obtain for themselves from their engagements with the company. This was a symbolic translation of their influence, good will and networks in the village and beyond.

Curiously, the Chalak men became increasingly visible with the decline of the Sangram, whereas most of the PSSP leaders and many of its active participants withdrew from political life. The latter retreated into their existing occupations as farmers or moved on to new vocations such as, tailoring, masonry, plumbing and becoming insurance agents. A few, immersed themselves in drinking and gambling. None of these persons were called Chalak. There were a few *Sarpanchs* (village heads) and Dalit landed persons, who had throughout kept their cards close to their chests - they were active in Sangram meetings as well as attempted to individually negotiate terms of their dispossession with the company. They became contractors once the movement declined. In this context, Baviskar's observation of main supporters of the Narmada anti-dam movement – including the prosperous middle-caste farmers and a section of resourceful Adivasis, managing well after displacement (2004; see also 1999) offers partial yet, a key insight into strategies of the resourceful in scanning their choices. What one found in Kashipur was that most of the PSSP leaders and many active PSSP participants had instead, chosen to not engage with the company, considering it 'beneath their self-respect.' Undeniably, they had the set of capacities such as, make arguments, bodily demeanours and networks. Yet, it was a set of frontline persons emerging from PSSP, who became Chalak by translating the 'symbolic capital' of Sangrami-ness and 'investing it as a weapon' (Bourdieu 1984:247). Participation in Sangram did not encumber them, in fact, it gave them a 'choice' to tap into their learning from the movement and monetise it.

Tiri voiced the popular opinion of, 'the company has come to eat us, we would also eat something.' The Chalak persons were conduits to PSSP leaders, villagers and the company. They were for all purposes, 'men in the middle'. I borrow this phrase from Nikita Sud's article, 'The men in the middle: a missing dimension in global land deals' (2014). Sud discusses the highly organised field of aggregators, brokers, touts, musclemen and others permeating the land economy. These middlemen, she argues, can be rule-makers who personalise, localise and actively shape the land economy (593). Like these middlemen, the position of Chalak men as conduits was critical (Levien 2018:104; Mosse and Lewis 2006) and fundamental to make gains (see, Baka 2013). They could become conduits due to their political background as Sangram participants. They were the men in the 'middle' in a variety of ways: leveraging their familiarity with the company men to impress villagers; using their embeddedness in the community to convey a sense of influence to the company; demonstrating their friendship and kinship ties with PSSP leaders to reaffirm their political

position; helping the kinsmen and other villagers to gain legitimacy. They aligned themselves to interests of the young men (cf. Krishna 2002; Thakur 2019). They were aware that their access to the UAIL office was provisional. Most feared that once the company operations would begin, its highly mechanised system of sourcing, transportation of mineral and transit, would obviate the need to engage with the villagers. As such, working as a Chalak person was full of risks. In early 2012, Tiri's brother had a tiff with a company officer. With the police on a prowl, the brothers remained underground for many weeks fearing arrest. I saw him after a month, undeterred, as 'the man with a mission', in his words, 'to help himself and others in these trying times.' 'Ultimately', he asserted, 'I want some stability in my life. There is too much uncertainty. I want a job in the company.'

Evidently, the Chalak persons were driven by their aspirations to tap the narrow windows of opportunities that presented themselves in context of uncertainty and insecurities (cf. Carswell and De Neve 2018). Their participation in the political struggle uniquely shaped their personal trajectories (cf. Cross 2013). It provided the raw material that they translated into practical individual capacities to enhance their economic and social status (cf. Das 2019)

The next section looks at the life of a dalal to understand the difference between a Chalak person and a dalal, and mutations in Chalaki.

5. The Cunning of dalals'

Several company dalals had switched sides from opposing collective action in the past to becoming leaders of sit-ins. They were called Chalak, in the sense of being glib talkers, who could easily influence the villagers. Over time, there were shifts and mutations in Chalaki. Traditionally, the term was used by Adivasi and other castes to refer to landless Dalits, who had earned the reputation of raiding standing crops at night, and stealing Adivasi's cows and pigs. It implied a sense of stealth. After the mining project was announced, it was used for dalals and those Dalit and Adivasi, who worked as agents of UAIL. More recently, it was used for the young Sangrami who engaged with the company for monetary gains. In this use, the negative connotation vanished, it was considered licit. In 2010-2011, for the first time, a large number of PSSP participants engaged with the company directly for allowances and training sponsorships, and successfully so. They were called Sangrami boys. In fact, during this period, a large number of young men in the area were given allowances, irrespective of their participation in PSSP. However, by 2012, these numbers had reduced considerably and

it was the Chalaki young men who emerged as small-time contractors, obtaining construction contracts and allowances regularly from UAIL.

Consistent with the existing literature, company dalals were seen as acting in self economic interest (Jeffrey 2010; Levien 2018; Manor 2000; Mosse and Lewis 2006; Reddy and Hargopal 1985; see also Krishna 2002 for an alternative explanation). Sometimes, the villagers also referred to the Chalaki men and PSSP leaders as dalal, underlining the fluidity of this term. Yet, whereas, dalals were seen as selfish, the Chalak men were popularly considered as socially helpful and even, as persons bringing development to the village.

Dalals played an important role in the land acquisition for UAIL project. They were company's 'eyes and ears' in the past. Of late, however, their role had truncated. Interviews suggest that those who became dalal for the company were lured by its promises of a good future and a monthly incentive. Many Adivasi dalals owned sizeable land; most of the Dalit ones were landless or small farmers. Ashok, a Dalit, was a dalal – turned -contractor. He was landless and tilled hill-slopes till 2003 or so. As a dalal, for each family that he convinced to get displaced, he had received a cash incentive (cf. Baviskar 1999: 2214). He also received several contracts and goodwill money to manipulate sit-ins. He had recently bought a tipper – an industrial machine, and a car of 7 lakh rupees, to rent out to UAIL. The contract for the car, hired for over two years, was recently dropped. It lay in a makeshift garage of his house. The tipper, obtained on a loan of over 24 lakh rupees with help from a company officer, also lay unused, in the plant site. Ashok felt cheated by the company and complained about his diminished importance – 'we held their hand and brought them here. Now they do not recognise us.' Becoming a dalal was a source of income and according to Ashok, 'a future insurance, if the project took off', but it involved grave personal risks. During the 1990s, they spent sleepless nights guarding their anonymity and fearing backlash from PSSP. Many, were threatened with dire consequences and a few, including Ashok, were badly beaten up by PSSP participants.

Many dalals acknowledged the role of company in their enhanced economic status and had a hard time coming face to face with their dwindling fortunes, after all the risks they had taken for UAIL. What insights one might draw from the changing fortunes of dalals in temporal terms? One can certainly infer that a set of skills that were important and potentially translatable into monetary gains in the past, were no longer of consequence. The mining environment had altered after acquisition was complete. The company was more interested in

ensuring the smooth operations at the refinery without any further disruption. So, it engaged with persons with political clout, such as the Chalak men, fearing that they might engage in disruptive actions. In these shifting fields, where the Chalak men were eager to tap into the available opportunities, the cultural capital of dalal was on its way to redundancy. Construction contracts thus, could be seen as a strategy of managing these men. Yet, in the risky and uncertain environments defined by distrust and insecurities, these ties were not relations of patronage, instead a vehicle for dependency and control (cf. Gardner; Rajak; Welkar). This relationship was not free from dealing with threats and fear of arrests from the police. In that sense, the relationship with the company and the contracts that these men obtained were not taken-for-granted deals. These engagements and outcomes were at best, uncertain, unstable and provisional.

6. 'Falling behind'

In a dismal scenario, where those who were considered to be doing well were grappling with uncertainty and anxieties for the future, what about the majority of young men who lacked Chalaki? It is true that the construction works kindled aspirations of doing well among the young men (Cross 2014). But what were the probabilities that these aspirations would be realised for them? What were their strategies, if they had one?

Many of these young men spent their days in the company office lawns or crowded the small photocopy and tea- shops that had sprung up across the refinery gates in the last two years. In his late 20s', Riju was one such young Dalit man from Jirijhola village. He left school after failing in VII class. He did attend the night school that PSSP started in 2001-2002 for a while. Belonging to a landless family, a crucial source of their livelihood was the small degraded *gochar* land (a category of government land) of 0.3 acres that he and his parents farmed.

On a wintry morning in January 2012, Riju and his friends had come to meet the Administrative Manager (AM). Their monthly allowances of 1,800 rupees that the company gave to many young men in 2010-2011, had stopped. In the last six months, they had made several visits to the UAIL office for its resumption. When we met, they introduced themselves as 'Sangrami boys.' The company officials had now spent many years in the area managing routine villagers-company clashes. They were familiar with the village power structure. They knew who were the traditional political leaders and the Sangrami; who was a Chalak person and who was not.

Though, educationally and economically equivalent individuals, the bodily dispositions of these young men were radically different from the Chalak persons. Their interactions with the company officers conveyed it clearly. Riju had met the AM on two previous occasions requesting continuation of the allowance, but nothing had come out of it. ‘We also have rights. But what can we do?’ he agitatedly reacted when I asked him if the meeting was fruitful.

Throughout the day, one could see groups of young men, dressed in jeans/pants, T-shirts and caps, waiting to meet the AM. The way these requests and meetings went was like this: Someone from the group would reach out to the local security of the AM, comprising dozens of young men, drawn from the Sangram. A written request would be handed over to one of these men. All such requests were collected and given to the AM. Ultimately, he selectively called a few groups into his cabin. Men spent long hours, nervously waiting for their turn. Once a group was called inside, the AM told them straightway that ‘nothing could be done’ or ‘you should come back later.’ In response to which, sometimes, feeble requests were made by them; voices remained low, bodies stiff and their manner subdued. It was curious because, Riju was sharp and well-versed in Odia. It implied, that linguistic faculty by itself had little worth. On rare occasions, some of these groups clashed with the AM. Adivasi young men asserted that owing to their ‘soft skills’, Dalit young men had gained much more than them. It did not seem true. I saw scores of Dalit men struggling to obtain training sponsorships, with little success (cf. Cross 2014). Their entreaties, docile manners and soft speaking did not yield concrete results (Jeffrey 2010). Their expectations frequently resulted in disappointment and failure (see, Krishnamurthy 2013). At the same time, most believed that only those who ‘ate company’s head’, could gain anything from it. The phrase was shorthand for Chalak men’s ability to talk back and annoy the company officers. Whereas, his visits to meet the AM went in vain, there were several others of his age and with similar educational qualifications who could obtain training sponsorships. He and his friends met a key PSSP leader for a recommendation letter for the same. They got a letter but to no avail. It is also likely, that the company extended help to those who seemed to have a direct stake in the project, such as, though landholdings or vicinity to the refinery area. He was also trying desperately to become a sub-contractor to a Dalit contractor from a neighbouring village. To become a sub-contractor, was ‘to get a respectable opening’ to earn some money in an area where jobs were scarce.

Steeped in visceral poverty, Riju and his parents worked regularly as labourers in company construction sites. His poorly thatched mud house, eight-feet in size, was built on government land.⁸ Inside, there were clothes hanging from the wall, rugs were rolled up on a corner below which agricultural tools were stacked. The mud-floor was uneven and utensils, a few aluminium pans and pots, earthen pitchers and a sack of ragi lay in the dark corner that served as the kitchen space. In the backyard, scores of their pigs moved about on the foothills of a small rocky mound. The lunch usually comprised of inferior quality rice - obtained for two rupees a kilogram under government's subsidised food scheme, and tamarind or tomato water or pumpkin leaves. Ragi gruel was occasionally made. They grew flax seeds, which fetched a few hundred rupees. During the agriculture season, he spent the early mornings hoeing, shovelling, planting and weeding on their farmland. Back home after a bath, he quickly finished lunch and ventured out to the company lawns with his friends- dressed in a pair of pants and T-shirt. The days were spent in socialising with young men from other villages. Riju often, sounded excited about the developments in the area, expressed in sentences such as, 'the area is developing a lot.' The irony was, he did not see his place in this transformation (cf. Cross 2014). Worrying about, his 'place in the future', he echoed what others said, 'they (Chalak persons) are racing ahead, we have fallen behind.' Yet, 'falling behind' was a euphemism at best. There were rumours of a coal-fired boiler to be set up in a large patch of land, where they farmed, threatening their only source of stable livelihood. Each passing day deepened his anxieties about how bad the future might be. Baviskar (1999), writing about a drunk Bhilala Adivasi, Jamsingh's shouting in his frightful night dream, '*gaav ma pani aavi gayo!*' (the water has entered the village) captured the nightmare of his village getting inundated in the soaring waters of Narmada, that 'lurked in the mind of every person' in Anjanwara (2213). This mirrored the state of mind of many young men in the refinery area, except that instead of the terrorising swirling waters that would devastate the familiar world of the Bhilalas at one go and more imminently, in Kashipur it was comparatively stretched- over months and presumably years, through the instrument of piece-meal dispossession instead.

Though, there was a spurt in labour work in the area, no young men wanted to become a labourer. They wanted work with dignity (Levien 2018). They considered manual work as 'inferior and demeaning.' In conversations with me, they emphasised their working among

⁸ In several villages, some of the landless Dalits had constructed their house on government lands.

friends and family as fun and different from informal labour, comparing their work to community labour, such as annual cleaning of the rivulets and re-construction of their mud-houses every few years.

But under the circumstances, if Riju could not better his life-chances through training sponsorships or becoming a sub-contractor, what are his choices? He might ultimately become a labourer. With widespread landlessness among both the Adivasi and Dalit groups, many young men shared these fears. The fresh rumours of company's expansion plans had further, caused an eerie sense of disquiet in the area. Oskarsson, Lahiri-Dutt and Wennstrom (2019), have argued in a recent paper that 'land grabbing for mining proceeds in an incremental manner' (1485) as companies increase its operational capacities requiring greater infrastructure for refinery inventory or impoundments. In June 2011, due to a clerical error, I got hold of a few official letters and maps of *khatian* (land records) related to land acquisition for a second red mud pond for the UAIL project. In light of such documents it is likely that the rumours contained a kernel of truth.

As such, a large number of villagers had lost their agricultural lands to the project. The company did not have any coherent policy to rehabilitate them: helping them to attain technical skills or give them jobs. They neither had the skills, capacities or money to take responsibility for their lives. There were a few young men, who wanted to return to farming, dreading the risks of migrating to cities to do menial and risky, in the brick kilns or glass factories (cf. Shah 2010). It was clear that the younger generation's 'desires and aspirations were different from their parents' (Shah 2010). They did not want to slog in the farms (Bardhan 2011; Gupta 1998). Yet, with little education or jobs, they were glum about their future prospects. There was a wide gap between what they aspired to be and what probable possibilities they had (Bourdieu 1984). Under the circumstances, farming was not a viable option in the long-term due to legitimate fears that the fugitive chemical emissions and spillage from the refinery could poison the waters and soil, and damage crops, further exacerbating their sense of misery. This also explained to some extent why the young men thronged the company lawns and struggled for months to obtain allowances and sponsorships.

7. Conclusion

Through an ethnographical account of strategies of young men in context of dispossession, I have sought to conceptualise Chalaki as a way of coping in a context where neither the state nor the mining company took any responsibility for destruction of existing precarious livelihoods and future uncertainties of the Adivasi and Dalit communities affected by it. Chalaki was distilled primarily from the experience of Sangram, steered by aspirations of bright futures and by transcending the ethical questions of engagement with the ‘demonic’ mining company. The ability of the Chalak persons to help themselves was based on their reputation and linked to their ability to help others from their own villages and kinship networks, both in their village and outside. Chalaki helped them improve their life-chances incrementally, yet significantly. Their eagerness to demonstrate political influence, provided a much narrower window of opportunity to a few more young men who were not Chalak, to obtain training sponsorships or become sub- contractors. Yet, the outcomes of the engagements of the Chalak men with the mining company remained uncertain, unstable and provisional. Under the circumstances, Chalaki, in a limited manner, sought to challenge villagers adverse incorporation into the changing economy. It attempted to personalise, localise, alter and actively shape the socio-economic differentiation after dispossession. Yet, a majority of the villagers continue to find themselves on a shaky ground – dispossessed, resource less and with little to hope for in the future. They worried about their ‘place in the future’, battling uncertainties and anxieties of everyday, as the ‘demon of development sat right there in their courtyard slowly gnawing at their bones.’

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University Enclave, University of Delhi
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Tel: 27667288/365/424

Email: system@iegindia.org