

**Negotiating Resource Control and Ethnicity in Central India:
Issues of Identity, Nationality and Statehood in Imaginations of the
*Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha***

Radhika Krishnan

*Visiting Assistant Professor, Centre for Exact Humanities,
International Institute of Information Technology, Hyderabad, India*

In November 2000, the Indian state of Chhattisgarh came into being, carved out from the south-eastern part of the sprawling state of Madhya Pradesh in Central India. Economic, developmental and infrastructural concerns and the purported ‘failure’ of governance apart, demands for autonomous states in India are often intrinsically linked with questions of ethnicity, culture and *asmita* [self-esteem] of peoples and communities. Even as they crucially highlight existing fissures and fractures, both social and economic, they have equally lent themselves to overt and covert expressions of regional and ethnic chauvinism. It is precisely in this context that the imaginations of a trade union operating in Central India, *Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha* [Chhattisgarh Liberation Front, henceforth referred to as the CMM], assume some significance.

The CMM, organising *Chhattisgariyas*¹ as it was, was acutely aware of the social/economic oppression of the *Chhattisgariya*. Its campaigns, in fact, emerged in the contentious cauldron of this situation. The CMM, however, thought it necessary to differentiate “*Chhattisgarhi*” identity from “son of the soil” formulations prevalent in India, formulations which indeed attempted to privilege region-based identities. The CMM countered the notion of “*dhartiputra*” [son of the soil] with its vision of “*shramputra*” [son of labour]. In this endeavour of the CMM one sees an interesting attempt to redefine identity, to isolate it from an uncritical invocation of ethnicity and regionalism, and to place it instead in the domain of labour. And in the process, solidarities were forged across linguistic and regional borders. This paper will thus explore this engagement with ethnicity and identity. In the present context where aggressive ‘nationalisms’ are asserting themselves, characterised as they are by xenophobia and narrow identity-based assertions, and drawing on real and perceived economic/social insecurities, the CMM’s imaginations promises to provide an alternative approach to neo-nationalisms and the neo-liberal economic agenda.

¹ *Chhattisgariya* here refers to a resident of the Chhattisgarh region.