

Sem-IV POL GE404 (Nationalism in India)

Tribal Movements in Colonial India

Many of the various tribal groups in India revolted against the forceful and devastating intrusions into their life and region by the British and other Indians. The tribals had been living peacefully and in harmony with nature for hundreds of years in their own forests. The British came and introduced many changes in their way of life and also introduced outsiders into their turf. This reduced them to the status of labourers and debtors from masters of their own land. The uprisings were basically against this unwelcome intrusion and a fight for their independence.

Causes of Tribal Movements

1. Imposition of Land revenue Settlement: Expansion of agriculture by the non-tribals to tribal area or over forest cover led to the erosion of tribal traditions of joint ownership and increased the socio-economic differentiation in the egalitarian structure of the tribal society.
2. Work of Christian Missionaries brought about further changes in the socio economic and cultural equation of the tribals and the mainstream society plus in turbulent times, the tendency of the missionaries to refuse to take up arms or in discouraging people from rising against the government made the missionaries to be viewed as extension of colonialism and were often attacked by the rebels.
3. Increasing demand for goods from early nineteenth century- first for the royal navy and then railways, led to increasing control of government over forest land. The establishment of the Forest department in 1864, Government Forest Act(1865) and Indian Forest Act in 1878 together established complete government monopoly over Indian forest land. Shifting Agriculture, a wide spread practice amongst the various tribal communities was banned from 1864 onwards on the reserved forest. Restrictions were imposed on the previously sanctioned timber and grazing facilities.
4. Extension of settled agriculture led to influx of non tribals in the tribal areas. These outsiders exploited them and extension of settled agriculture led to the loss of land by the tribals which reduced them to agricultural labourers.
5. Some of the tribal uprising took place in reaction to the effect of the landlords to impose taxes on the customary use of timber and grazing facilities, police exaction, new excise

regulations, exploitation by low country traders and money lenders, and restrictions on shifting cultivation in forest.

6. The rebellions by the non-frontier tribals were usually reactions against outsiders (dikus), local landlords and rulers, the support provided to the later by the British administration and intervention by them in the life of the tribals. The indigenous names for these tribal movements were Meli, Hool and Ul-Gulan.

Nature of Tribal Movements-The Colonial intrusion and the triumvirate of trader, money lender and revenue farmer in sum disrupted the tribal identity to a lesser or greater degree. In fact, ethnic ties were a basic feature of tribal rebellions. The rebels saw themselves not as a discreet class but as having a tribal identity. At this level the solidarity shown was of a very high order. Fellow tribals were never attacked unless they had collaborated with the enemy.

Three phases of the tribal movements.

- **The First Phase** (1795-1860) It coincided with the rise, expansion and establishment of the British Empire. The leadership emerged from the upper crust of the tribal society led by the traditional section whose privileges had been undermined by colonization of India. Main Tribal Uprisings- Santhal rebellion; Khond Uprisings.
- **The Second Phase** (1860-1920): Important movement- Munda Uprising under Birsamunda.
- **The Third Phase** (1920-1947): Important movement - It includes Tana bhagat movement/Oraon Movement, Rampa rebellion, and Chenchu tribal movement.

Khond Uprising: The Khonds lived in vast hill tracts stretching from Tamil Nadu to Bengal, covering central provinces, and in virtual independence due to the inaccessible mountainous terrain. Their uprisings from 1837 to 1856 were directed against the British, in which the tribals of Ghumsar, china-ki-medi, kalahandi and Patna actively participated. The movement was led by Chakra Bisoi in the name of the young Raja. The main issue was the attempt by the government to suppress human sacrifice (Mariah), introduction of new taxes by the British and the influx of Zamindars and sahookars (money-lenders) into their areas which was causing the tribals untold misery. The British formed a Maria agency, against which the Khonds fought with Tangi, a king of battle axe, bows-arrows and even swords. Latter Savaras and some local militia clans also joined

in, led by Radha Krishna Dand Sena. Chakra Bisoi disappeared in 1855 after which the movement petered out.

Tana Bhagat Movement (1914-1919): a tribal uprising of a section of the Oraons under the leadership of Jatra Oraon, a twenty-five year old youth of Gumla, Ranchi, occurring during the late colonial period in the Chhotanagpur region. In April 1914 Jatra proclaimed that he had received a message from Dharmesh, the supreme god of the Oraons to revive the Oraon Raj. He advocated that Oraon religion should be freed of evils like ghost hunts and exorcism, belief in bhuts or evil spirits, animal sacrifice and liquor drinking and advocated vegetarianism, austerity and restraint. As the movement progressed, agrarian issues came to the fore.

The tribal religious movement gave way to a 'no-rent payment' campaign as Jatra questioned the ritual subordination of the Oraons to the zamindars and illaquadars (those who had been granted land by the Maharaja of Chhotanagpur in exchange of the services they rendered) and Hindu banians, as also to Muslims, Christians and the British state. Jatra decreed that his followers were to stop ploughing the fields of landlords and were not to work any more as coolies or labourers for non-Oraons or for the government. Gradually political elements crept in as well and the movement developed an anti-British and anti-missionary character. The Oraons also questioned the traditional leadership of the pahans or priests and mahtos or the village headmen. Believers were ordered to avoid articles that were red in colour, including chillies and red paddy, for red represented the British whom the Oraons were to hate. They believed that true education was to come from Heaven and so the children were prevented from going to school and missionary schools were forcibly closed down.

The basic rationale behind the movement was that land was a gift of God and that no one had the right to interfere with the tribals' right over land. A 'no-rent campaign' was therefore launched against the diku landowners, as the tribals were unable to redress their grievances through legal procedures. Thus Jatra advocated that his followers stop the payment of rents to landlords. With the increasing domination of dikus over the Oraons a perception developed that the colonial state had failed to protect them against their adversaries. Hence the Oraons came to search for an alternative political authority of their own. So, economic grievances gave way to the dream of an independent tribal polity.

Jatra, along with his leading disciples was arrested on 23 April 1914 for instigating the tribals to refuse to work for the zamindars and the government and endangering the peace. They were tried in the sub divisional court and were imprisoned. On his release from prison on 2 June 1915 Jatra abandoned the leadership of the movement. Later he came in contact with Gandhi and joined the NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT against the British. A succession of gurus followed Jatra. Next in line was Litho Oraon who declared herself a goddess and preached on the same lines as Jatra did. She was also imprisoned and faded out after her release. In November 1915 Mangor Oraon took up the leadership of the Oraon movement and eventually suffered the same fate.

Rampa Rebellion- Alluri Sitaram Raju famously led the Rampa Rebellion (1922-24) against the British for their imposition of the 1882 Madras Forest Act, which restricted the local tribal community, particularly the Koya tribe, access to the forests to practice their traditional *podu* agricultural system, a form of shifting cultivation using slash and burn methods. Leading raids on police station, collecting stolen arms and ammunition, and killing British police officers, Sitarama soon earned the moniker ‘Manyam Veerudu’ (‘Hero of the Jungle’). He learnt from the Adivasis, the time-tested methods of war and added his own tactics to put up a formidable fight against the British. For instance, his team used whistles and beatings of the drums to exchange messages amongst the revolutionaries. He soon realised that the traditional weaponry would be of no use against the heavily armed the British forces. He thought the best way is to snatch them from the enemy and launched attacks on police stations with a lightning speed. The first of such attacks was made on Chintapalli police station in Visakhapatnam Agency area on August 22, 1922, with over 300 revolutionaries under the leadership of Raju taking part in it. Subsequently, similar attacks were made on Krishnadevi Peta police station and Raja Ommangi police station. They snatched weapons and armoury in all such attacks. A large contingent of Reserve Police personnel from Visakhapatnam, Rajahmundry, Parvatipuram and Koraput were rushed to these areas led by British officers. Two of the officers – Scot and Heiter were killed in battles with revolutionaries on September 24, 1922, and several others wounded.

All the attacks were concluded by a trademark letter signed by Raju himself, giving details of the booty in the station diary. Another hallmark of his attacks was that he would announce the date and time of the attack. The Agency Commissioner J R Higgins had announced a prize of Rs 10,000 for Rama Raju's head and Rs 1,000 each on his lieutenants Gantam Dora and Mallu Dora . It

deployed hundreds of soldiers from Malabar Special Police and the Assam Rifles, led by top British officers, to crush the movement. Officers like Sanders and Forbes were on the back foot several times as Raju dared them to stop him and his followers from carrying out certain attacks.