



CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH BIHAR

Department of History & Archaeology

Course content

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Course Title: History of Resistance- Tribal and Peasant Movements in colonial period

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TOPIC: Causes and Characteristics of Tribal Uprisings

The foundation of the British rule over India was the outcome of the gradual colonialization of Indian economy and society through several stages. The impact of this process was felt terribly by each and every section of the society and each of them responded to it in their own way. The tribal society, too, could not remain untouched by the colonialization which disturbed traditional mode of living. Their traditional institutions got upset which compelled them to respond in series of revolts and insurrection against the British government and its Indian collaborators.

Though, these movements were suppressed by the veritable butchery on the part of the rulers, but there is no gainsaying the fact that these movements marked the first and foremost Indian response to the British Imperialism before the rise of the organised National Movement. Thus, the tribal uprisings form a glorious chapter in Modern Indian History.

Tribal Groups

There were different tribal groups like Khonds, Santhals, Mundas, Koyas, Pahariyas etc. spread over a large part of the country. It is to be kept in view that the tribals do not refer to the classic food gatherers and hunters, but tribal peasants, who had settled down as agriculturists. Of course, they combined agriculture with hunting, food gathering as well as manufacturing from forest based products. Their relative isolation coupled with closure ethnic bonds perhaps differentiated them from peasants in general.

Different Tribal Revolts in brief

The Chuars revolted during 1768-1835 in the Nanabhum and Barabhum region in West Bengal. The Bhils revolted against the British occupation of Khandesh in 1818 that continued till 1848. The Ho revolted in 1820, 1822, and 1832 in Singhbhum and Chotanagpur against the occupation of Singhbhum. The occupation of Singhbhum was very much resented by the Raja of Porhat. His subjects, the Hos revolted against this occupation. There were repeated revolts of Kolis in 1824, 1828, 1839, and 1844-48 in the Sahyadri hills covering Gujarat and Maharashtra. In the Khasi hills in Assam and Meghalaya, the Khasis raised the banner of revolt under the leadership of Tiru Singh and Bar Manik. Similarly, the Singphos of Assam revolted during 1830-1839. The Kols under the leadership of Budho Bhagat revolted in Chotanagpur in 1831-32. The Khonds of Orissa revolted in 1846-48 and in 1855 under the leadership of Chakra Bisayi. The Naikadas under the leadership of Rupsingh and Joria Bhagat revolted in 1858-59 and 1868. The Nagas took the arms in Assam in 1882 under the leadership of Sambhudan. The Santhals stood up to the British in 1855-56 under the leadership of Sido and Kanho

in the Rajmahal hills. The Mundas revolted in 1899 under the leadership of Birsa Munda.

General Causes of Tribal Revolts

· Colonialism

The tribals were upset for a variety of reasons which spurred them to revolt. The root cause of their revolts was the penetration of the colonial rule in to their domain. It ended their traditional economy and social set-up which created conflicts not only with the colonial administration but also within their own society. The colonial system did not show any understanding of the rights and privileges of the tribals enjoyed by them for generations. The British identified the tribal chiefs as Zamindars and the tribals with the raiyats. They identified different categories of land, determined tribals' right in land, fixed rent and thus grafted the concept of private property in land on to the tribal system. Their communal mode of production broke down. The system of communal ownership or control of land and the use of collective labour gave way to commercial exploitations. Their traditional collective system like khuntkutti was destroyed and the tribal society started experiencing new type of agrarian relationship which was totally alien to them.

· Entry of the Dikus (outsiders) and Problem of Land Alienation

As pressure built upon the meager resources of the tribal chiefs and their subordinate tenure holders to pay more taxes, they were compelled to invite thicadars from outside who could generate more income for them. The new class of thicadars not only grabbed as much of the tribals' land as they could, they also missed no opportunity to harass and humiliate them. It resulted in large scale of incidence of alienation of land from the tribals to non-tribals and the tribals were compelled to migrate in search of other opportunities and to experience further exploitations of all sorts.

- **Money lenders and Indebtness**

The colonial system introduced a large number of moneylenders who worked as middlemen among the tribals. These middlemen were the chief instruments for bringing the tribal people within the vortex of the colonial economy and exploitations. The tribals, in view of high land revenue demands and the inevitability to pay it on time, were pitch forked into web of debt that only resulted in their alienation from the land. The independent tribal peasants were now reduced to the position of agricultural labourers, sharecroppers and rack rented tenants on the land they had earlier brought under cultivation and held on a communal basis.

- **Forest Issues**

With the advent of the colonial rule, their relationship with the forest changed terribly. The tribals had depended on the forest for food, fuel and cattle-feed. Contrary to the previous regimes, the colonial regime not only claimed but enforced its ownership of forest resources extinguishing all local rights in the forest. In view of the growing demands of large timbers, the first Forest Act came in 1865.it was further strengthened in 1894 on the advice of the German Agriculturist Dr. J.A Voelcker. The resolution of 1894 divided India's forest into four main categories- Reserved forest, protected forest, private forest and village forest and wastes. Thus, the tribals were deprived from their access to the forests, an important source of their livelihood.

- **Replacement of their traditional system**

The colonial system also replaced the traditional political system. Their panchayati system and the community law were now replaced by the new administrative and the judicial system. The tribals again fell victim to such a new system which compounded their problems. Oppression and extortion by the policemen and other petty officials aggravated distress among the tribals. The legal system was beyond their reach for their grievances to be addressed.

· **Role of Christian Missionaries**

In view of the growing influence of the organized religions like Christianity, the youth dormitories started disappearing. They were declared illegal. Adivasi dances in Akhara were abolished accusing it of promoting illicit sexual relations. Christian missionaries circumvented the very institutions which formed the basis of tribal cultural autonomy. The tribals were more upset at the attempt of the Christianity to promote conversion among the tribals.

· **Treatment towards women**

The tribals were also upset because of the treatment of the outsiders towards tribal women. The comparative freedom of the tribal women was taken for granted by the outsiders. In fact, the mistreatment of women at the hands of railway staff was one of the dominant underlying currents of the Santhal rebellion.

· **Beggar and cheating**

The various reasons concomitant with the advent of colonialism led the tribals to revolt. Though the reasons differed in intensity from region to region, but the complete disruption of the old agrarian order of the tribals, their distance from the forests, onslaught on their cultural autonomy and the exploitation by the traders, moneylenders and the revenue farmers provided the common factors for all the tribal uprisings.

Features

ü They were spontaneous movements.

ü They were local in characters.

ü They had some sort of class consciousness.

ü They depended on horizontal mobilization.

ü They invoked religious and caste idioms for mobilization.

ü They were only concerned with the redressal of their immediate grievances.

ü They were also mysterious in nature.

ü Violence characterized all tribal uprisings.

ü Social solidarity was par excellent.

THE END