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Tribal Movements In India

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Abstract

Tribal movements in India represent collective struggles by indigenous communities against exploitation, displacement, and cultural domination. These movements emerged primarily during the colonial period as a reaction to land alienation, oppressive forest laws, forced labor, heavy taxation, and the intrusion of moneylenders, landlords, and colonial administrators into tribal life. Major uprisings such as the Santhal Rebellion, Kol Uprising, Munda Ulgulan, Bhil movements, and Gond revolts highlighted the deep-rooted grievances of tribal societies.

Though largely localized and spontaneous, tribal movements played a vital role in shaping political awareness and resistance among tribal communities. They challenged colonial authority and exposed the exploitative nature of British policies. While most movements were suppressed militarily, they succeeded in drawing attention to tribal issues and injustices. In the post-independence period, the legacy of these movements influenced constitutional safeguards, including protective provisions under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, reservation policies, and welfare-oriented tribal development programs. Overall, tribal movements in India symbolize the enduring struggle for land rights, social justice, cultural identity, and self-determination, forming an essential component of India's historical and socio-political development.

Keywords: British, Hill, Forest, Adivasi, Tribal, Property, Zamindar.

Objectives

1. The tribal movements in India emerged with clear social, economic, political, and cultural objectives aimed at protecting the rights and identity of tribal communities. The main objectives are as follows:
2. To prevent alienation of tribal land and reclaim land taken by landlords, moneylenders, and colonial authorities.
3. To oppose exploitation by moneylenders, traders, contractors, forest officials, and zamindars.
4. To protest against oppressive British policies such as heavy taxation, forced labor (begar), and unjust revenue systems.
5. In summary, the objectives of tribal movements in India centered on achieving justice.

Introduction

India is known for its tribal or adivasi inhabitants. The term 'adivasi' connotes that they were the first or original inhabitants of the land, having original habitat, native to the soil. Rivers has defined a tribe as a social group of a simple kind, the members of which speak a common dialect and act together for such common purpose as welfare. Tribes live in a definite habitat and area, remain unified by a social organisation that is based primarily on blood relationship, cultural homogeneity, a common scheme of deities and common ancestors and a common dialect with a common folk lore. Their habitat and culture not only provides them a sense of freedom, self-identity and respect, it also empowers them to stand united against any kind of exploitation, oppression and harassment by outsiders like zamindars, kings, British and others. As a corollary, the tribal history of India is abundant with stories of uprising against the exploiters as and when such occasion arose

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(Wilson 1973). Before independence, tribal revolts stood primarily against alien rulers. According to Mahapatra (1972), most of the tribal movements had their origins in religious upheavals. Vaishnavist movements were one of the important religious movements found among the Meithei tribe in Manipur, Bhumij in West Bengal, Nokte Naga in Assam, Bathudi in Orissa and tribals in Jharkhand (Bihar), Orissa and south India. These were also found among Gonds in central India, Kondh in Orissa and Bhils in Rajasthan. In the early years of colonisation, no other community and even rulers of so many dynasties in India could put forward such heroic resistance to British rule and faced tragic consequences as did by the numerous Advise or tribal communities of present Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Bengal. Shah (1977) has stated that there were also movements against oppressing landlords, money-lenders and harassment by police and forest officials in Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Chhattisgarh.

Major Reasons of Tribal Movements

Various reasons have stimulated the tribals for uprising. Historically speaking, however, there is a qualitative shift in tribal movement in independent India as compared to the period before 1947. Let us begin by explaining this difference.

Paths of Tribal Movements

There are only two paths of any kind of movement: nonviolent and violent. The non-violent path is based on bargaining and negotiating with the government and using a variety of pressure tactics without resorting to violence/revolts. On the other hand, the violent path is militant path of revolts or mass struggles based on developing the fighting power of the oppressed tribal strata. The importance of both these paths is different. One indicates struggle generated to reshape and reform, while the other indicates structural transformation of the community. For example Tana Bhagat movement was nonviolent and Muriya Movement was one of the violent insurgent of tribals. The Tana Bhagat movement is also an example of what M.N. Srinivas called as 'sanskritization'. These tribals found solutions to their problems by the acceptance of new life style, values and beliefs. Those who converted to this new life are known as Bhagat.

Spectrum of Major Tribals Movements in India

In 1976, the Anthropological Survey of India had identified 36 tribal movements in the country. Raghavaiah (1971) has listed 70 revolts from 1978 to 1971, while various other scholars (Mathur 1988; Fuchs 1965; Shah 1990; Sharma 1986; Singh 1972) have argued that instances of tribal movements could be traced even before 1768. Singh (1982) has divided all these movements into three faces. The first face was between 1778 and 1860 and these coincide with the rise, expansion and establishment of the British Empire. The second face covers the period of

colonialism when merchant capital penetrated into tribal economy affecting their relationship with the land and forest. The third phase deals with the period from 1920 till the achievement of independence in 1947. During this phase the tribals not only began to launch the so called separatist movement but at the same time participated in nationalist and agrarian movements.

The Kol Revolt

The Kol tribe was the inhabitant of Chotanagpur. They preferred an independent life. The main reason of Kol revolt was imposition of new taxes by the king of Porhat. In 1820, the king of Porhat agreed to support the British and pay them huge taxes annually. In return, he claimed the neighbouring Kol region for collection of taxes. He went on to collect taxes from the Kols. The Kols resented against this kind of taxes and a few officials were killed by them. The British then sent troops in support of the king. The Kols took up traditional arms like bows and arrows to face British troops armed in modern weapons. They revolted very bravely but had to surrender in 1821. In 1831 the Kols rose again because the region of Chotanagpur was leased out to Hindu, Muslim and Sikh money lenders for revenue collection. The oppressive tactics of money lenders, high revenue rates, British judicial and vulnerable revenue policies devastated the traditional socio-cultural framework of the Kols. They gathered under the leadership of Bir Budhu Bhagat, Joa Bhagat, Jhindrai Manki and Sui Munda.

The Santhal Revolt

The Santhals were mainly agriculturalists living in the dense forests of Bankura, Midnapur, Birbhum, Manbhum, Chotanagpur and Palamou. The Santhals fled their original land (Bhagalpur and Manbhoom) when the oppressive zamindars brought that land under Company's revenue control. They started living and farming in hill of Rajmahal, calling it Damin-i-Koh. But their oppressors followed them and exploitation started in full swing. Apart from the zamindari and British Company, local moneylenders also cheated them with high interest rates. The simple minded Santals reeled under loans and taxes and had to lose everything. Sidhu and Kanhu, the two brothers, rose against these dreadful activities. Santhals assembled at the Bhagnadihi fields on 30 June 1855 and pledged to establish a free Santhal state. The rebels' ranks swelled and they numbered nearly 50,000 from early 10000.

Koi Revolt

Koi revolt is an important mass uprising among the tribals of Bastar. The people of the Jamindaris, who were involved in the cutting of trees, were known as Kois, which subsequently became the name of the revolution. The rebellion stood against the autocratic and dominant British rule. A vital revolution among the other tribal

rebellions, Koi revolt is considered as a serious uprising that resulted in a considerable change in its aftermath. The tribal people denied the decision of the British, which offered the contracts of cutting of Sal trees to people outside the region of Bastar. The outside contractors who were offered the contract of cutting the trees were also known to exploit the innocent tribal people in many ways. This added to the problem and the tribal men were exploited both economically as well as mentally. When the water rose above their heads, the tribal people of Bastar collectively decided that they would not tolerate the cutting of a single tree.

Paralkot Rebellion

In 1825, the Paralkot rebellion was a symbol of protest against foreign rules by Abujhmaris, who were the inhabitants of the present day state of Chhattisgarh. The anger of Abujhmaris mainly originated against the foreign rulers like the Marathas and the British. Gend Singh led the revolt of Paralkot and the other Abujhmaris supported him. The purpose of this rebellion was to acquire a world that is free from all outsiders. In the time of Maratha Dynasty, Abujhmaris were levied heavy tax, which was impossible for them to pay. So, they revolted against the injustice by the foreign powers. One thing noteworthy of this movement was the desire of the Abujhmaris to build an independent Bastar, free of foreign intrusion. The Paralkot revolt is one of the important tribal rebellions in the history of the Indian state of Chhattisgarh.

Halba rebellion

The event of Halba rebellion took place in the Bastar District in Chhattisgarh. The Halba rebellion started against the Marathas and the British in the year 1774 after the decline of the Chalukyas. The governor of Dongar, Ajmer Singh, was the initiator leader of the revolt of Halba. The movement of Halba was aimed at creating a new and independent state in Dongar. The Halbas stood beside Ajmer Singh as the soldiers. Another reason for insurgency was lack of money and food in the hands of the common people. Added to this huge problem, there was the pressure and fear caused by the Maratha and the British which eventually resulted in the uprising. Many of the Halba tribal people were killed by the British and Maratha armies. Subsequently, the army of Halba was also defeated.

Maria Rebellion

The uprising of Maria Tribe was a prolonged rebellion in Bastar; it continued for twenty years from 1842 to 1863. It was apparently fought to preserve the practice of human sacrifice. The AngloMaratha Rule forced the aboriginal tribes to part with their tribal faiths and practices. The British and the Marathas used to enter the temples constantly, which according to the innocent beliefs of the

tribal people polluted the sacred atmosphere of the temples. The only way to save the identity of the Marias was to revolt against the invaders. The Maria Rebellion is considered one of the major tribal rebellions for their expression of particular identity and socio-cultural specificity.

Muria Rebellion

Muria rebellion of 1876 is another revolt that appeared in the region of Bastar. It is a great booster for the ill treated and suppressed people of all ages, all over the country. In the year 1867, Gopinath Kapardas was selected as the Diwan of the state of Bastar. Gopinath Kapardas used to exploit the simple and innocent tribal people. The tribal people appealed to the King to remove the Diwan from the position, but the King did not support their subjects. Being repeatedly neglected by the King, the Murias were left with only one option: to revolt. On second March of the year 1876, the raging tribal people enclosed Jagdalpur, the abode of the King. The Muria people besieged the King and blocked all the ways of exit. Surrounded by all sides, the King faced real inconvenience to inform the British about the unrest that had generated among the tribal people.

Tarapur Rebellion

Tarapur rebellion is a great example of the tribal rebellions in Bastar, the present Chhattisgarh. The common people of Bastar stood against the foreign rulers. The revolt of Tarapur took place from 1842 to 1854. The native people of Bastar felt that their local tradition and culture were being considerably harmed and the social, political as well as economic interests were being hampered. Thus, they stood against the Anglo-Maratha reign in order to restore their native culture and protest against imposition of heavy taxes. The local Diwan, who used to collect the taxes from the common people, became the symbol of oppression for them. The tribal rage grew more and more, resulting in the Tarapur rebellion.

Bodo Movement

The Bodos are recognized as a plains tribe in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The major objective of the Bodo movement was to have a separate state of their own. Since the colonial period, there had been attempts to subsume the Bodos under the umbrella of Assamese nationalism. Therefore, it was under the British rule that the Bodos first raised the demand for a separate homeland along with the hill tribes of the northeast. The formation of the All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPT) in 1933 was evidence enough. Subsequently, formation of organisations such as the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) in 1952, Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), and All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) in 1967 reflected the Bodo people's quest for political power and self-determination.

The movement of ABSU began with the slogan “Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty”. In order to spearhead the movement, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) created a political organization called the Bodo People’s Action Committee (BPAC). Initially, the ABSU and PTCA worked in tandem to put forth the demand for a separate homeland for the Bodos, but ABSU withdrew its support to PTCA in 1979 when they felt that the PTCA had failed to fulfill the aspirations of the Bodo people for a separate state during the reorganisation process of Assam.

Jharkhand Movement

The Jharkhand movement in Bihar is a movement of tribal communities consisting of settled agriculturalists who are sensitised to Vaishnavism. There were major cultural changes in the life of tribals since 1845 when the Christian missionaries first arrived in Jharkhand. Many tribes were converted into Christianity and many schools including higher institutions for both the sexes were established for educating the tribals. The impact of modern education on the changing aspirations of the tribal boys and girls became evident later. As against such positive development, the tribals also had to face many problems due to extraction of mineral wealth from Jharkhand. The region is a rich source of coal and iron. Even bauxite, copper, asbestos, limestone and graphite are also found there. Coal mining in this region had started in the year 1856 itself. In the year 1907, the Tata Iron and Steel Factory was established in Jamshedpur. Since independence, much emphasis was laid on planned industrialization concentrating on heavy industries especially on the expansion of mining. Interestingly, the Jharkhand region contributed to 75 percent of the revenue of Bihar. The Government began acquiring the lands of the tribals, but did not resettle and rehabilitate them.

Bhumkal

The Bhumkal rebellion took place in the year 1910 in the present Indian state of Chhattisgarh. It was a widespread rebellion. Tribal people of forty six out of the eighty four parganas of the district of Bastar participated in this movement. According to most of the historians, the origin of the Bhumkal protest movement was rooted in the previous rebellious movements that took place in this region. It was a movement based in the earlier struggle of the tribal people of Bastar to protect and preserve their tradition, culture and customs. The revolt of the tribal people of Bastar was to reassert their rights on the forests and other natural resources of this area. It is because all their customs, culture and economic activities depended on their basic belief about the relation between man and nature. The sudden dispossession of the forestland since 1908 when the British declared the forests as ‘reserved zones’ initiated the Bhumkal rebellion.

Bhil Rebellion

The Bhils are a tribe of central India, mainly distributed in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, who traditionally had an identity of guerrilla fighters and warriors. Under the Moghul Emperors, they could peacefully live the life of a hunter-gatherers; but they faced persecution under the Marathas. They took to the jungles and became less acquiescent to authority. In 1818, when the British organised the princely states of Central India into the Central India Agency, centred on the town of Neemuch (north-west Madhya Pradesh, close to the border with Rajasthan), they attempted to bring the Bhils from the hill. But the Bhils did not like this. The Bhil’s main objection was similar to that of nomadic hunter gatherers anywhere in the colonised world, whether it is Apache or Sioux in America, Bushmen in South Africa and aborigines in Australia. Therefore, in 1825 the British created a Bhil Agency, specifically to deal with them and a Bhil Corps was formed, in an attempt to quell the less cooperative tribesmen.

Tana Bhagat Movement

Tana Bhagats is a tribal community of Jharkhand. This community were formed by Oaron saints Jatra Bhagat and Turia Bhagat. In its earlier phase, it was called as Kurukh Dharam. Kurukh is literally the original religion of the Oraons. The movement was against the Zamindars, missionaries and British. Tana Bhagats were followers of Mahatma Gandhi and believes in Non-violence. They opposed the taxes imposed on them by the British and they staged a Satyagraha (civil disobedience movement) even joined Gandhi’s satyagraha movement.

Munda Rebellion

This rebellion was led by Birsa Munda in the south of Ranchi in the year 1899 against of land alienation. The “Great Tumult” aimed to establish Munda Raj and independence. Traditionally, the Mundas enjoyed a preferential rent rate known as the khuntkattidar, which meant the original clearer of the forest. However, in course of time, the Mundas realized that this system of khuntkattidar is being corroded by the jagirdars and thikadars who came as moneylenders and as traders. After the establishment of the British rule, the movement into the tribal regions by the non-tribals increased. This, in turn, led to increase in the practice of forced labour. The tribal people became more aware of their rights due to the spread of education, which was provided by the missionaries.

Conclusion of Different Tribal Movements in India:

The tribal movements in India were significant expressions of resistance against exploitation, injustice, and cultural suppression faced by tribal communities during both the colonial and post-colonial periods. These movements arose mainly due to land alienation, forest

laws, forced labor, heavy taxation, and interference in tribal social and cultural life.

Although most tribal movements were localized and lacked nationwide coordination, they played a crucial role in awakening political consciousness among tribal people. Movements such as the Santhal Rebellion, Munda Ulgulan, Bhil Revolts, Kol Uprising, and Gond movements challenged colonial authority and exploitative landlords, moneylenders, and forest officials. While many of these uprisings were suppressed by force, they exposed the injustices of colonial policies.

In the long run, tribal movements contributed to important administrative and legal reforms. The British government introduced protective laws related to land rights, forest use, and tribal administration. In independent India, these struggles influenced constitutional safeguards, including the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, reservation policies, and special development programs for Scheduled Tribes.

Overall, tribal movements in India were not merely rebellions but powerful struggles for identity, dignity, and self-rule. They laid the foundation for tribal rights, social justice, and inclusive development, making them an integral part of India's freedom struggle and nation-building process.

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