



TRIBALS, DIKUS AND THE VISION OF A GOLDEN AGE

HISTORY

Tribe is a social group consisting of people of the same race who have the same beliefs, customs, language, etc. and usually live in one particular area ruled by their leader. The term 'tribe' is a colonial invention. It was akin to differentiation of people based on race, skin colour, nationality and regional origin. The people related to tribes are called **tribals**. Columbus called the native people of North America as Red Indians and the British commissioners later called them as **Indian Tribes**. The term caught on when the British took control of India. However, we call them Adivasi, that is, original inhabitants of a place. They were also called as **forest** or **hill people**. The tribal people mostly live in remote areas and are concentrated in heavily forested areas. They did not follow social rules and rituals of the caste society. There are hundreds of tribes in India. The features of tribal life reveal the original man-nature relationship :

- (i) All those who belonged the same tribe thought of themselves as sharing common ties of kinship. They did not have the sharp social divisions that were characteristic of caste societies. They married generally with their own tribe.
- (ii) Their main economic activities were hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation.
- (iii) Members of a tribe were bound together by a similar language, culture and customs. They had social and cultural identity of their own. Each group had its own folk dance form, music, musical instruments and other aspects of culture.



Tribal groups in different parts of India

- (iv) Each tribe had almost its own dialect for communication. This dialect may be strikingly different from those of other groups in the adjoining area.
- (v) Most tribals considered land as belonging to the whole group.
- (vi) Each group had its own rules for living and was governed by their own group leader.
- (vii) They had their own religion and practices. However, most such practices had commonality with Hinduism.

In 1931, India had about 23 million tribal populations. These tribal communities were concentrated in certain geographic regions : (i) Himalayan foot hills, (ii) North-East, (iii) Central India, and (iv) Southern hills and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Each tribal group had its own name.

The sources of tribal history are mainly their ballads and folklores, which have passed on from one generation to the other orally. There are also official documents, gazettes, newspapers and biographies of the recent years.

Life and Occupations of the Tribal Groups

The tribals were primarily the gatherers of several kinds of forest produce. The men used to go on seasonal hunting. Later on, they turned to cultivation and herding. By the nineteenth century, tribal groups were involved in a variety of activities in different parts of India.

Jhum Cultivation

Jhum cultivation means shifting cultivation. The cultivators cleared small patches of land mostly in forests. They cut the tree-tops to allow sunlight to reach ground. Then they burnt the plants to ashes on the land. They mixed the ash with the soil to increase its fertility. The soil was scratched with hoe to prepare it and the seeds were scattered (broadcast method of sowing seeds). The plough was not used. After the crop grew and riped and harvested, they left the field fallow for several years. Then they shifted to clear another patch of land further in the forest. Shifting cultivators were usually found in the hilly and forested tracts of north-east and central India.

Hunting and Gathering

In many regions tribal groups like Khands in the forest of Orissa depended upon collective hunt and gathering fruits, roots, etc. They cooked food with the oil they extracted from the seeds of the sal and mahua. They used many shrubs and herbs as medicine. Forest produce was sold by them in the local markets, for example, the local dyers bought kusum and plash flowers from the Khands. Sometimes they earned some money by labouring in the fields of peasants, carrying loads or building roads, etc. They used to buy grains with this money or in exchange of forest produce. However, it was below the dignity of some tribals like the Baigas of central India to become a labourer.



Santhal girl carrying firewood

Some traders came to sell goods that were not produced within the locality. These were often sold at high prices. Then the tribals reached the moneylenders who charged high interest on the loans. The cycle of debt led to poverty so the tribals came to see the traders and the moneylenders as dikus meaning evil outsiders, the cause of their suffering.

Herding

Many tribal groups were pastoralists who herded and reared animals. Their animals grazed freely usually on the hills and jungles. Where the grass in one place was exhausted, they moved to another place. The Van Gujjars of the Punjab hills and the Labadis of Andhra Pradesh herded cattle, the Bakarwals of Kashmir reared goats and the Gaddis of Kulu reared sheep.

Settled Cultivation

Many tribals began to settle down, that is, cultivating their fields in one place year after year. They also learnt the use of plough. They gradually got rights over the land they live on. In many cases, like the Mundas of Chhottanagpur, the land belonged to the clan as a whole, therefore, all of them had rights on the land. More powerful among them became the chiefs and rented out their land. British officials saw settled tribal groups like the Gonds and Santhals as more civilised than shifting cultivators or hunter-gatherers.

Many tribal people used to combine shifting cultivation with hunting and gathering. This combination was made keeping in view the seasons, hot, rainy and cold, that is, sowing and ripening of the crops and availability of fruits and other produce in the forests and division of tasks for men and women. Tribals made their houses of logs themselves. They also made baskets, weaved mats and cloths.

The Impact of Colonial Rule on Tribal Lives

Under British rule, the tribals found their familiar ways of life to be disappearing, their livelihoods under threat and their religion in danger. The British considered the forest land as belonging to none. So they declared them as state property. In the eighteenth century, the British considered forests as unproductive and wastelands. They brought many forest areas under cultivation of crops like indigo, opium, tea, coffee and other commercial products. Later, they got timber from forests. The tall sal and other trees were felled down to provide sleepers for railways and other buildings. The clearing of forests had its major impact on people living in forests. They were displaced in large numbers.

The British thought who lived in the forests were wild and savage, they needed to be settled. Settled peasants were easier to control and administer. Adivasis faced certain prejudices and kept themselves socially distanced from majority of population groups. The Adivasis



Bhil women cultivating in a forest in Gujarat



A Hajang woman weaving a mat

were unconsciously given the colonial label of primitive people. Their community based economic system and customary rights over forest resources were not to the liking of colonial administration. The greatest injustice to the Adivasis was done in 1870s. By the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, about 160 Indian communities mostly Adivasis were classified as **born criminals**. They were considered as suspects of crimes and were also hauled up under the Habitual Offenders Act. In Punjab alone 1,50,000 people were notified as criminal under the Act.

Banning the Shifting Cultivation

After taking over the forests these areas were handed over to British planters. The displaced people particularly the tribals were forced to work on plantations as forced (begar) labour or labour at very low rates. They were prevented from returning home. They were in later years required to work on other projects like railways and in mines. They were required to haul timber from the forests. The British banned the shifting cultivation. The Adivasis were prohibited from using forest products and fuel wood. As a result the life and livelihoods of tribals were affected.



Coal miners of Bihar 1948

Work deep down in the dark and suffocating mines was not only breaking and dangerous, it was often literally killing. In the 1920s over 2000 workers died every year in the coal mines in India.

The British introduced land settlements for the fields other than the plantations. Some peasants were declared land owners and others tenants. The tenants were to pay rent to the landowner who in turn paid revenue to the state. However, the jhum cultivators could not be settled. Settled plough cultivation is not easy in areas where water is scarce and the soil is dry. So, their field did not produce good yield. The jhum cultivators in north-east India protested and the British had to ultimately allow them the right to carry on shifting cultivation in some parts of the forest.

The Power of Tribal Chiefs Reduced

Under British rule, the functions and powers of the tribal chiefs were reduced considerably. Previously they had a certain amount of economic power and right to administer and control their territories. They decided on the local rules of land and forest management. Now, they were allowed to keep their land titles and rent out lands but they had to follow laws made by British officials. They also had to pay tribute to the British and discipline the tribal groups on behalf of the British.

The Problem with Trade

Traders and moneylenders were coming into the forests during the nineteenth century. They wanted to buy forest produce, offer cash loans and asked them to work for wages. It took some time for the tribal groups to understand that they were earning very little. For example, the buyers of silk cocoons from Hazaribagh (now in Jharkhand) sold

them at five times the price in Burdwan or Gaya. The middlemen between the growers and exporters made huge profits.

Hardships of the Baigas— Under British Rule

In the 1930s, Verrier Elvin recorded many songs that lamented the hardships of the Baigas under British rule.

In this land of the English how hard it is to live.

To pay cattle tax we have to sell cow,

To pay forest tax we have to sell buffalo,

To pay land tax we have to sell bullock,

How are we to get our food ?

In this land of the English.

Tribal Revolts

Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tribal groups in different parts of the country revolted. They rebelled against the changes in laws, the new taxes, exploitation by traders and moneylenders etc. Tribal revolts were common and frequent during the colonial rule in all tribal territories. A few of the well known revolts were, the Kols Rebellion in 1831-32, Santhal Revolt in 1855, the Bastar Rebellion in central India in 1910 and the Warli Revolt in Maharashtra in 1940. The clash between the tribals and the British was grossly mismatched as the tribal people fought with bows and arrows, axes and spears while the British used sophisticated weapons and troops.


Birsa Munda : Vision of a Golden Age

Birsa advocated the rights of the Mundas as real proprietors of the land and sought to abolish the existence of middlemen. In 1895, he went into the forests and villages of Chhottanagpur in Bihar. People said he had miraculous powers—he could cure all diseases and multiply grain. Birsa himself had declared that God has appointed him to save his people from trouble, free them from the slavery of dikus (evil outsiders). Soon thousands began following him, believing that he was bhagwan (God) and had come to solve all their problems. The land policies of the British were destroying their traditional land system. Landlords and moneylenders were taking over their land and preachers of new religion were criticising their traditional culture. Their revolt was against the exploitation by all outsiders including the British officials, police as well as landlords and moneylenders. The term used for them was diku meaning evil outsiders.

Birsa was born in the mid 1870s in Ulihatu in Ranchi (Jharkhand). He grew up around the forests of Bohonda, grazing sheep, playing the flute and dancing in the local akhara: His poor father had to move from place to place looking for work. Birsa went to the local missionary school. Birsa was deeply influenced by many of the ideas he came in touch within his growing up years. His movement was aimed at



Birsa Munda



reforming tribal society. He urged the Munda tribe to give up drinking liquor, clean their village and stop believing in witchcraft and sorcery. In 1895, Birsa urged his tribe to recover its glorious past. He talked of a **golden age** in the past when the Mundas had been free of the oppression of dikus and said there will be a time when the ancestral right of the community will be restored. He asked his followers to see themselves as the descendents of the original clearers of the forests and settlers of the region fighting for their land and win back the kingdom of their own land (mulk ka raj).

The British official saw this movement as a political threat to set up a Munda Raj with Birsa as its head. They arrested Birsa in 1895, convicted him on charges of rioting and jailed him for two years. After release in 1897 Birsa continued his tour to gather support. His followers attacked police stations and churches, and raided the property of moneylenders and landlords. In 1900, the police opened fire on unarmed tribals who had come to listen to Birsa. A number of tribals were killed. Birsa was arrested and imprisoned and died soon after, of cholera in Ranchi jail. The Movement faded out. In 1908, the British passed the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act. It marked the triumph of the Adivasi struggle as their rights to land were recognised. Birsa's sacrifice did not go in vain.

In Other Parts of the World

If there is nothing to buy

Cash cropping is all very well
If you've got something to sell
But tell me sir why,
If there's nothing to buy;
Should I bother ?
This is the view of a tribe of Papua New Guinea.



Key Words

- » Tribe : a social group consisting of people of the same race having same beliefs, customs, language, etc. living in one particular area ruled by their leader.
- » Dikus : evil outsiders.
- » Fallow : a field left uncultivated for a year or more so that the soil recovers fertility.
- » Jhum Cultivation : shifting cultivation.
- » Sleepers : the horizontal planks of wood on which railway lines are laid.
- » Begar : forced labour.
- » Settled cultivation : cultivation on the same field year after year.
- » Adivasis : original inhabitants of a place.

SUMMARY

- ▶ Tribe is a social group having same beliefs, customs, language etc., ruled by their leader.
- ▶ All those who belonged to the same tribe thought of themselves as sharing common ties.
- ▶ Tribal communities in India were concentrated in certain geographic regions :
- ▶ (i) Himalayan foot hills, (ii) North-East, (iii) central India, (iv) Southern hills and Andaman Nicobar Islands.
- ▶ The main sources of tribal history are mainly their ballads and folklores which have passed on from one generation to the other orally.
- ▶ Some tribals were used to shifting cultivation. Some of them turned to settled cultivation.
- ▶ Many tribals usually depended upon hunting and gathering forest produce.
- ▶ Many tribal groups herded and reared animals.
- ▶ The British declared the forests as state property and banned the shifting cultivation.

Exercise Time

A. Tick (✓) the only correct choice amongst the following :

1. Columbus called the native people of north America as
a. Blue Indians b. Red Indians c. Indian Tribes d. Dikus
2. The main source of tribal history is
a. manual b. written c. oral d. all of these
3. The tribals laboured in the plantations and mines at _____ rates.
a. medium b. high c. low d. no
4. The powers of tribal chiefs were _____ under British rule.
a. increased b. reduced c. against d. favour
5. The middle _____ made huge profits in the trade of silk cocoons.
a. men b. women c. growers d. people

B. Fill in the blanks :


1. The British called the Adivasis as _____.
2. The method of sowing seeds in jhum cultivation is called _____.
3. The tribals were forced to labour at very low rates in plantations and _____.
4. The leader of the Munda revolt was _____.
5. The Mundas regarded themselves as original clearers of _____.

C. Match the Following :

- | | |
|-------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Begar | a. shifting |
| 2. Jhum | b. original inhabitants |
| 3. Dikus | c. own land |
| 4. Adivasis | d. forced labour |
| 5. Mulk | e. outsiders |

D. Write true (T) or False (F) against the following statements in given brackets :

1. The British wanted to preserve the tribal way of life. □

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2. Jhum cultivators plough the land and sow seeds.
 3. Cocoons bought from the Santhals were sold at five times the purchase price.
 4. Birsa urged his followers to give up drinking liquor.
 5. Tribals did not resist wage earning and trade.



E. Define the terms :

1. Tribe
2. Dikus
3. Jhum cultivation
4. Fallow

F. Answer in one word or one phrase :

1. Who used the word Indian tribes for the native people of north America ?
2. To whom the most tribals thought the land belonged ?
3. Whom did the tribals see the cause of their suffering ?
4. What did the Bakarwals of Kashmir rear ?
5. What did the British get from the forests for railways ?

G. Answer these question briefly :

1. What is the source material used for studying tribal history ?
2. What problems did shifting cultivators face under British rule ?
3. How were the Adivasi people known as tribals in India ?
4. Describe the main features of tribal life.
5. Describe the impact of colonial rule on tribal societies.

H. Answer these questions in detail :

1. Describe the life and occupations of tribal groups.
2. How did the colonial rule affected life of the tribal groups ?
3. What were the causes of tribal revolt ? Write about the Movement led by Birsa Munda.

PROJECT WORK

- Find out about the Mundas, Khasis, Gonds or Bhils : major economic activities, customs and way of life. What are the differences from 19th century ? Has modernisation affected and how ? What is the status of women in the set up of this tribe ?