



Issues Of Tribal Movements In India

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Abstract

In India Tribal movements during British rule were marked by their frequent, militant, and violent nature. The issues of tribal movements can be divided into mainland and frontier tribal movements. Mainland rebellions were driven by issues such as loss of forest, land, and the traditional system of joint ownership, along with exploitation by outsiders. In contrast, north eastern frontier tribes, seeking political autonomy or independence, led longer-lasting and distinct revolts. Initially focused on socio-religious oppression, many of these tribal movements eventually merged with the broader National Movement. Tribal leaders and chiefs often employed traditional weapons to resist colonial forces and assert their rights.

Key-Words: Tribal, Movement, Mainland, Traditional, Rebellions and Violent etc.

Introduction:

According to statistics from 2011—marking the beginning of the 21st century—the population of Scheduled Tribes in India stood at approximately 104.2 million. Scheduled Tribes constitute eight percent of India's total population. Based on regional considerations, they are generally classified into two categories: (1) Borderland Tribes and (2) Non-borderland Tribes. The term "Borderland Tribes" refers to the inhabitants of India's north eastern frontier region. The states comprising this region are Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. With the exception of Assam, each of these states shares a border with Assam on one side, and with Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar), or the People's Republic of China on the other. Viewed from this perspective, the geographical location of these aforementioned states within India holds distinct significance. Borderland Tribes account for eleven percent of India's total tribal population.

The remaining segment of India's tribal population resides in states situated away from the borders. This group constitutes eighty-nine percent of the total tribal population. They are found in almost every state across the country; however, their numbers are particularly concentrated in certain states. These states include Madhya Pradesh (where they constitute 23% of the total state population), Odisha (22%), Rajasthan (12%), Gujarat (14%), Bihar (8%), the Lakshadweep Islands (94%), and Dadra and Nagar Haveli (79%).

Tribal communities are distinct ethnic groups. Consequently, every tribal community possesses its own unique culture. Each tribal group is characterized by its own distinct social structure, customs, values, lifestyle, language, and other attributes. Furthermore, their distinguishing characteristics stand in stark contrast to those of other caste-based Hindu communities in India. The majority of indigenous tribal groups are settled agriculturalists. However, the distinctiveness separating these agrarian tribal groups from agrarian caste Hindus is undeniable. The existence of social distinctions between these two agrarian communities is indisputable. Nevertheless, the challenges associated with agricultural practices remain, to a greater or lesser extent, common to all these communities. Over time, India's indigenous populations have evolved into settled agriculturalists. Consequently, many sociologists are inclined to characterize tribal movements as movements of the peasantry. Kathleen Gough, in her article titled **Indian Peasant Uprising** (EPW); A.R. Desai, in his book **Peasant Struggles in India**; and Ranajit Guha, in his book **Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India**, have discussed this subject in detail. Indeed, many peasant leaders have referred to tribal people as "tribal peasants."

Issues of Tribal Movements

With the passage of time, significant changes have taken place over a prolonged period within Indian society—and specifically within India's tribal society. Consequent to these changes, the underlying issues driving tribal movements have also undergone transformation. The specific problems that historically sparked discontent among tribal communities—leading them to engage in protests and uprisings—have themselves evolved. In this context, the shift in the socio-political landscape and circumstances between the pre- and post-independence eras is particularly significant.

In his book titled **Tribal Society in India: An Anthrop-historical Perspective**, sociologist Suresh Singh has categorized tribal movements into three distinct phases. The first phase spans the period from 1795 to 1860. During this timeframe, the emergence, expansion, and consolidation of the imperialist foreign British ruling power took place in India. The period extending from 1860 to 1920 constitutes the second phase. During this stage, colonialist activities intensified significantly.

This commercial capital entered the areas inhabited by the indigenous people. The traditional relationship of the indigenous people with agricultural land and forest land was adversely affected by commercial capital. The long-standing economic system of the indigenous people faced various adversities. The third stage began in 1920 and extended until independence in 1947. In this stage, the indigenous people engaged in two different activities. During this period, the indigenous people joined the so-called separatist movement on the one hand, and the nationalist movement and the agricultural movement on the other.

In the 19th century, the British government included various indigenous areas in the administrative areas of the government. Many indigenous areas were subjected to the rule and exploitation of the foreign British government. Under the rule of the British, the indigenous people, and especially their leading individuals, were dissatisfied with the loss of wealth and power. The indigenous people organized movements against the British power. The religious leaders or great men of various tribal communities have organized liberation movements (messianic movements) among the tribal's as saviours. All these religious leaders spread the consciousness and conviction among the tribal followers that they will expel the foreigners (Diku) and bring back the golden days of the past. The aim of all this was to establish the tribal's' own system of governance in the tribal society and to continue the tribal organization and culture.

The aim of the movement of Birsa Munda in Chotanagpur was to kill the national enemies 'Diku'. The agitators considered European missionaries, government employees and native Christians as national enemies or 'Diku'. The Munda tribals believed that under the leadership of Birsa they would be able to

restore their Munda kingdom. They would be able to live in mutual prosperity and harmony in the Munda kingdom. There will be no food shortage, famine, epidemic in the Munda kingdom. Religion instilled strength, courage and hope in the minds of the Mundas against the oppression of the foreign British rulers. The participants of the Birsa movement were full of dreams of a bright future. More such tribal movements were organized in the early days of the British movement. Apart from the large tribal communities, such movements were also organized among small tribal communities. For example, the 'Naikda' of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh and the 'Konda Dora' of the Salur region of Visakhapatnam can be mentioned. All these movements were conducted against the British government officials and caste Hindus based on the spirit of religion.

The importance of economic grievances and dissatisfaction as the source or subject of the tribal movement is undeniable. However, on the basis of economic dissatisfaction, peasant movements were also organized among caste Hindus like the tribal movement. However, despite the formal consistency, the uniqueness of the economic movement of the tribal peoples cannot be denied. The communal agricultural structure of the tribal peoples is of a different nature; it is independent of the issues related to the caste Hindu farmers. It was during the British period that the caste Hindus started entering the forests and hilly areas to pursue economic interests or to accumulate wealth. However, the traditional rights of the tribal's over the natural resources of the respective regions were well established for a long time. The economy of the tribal society was dependent on the forest areas and hilly areas. As a result of the infiltration of the caste Hindus, the social and economic system of the tribal's was damaged. The British government abolished the land system prevalent among the tribal's for a long time and introduced a new land system. This land policy of the foreign British government was based on private ownership, non-communal, feudal, and followed the zamindari system. As a result, the traditional land system of the tribal's collapsed. Discontent and disorder reared its head in the tribal society. This is how Birsa's religious-political movement began. Sociologist Kumar Suresh Singh has commented in his book *Dust Storm and Hanging Mist*: "...the transformation of the Mundari agrarian system into non-communal, feudal, Zamindari or individual tenures was the key to agrarian disorders that climaxed in religious-political movements of Birsa."

In the villages of the tribal areas of the states of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, etc., tribal people started losing their land to moneylenders and landlords. Over time, the tribal's transformed into sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. In some places, tribal leaders adopted Hinduism. After conversion, these tribal leaders allowed non-tribal's to live in the tribal areas. These Hindu farmers were more experienced in agricultural work.

Naturally, they began to swiftly and easily appropriate the lands of the indigenous people, who were almost immediately reduced to the status of agricultural labourers for Hindu farmers.

The Zamindars (landlords) imposed exorbitant revenue demands upon the indigenous cultivators. Furthermore, moneylenders would lend money to the simple and trusting tribal people at usurious rates of interest; through unscrupulous means—specifically by compounding interest they would inflate the debt burden, thereby rendering the indigenous people destitute. The tribal people were not unable to pay the inflated revenue demands, nor could they repay the high-interest loans. Under such circumstances, the arable lands of the indigenous people inevitably fell into the clutches of landlords and moneylenders. Over time, on the very lands that were once their own, these indigenous people were reduced to the status of sharecroppers or bonded agricultural labourers.

Government officials—particularly those in the police and revenue departments—abused their power and authority to impose the yoke of servitude upon the indigenous people. These government employees compelled indigenous people to perform begar (forced labor) for both official duties and their own personal ends. The contemporary legal and judicial systems remained indifferent to the plight of the indigenous people; this was because the courts and legal institutions lacked a comprehensive understanding of the agricultural systems, as well as the socio-economic customs and traditions, of

these tribal communities. In essence, due to the absence of judicial protection, the helpless indigenous people were subjected to indiscriminate oppression by landlords, moneylenders, and government officials. Consequently, widespread discontent and rebellion erupted among various indigenous communities, such as the Santhals, Kols, Bhils, and Mundas.

In certain regions—such as parts of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat—social reform movements inspired indigenous people to join the nationalist struggle against the foreign British government. In Rajasthan, the 'Bhagat Movement' ignited a fervent aspiration among the Bhil community for the establishment of an independent Bhil state. Conversely, during the final decade of the 20th century, a consciousness rooted in 'Hindutva' began to take root among a section of the indigenous population across regions including Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. Based on this distinct form of religious consciousness, divisions emerged within the indigenous communities themselves, and a sense of militant fervour arose among the proponents of Hindutva. Hindu nationalist forces emerging from within the tribal communities became active against the Muslim community. This development impacted the traditional dynamics of the relationship between tribal groups and caste Hindus.

Certain tribal communities organized movements of 'Sanskritization' in an effort to establish their claim to a higher status—one equivalent to that of caste Hindus. Within tribal circles, this movement of Sanskritization came to be known as the 'Bhagat Movement.' Such movements are essentially socio-religious in nature. Religious concepts and fervour served to galvanize the tribal people in their resistance against external authority, exploitation, and oppression. Various sociologists have conducted numerous and diverse studies on this subject. In his book titled *Social Movements in India*, Ghanshyam Shah observes in this context: "David Hardiman argues that religiosity had 'a profound bearing' on the state of consciousness of the Adivasis. It provided them with a practical code of 'political ethics' to resist and struggle against their exploitation."

Individuals occupying a lower position in the social hierarchy feel particularly gratified when they receive respectful treatment from those of higher social standing. For tribal communities, this constituted a novel experience. Desai has pointed out that, in recent times, certain tribal groups have revived and developed their own scripts as a means of revitalizing their indigenous cultures. Tribal leaders organized cultural revivalist movements with the aim of fostering a distinct and fulfilling cultural identity for their people. Thanks to these movements, a sense of solidarity grew among the tribal communities; their hopes and aspirations were rekindled, and in many instances, a spirit of resistance against exploitation and oppression was awakened.

A sense of apprehension and unrest emerged among the 'Khasi' tribal people residing in Assam. The dominance and authority exercised by the Assamese population—coupled with the fear of being expelled from the state left the Khasi tribes deeply apprehensive. It was out of this very apprehension that a political movement took shape among the Khasis. Among certain tribal communities, the perception took root that, in independent India, it would become impossible to preserve their distinct identity and existence. The Nagas serve as a pertinent example in this regard. In 1947, the Nagas made no secret of their apprehension that the Hindu rulers of independent India would jeopardize their culture, customary laws, traditional practices, and village organizations. The Nagas further alleged that the framers of the Indian Constitution possessed no comprehensive understanding of Nagaland or the Naga people. Consequently, the Nagas could not expect to receive justice under the Indian Constitution; this constitution, they argued, could neither serve the interests of the Nagas nor be acceptable to them.

The majority of indigenous people reside in forest regions. Indigenous communities depend on these forest areas in numerous and diverse ways. Indeed, forest resources constitute a major source of life and livelihood for these tribal communities. Indigenous people firmly believe—and assert—that they alone possess rights over the forest lands. They maintain that it is their prerogative to determine how forest resources are utilized and what activities are permitted within these areas. They have been inhabitants

of these forests since time immemorial; for them, the forest is synonymous with their very existence and means of sustenance. Should their exclusive dominion over the forests be denied, or should they be dispossessed of their rights, they will justifiably engage in protest movements. The British government introduced a new set of regulations with the aim of generating revenue from forest resources. Consequently, timber merchants and contractors were granted official permission to fell trees within the forest zones. These administrative measures implemented by the British government regarding forest lands infringed upon the indigenous people's traditional rights over the forests, and the communities subsequently fell victim to harassment at the hands of government officials. Naturally, the tribal people rose up in resistance against these adverse circumstances. In 1930, the Kherwar tribe of the Palamau region in Bihar participated in a 'Forest Satyagraha' (non-violent protest). Their primary demand was the restoration of the indigenous people's age-old rights over timber and other forest resources. In Andhra Pradesh, the Sattras a tribal community—organized a militant movement against the Forest Department. A pivotal issue underlying the Rampa Rebellion in Andhra Pradesh was the opposition to the imposition of taxes on tadi (palm toddy).

The movement of the Kherwars in the Palamau region of Bihar continued into the era of independent India. During the 1950s, the Kherwars once again engaged in a Satyagraha movement. In the 1930s and 1970s, indigenous communities in the Garhwal region of the Himalayas organized movements against forest contractors. From the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, indigenous communities in a specific region of Gujarat engaged in protests and struggles against the Forest Department and the laws governing forest lands. This resistance stemmed from the fact that the new legislation effectively deprived indigenous people of their rights over forest resources and land. However, this movement by the indigenous people of Gujarat did not succeed. Subsequently, indigenous communities in eastern Gujarat organized a movement demanding minimum wages for work in forest areas, rights to cultivate forest lands, and the right to collect forest produce. Various voluntary organizations took the lead in these movements.

In terms of their thematic content and internal cohesion, the nature of indigenous movements depends on a variety of sources, elements, and issues. Indigenous communities in Central and Eastern India share a deep history of interaction with caste Hindus. Consequently, these indigenous groups do not seek any form of political status or autonomy outside the framework of the Indian Union. In contrast, indigenous communities residing in the border regions of the Northeast have had no significant interaction with caste Hindus. Many members of these communities have embraced Christianity, and they inhabit territories situated in close proximity to international borders. For this reason, these indigenous groups often raise demands for secession from the Indian Union.

Conclusion:

Many sociologists observe that indigenous communities are fundamentally dependent upon natural resources. Naturally, their relationship with nature is extremely intimate and profound. Indigenous peoples harbour immense reverence for their immediate environment and the natural world. Consequently, indigenous movements are, to a significant extent, regarded as environmental movements. In earlier discussions concerning indigenous movements—particularly during the nineteenth century—the primary emphasis was placed on their rights regarding land and forest resources. However, in the contemporary era, ethnological issues and the assertion of a distinct collective identity have come to dominate the discourse surrounding indigenous movements.

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