

## **Tribal Dissatisfaction Under Colonial Economy of 19th Century**

*Shubha Johari*

**Abstract:** *Tribal population was spread all over India and most of them occupied wild tracts, hilly and forested areas, away from more civilized centers. In 1880 their population was estimated at about seventy million. They had existed for centuries with their own social traditions and beliefs and subsisted on natural resources. They had preserved their near isolation and way of life until the British administration and policies made in-roads into their territories.*

*The tribal population was totally unprepared for the colonial economy. British land revenue policies and Forest Law directly affected their means of livelihood. They had been practicing shifting cultivation and were heavily dependent on forest for their day-to-day lives. Permanent land settlements gradually took away the land from them that they had been using for their mode of cultivation as common communal property. Forest Law and monopolization of forest wealth severely restricted the availability of forest for fulfilling their needs.*

*Commercialization and exploitation displaced the tribals from the tracts they had been occupying for generations. Traders, money lenders and revenue farmers took advantage of British land settlement policies to exploit the simple-minded people. The forest produce became a source of government revenue. Not able to comprehend the government policies, the tribal people saw the penetration of "outsiders" into their territories as threat to*

*their survival and a series of spontaneous uprisings occurred at various places in the country.*

*The government took steps to remove bad practices and bring them into the mainstream. Mariah sacrifice or human sacrifice was stopped. Government agencies and various religious missionary organizations tried to educate and "civilize" them. But these well-meaning efforts were not sufficient to stop the uprisings.*

*The uprisings were spontaneous reactions from the tribal communities that were directed towards government and "outsiders". In extreme cases the agitation took the form of armed rebellion with their primitive weapons. All such agitations were ruthlessly countered by the government forces using modern weapons. Santhal rebellion of 1855-56 was launched by about 60,000 Santhals who had been affected by permanent land settlement. They attacked mahajans and zamindars, railway property, police stations, post offices etc. The rebellion was put down by government forces in which about 15,000 Santhals were killed. Another rebellion was launched in Rampa coastal area of Andhra Pradesh that affected about 5000 square mile area. This was suppressed by Madras Infantry.*

*This paper elaborates on how tribal population was affected by colonial administration of 19th century and highlights some of their numerous uprisings.*

**Keywords:** *Indian tribal population, tribals, mariah, forest products, Santhal, Santhal rebellion, Rampa coastal area*

Tribals in India in the 1870's and 1880's did not live in isolation. Actually, barring few isolated and primitive food-gatherers, Indian tribals were considered as an integral part of the Indian society. Their population was spread over a large part of India. By 1880's the total number of tribals and aborigines living in India was reckoned at 70,000,000 in number. These tribals were famous for their simplicity, good habits, general love for order, loyalty and very unique culture.<sup>1</sup> In order to bring them to the mainstream of public life the British Government introduced a series of reforms. Attempts were made during the first half of the 19th century to humanize the

wild hill tribes. It was a well-known fact that the British waged a long struggle against the prevalence of Mariah sacrifice among the hill tribes of Madras and Orissa.<sup>2</sup> Such practices were also found popular in the hill regions of Chhota Nagpur and Central Provinces. Being the worshippers of the Goddess, Khonds and Koles of these areas believed that the productive energies of nature could only be propitiated by the blood of human victims. Reports of such sacrifices poured in and Government adopted remedial measures in order to abolish such evil practices. Roads were made, fairs and markets were established and tribals were invited to hold intercourse with their civilized neighbours. Thousands of Mariah victims were rescued by British officers like Colonel Campbell. Christian Missionaries played a pioneering role in the enlightenment and upliftment of several tribal communities.<sup>3</sup>

The British colonization had also brought some adverse effects on the tribals and their chiefs. This colonial administration ended their relative isolation and brought them fully within the ambit of colonialism. It recognized the tribal chiefs as zamindars and introduced a new system of land revenue and taxation of tribal products. A number of tribal people joined or shifted to cultivation, converted to agricultural labourers, and were recruited by the British as coolies in distant plantations, mines and factories. But, most importantly, the British rule and its accompanying commercialization strengthened tendencies towards penetration of tribal areas by outsiders from the plains - moneylenders, traders, land-grabbers and contractors.<sup>4</sup> Revenue farmers, better known as middlemen, played a crucial role in bringing the tribal people within the vortex of colonial economy and exploitation. The middlemen were outsiders who increasingly took possession of tribal lands and ensnared the tribals in a web of debt. Many a time the tribal people increasingly lost their lands and were reduced to a position of agricultural labourers, share-croppers and rack-rented tenants on the land they had earlier brought under cultivation and held on a communal basis. Thus, the British legal conception of absolute private property eroded traditions of joint ownership and sharpened tensions within tribal society.<sup>5</sup>

Colonialism altogether transformed the relationship of the tribals with the forest. Before the British they mostly practiced shifting cultivation, better

known as Jhum, Podu etc., taking recourse to fresh forest lands when their existing lands showed signs of exhaustion. The colonial government changed all these practices. It usurped the forest lands and placed restrictions on access to forest products, forest lands and village common lands. It refused to let cultivation shift to new areas. In fact, in the 1870's and 1880's there was a rapid tightening of control by the colonial state over forest zones for revenue purposes. Shifting cultivation, in those days, required no ploughing animals and was often essential for the survival of the poorest in rural society. This was simply banned or restricted in the reserved' forests from 1867 onwards, and attempts were made to monopolize forest wealth through curbs on use of timber and grazing facilities.<sup>6</sup> Giving an example of the devastating impact of government policies on the tribal people of Deccan such as the Bhils and Romoshis, native paper "Arundaya" wrote, "Under former Governments these tribes used to do their duties which are now performed by the police, and the extensive forests which existed in those days also yielded them subsistence. Both these ways of earning their livelihood are now denied to them. They can not devote themselves to agriculture for want of capital. The way Government behaves is like that everything in this country belongs absolutely to the Government. Now it is an understood maxim that the Government is the proprietor of all lands and buildings, and their owners are merely tenants-at-will."<sup>7</sup>

The tribal response resulted in violent outbursts and throughout the 19th century the tribals organized hundreds of militant outbreaks and insurrections, either against the British Raj or against the moneylenders or their own Chiefs. All these uprisings were marked by immense courage and sacrifice on their part and brutal suppression and veritable butchery of the part of the rulers. All this differed in intensity from region to region, but the complete disruption of the old agrarian order of the tribal communities provided the common factor for all the tribal uprisings. Oppression and extortion by policemen and other petty officials further aggravated distress among the tribals. A number of revenue farmers and government agents also compelled the tribals to perform the duties of unpaid labour by intensifying and expanding the system of 'Begar'.<sup>8</sup> Christian missionaries also provoked a variety of reactions among the tribals. In between 1860-1920

several attempts were made by tribals of various regions like Assam and Bihar to introduce religious and socio-cultural reforms through a movement of 'revitalization'. The exponents of these movements borrowed some elements of Christianity and Hinduism and promised their tribal followers a sudden miraculous entry into a golden age.<sup>9</sup> Several religious and charismatic leaders emerged at this stage and promised divine intervention and end to their suffering at the hands of the outsiders. They asked their fellow tribals to rise and rebel against foreign authority. Most of these leaders claimed to derive their authority from god and declared that they had magical powers. Filled with hope and confidence, the tribal masses tended to follow these leaders to the very end.

It was by and large the colonial intrusion and the triumvirate of trader, moneylender and revenue farmer which destroyed the tribal identity to a great degree. The rebels saw them not as a discreet class but as having a tribal identity. A very high level of solidarity was shown by these tribals. Fellow tribals were never attacked unless they had collaborated with the enemy. In many cases, the rural poor formed a part of the rebellious tribal bands. The rebellions normally began at a point where the tribals felt so oppressed that they felt they had no alternative but to fight. This often took the form of spontaneous attacks on outsiders, looting their property and expelling them from their villages. This led to clashes with the colonial authorities, and then the tribal moved towards armed resistance and elementary organization. They mostly fought with primitive weapons such as stones, axes, spears and bows and arrows, believing in the magical powers of their commanders. The war remained unequal as the tribals were pitted against the latest weapons and disciplined soldiers of the British. The result was quite obvious - tribals died in lakhs in these wars.<sup>10</sup>

One of the important outbreaks of the tribal people was the Santhal Rebellion<sup>11</sup> of 1855-56. These Santhals generally believed to be peaceful and unassuming agricultural people, originally belonged to Manbhum, Barabhum, Midnapur, Hazaribagh, Bomkura and Birbhum areas. Due to the Permanent Land Settlement they lost their century-old land to the zamindars and excessive rent demands also compelled them to leave their ancestral homes and settle in the plains. With great industry they cleared

the forest. Once the land was made suitable for cultivation the greedy zamindars of the surrounding areas grabbed them on various pretexts. The moneylenders exploited these peace-living Santhals to the maximum possible extent with the support of the police, the revenue officers and Court Amlas.<sup>12</sup> After such numerous attempts of extortions, oppressive exactions, forcible dispossession of property, abuse and personal violence and a variety of petty tyrannies by the zamindars, moneylender, policemen and revenue officers, the Santhals decided to launch a revolt against all these outsiders. Tribal leaders were organized, protest meetings were held and thousands of Santhals crystallised their determination to usher in 'Satyug' or the 'Reign of Truth' by getting rid of the outsiders and their colonial masters.

Santhals, like other tribal people, had great faith in divine intervention and magical powers of their gods. When Sido and Kanhu, two principal rebel leaders, claimed that Thakur (God) had communicated with them and told them to take up arms in order to get independence, the Santhals wholeheartedly joined the rebellion. Around 60,000 Santhals gathered under the banner of revolt, and by forming gangs deliberately attacked the Mahajans and zamindars and their houses, police stations, railway sites, the Dak (post) carriers and ultimately every symbol of colonial power and exploitation of outsiders. The Government, on the other side, dispatched military regiments and declared Martial Law to suppress the rebels. The result was almost written on wall, as these Santhals were pitted against the sophisticated weapons of the British army. More than 15,000 Santhals were killed and their leaders were either arrested or killed in cold blood.<sup>13</sup>

In 1879-80 another formidable rebellion occurred in the Godavari Agency, where the hill tribesmen of Rampa in coastal Andhra Pradesh revolted against the depredations of the Government-supported Mansabdars and new forest rules. 'Rampa' country and its 'Koya' and 'Konda Dora' hill chiefs (Muttadars) had already risen against their overlords on several occasions, like in the year 1840, 1845, 1858, 1861 and 1862. But the most important outbreak took place only in 1879. The root cause of this rebellion was undoubtedly the efforts of the Mansabdars to increase taxes on timber and grazing, but police exaction, new excise regulations restricting domestic preparation of toddy, exploitation by low country traders and

moneylenders, and restrictions on shifting cultivations (Podu) in forests provided additional grievances. This rebellion at its height affected no less than 5000 square miles. But the Government, with the help of Madras infantry, brutally<sup>14</sup> suppressed it in 1880.

There was no end to tribal rebellions in India during the British regime. One after another tribal rebellion occurred in various parts of the country. In 1870's there appeared the Kherwar or Sapha Har Movemant. This movement preached monotheism and internal social reforms in the beginning but gradually turned in to a campaign against revenue settlement operations just before it was suppressed. The growing trend of millenarianism or belief in an imminent golden age among the tribals of India assumed violent forms many a time. Old District Gazetteers and anthropological surveys contained numerous references to such occurrences, mostly in the 19th century. One such incidents occurred in 1868 when the 'Naikda' forest tribe in Gujarat attacked several police stations in a bid to establish a 'Dharam-raj'. Again in 1882 the 'Kacha Nagas' of Cachar attacked the Whites under a miracle leader called Sambhudan who claimed that his magic had made his followers immune to bullets. However, all these rebellions were successfully crushed by the British Government.<sup>15</sup>

Several other tribal communities also revolted against the colonial power and the zamindars, moneylenders, landlords and revenue officers in various other parts of the country. Of these, mention may be made of the Nagas, the Garos and the Kolis. Kolis of Gujarat raised the banner of rebellion during 1824-28, 1839 and in 1849. In the Maharashtra region these Kolis also revolted against the zamindars. Like their brethren in other parts of the country they too were ousted from their ancestral lands by the zamindars or landlords. Along with attacks on zamindars these Kolis also committed dacoities in Maharashtra. However the Khasi Confederacies, a collection of about 25 small States in the North-Eastern part of India maintained friendly terms with the Government. But the tribals of Garo hills, surrounded by the districts of Bengal and Assam, organized raids on some independent neighboring villages in 1873 with a motive to plunder wealth. The British Government immediately took some actions to control the tribals of Garo hills. An expeditionary force was organized under Captain Davis, Mr. Daly,

Captain Williamson and Lieutenant Woodthorpe. All villages surrendered and Garos were peacefully employed in opening several paths which they were supposed to maintain.<sup>16</sup> The Nagas also occasionally revolted against the British authority. Several expeditions were sent to suppress the Nagas from time to time by the Government. The British also annexed a number of hill states of Punjab and Himalayan region. Apart from sending expeditions to crush the revolting tribes, the Government also carried out a series of reforms in tribal regions in order to educate the tribals and bring them back on the path of civilization. Roads were constructed, medical facilities were provided and schools were opened at several hill tracts or regions for the upliftment of the Indian tribal population.

**Notes and References:**

1. Parliamentary Papers, 1874 , Moral and Material Progress, p. 162, Microfilm, India Office Library, London
2. K. Mojumdar, Changing Tribal Life in British Orissa, Delhi, 1998, p. 22.
3. Chittabrata Palit and Surendra Jha, Ed., Situating Tribals in Indian History, Delhi, 2009, p. 79.
4. Sumit Sarkar, Modern India 1885 to 1947, 1983, p. 44.
5. Bipan chandra, India's Struggle for Independence 1857 to 1947, New Delhi, 1988, p. 45.
6. Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 45.
7. Arundaya, 18th September 1879, Report on Native Indian Papers, Bombay, p. 4 [MF, IOL, London].
8. Bipan Chandra, op. cit., p. 45.
9. Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 45.
10. Bipan Chandra, op. cit., pp. 45 - 46.
11. John Kochuchira Tor, Political History of Santhal Parganas from 1765 to 1872, Delhi, 2000, p. 111.
12. B.L. Grover and S. Grover, A New Look at Modern Indian History, Delhi, 1981, p. 496.
13. Bipan Chandra, op. cit., pp. 47 - 48.
14. Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 46.
15. Ibid, p. 45.
16. Parliamentary Papers, 1874, pp.162 - 163 [MF, IOL, London].