

HISTORY & GENESIS OF TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Tribal movements in India were known to be the most prevalent, violent, and terrifying in the 18th and 19th centuries when it was government by the British in India. There are two distinct types of tribal uprisings i.e. those on the mainland and those around the borders, primarily concentrated in the northeast. Tribal movements, were inspired by revolutionary tendencies. They tend to fight and eliminate ill tendencies that attempt to change the structure of the tribal society. On the whole, most of the tribal movements, during the British rule in particular, were organized in order to mobilize tribal peasants against oppressors like land lords, money lenders and officials in British. The tribal communities have always been very conservative in nature and wanted to retain features of their society. Indian tribal uprisings, rebellions and movements were motivated by revolutionary ideas. Many tribal revolutions were sparked by the erosion of tribal rights to land and forest as a result of British-imposed laws. The land was gradually alienated from tribes as non-tribe people gradually took over the land as land became private property and market forces dominated.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, India was ruled by the British and during that time, tribal movements were renowned to be the most pervasive, violent and terrifying. Tribal uprisings, those that occur on the country's main land and those that occur near its borders, mostly in the northeast. Hunting, fishing and gathering were the primary pursuits of tribal households. Tribal lands were lost as a result of the concept of settled agriculture being introduced by the inflow of non-tribal people. Tribal peoples reduced to little more than landless agricultural laborers. The introduction of money lenders was intended to benefit the local population but it actually made Tribal circumstances worse. The tribal population's joint ownership structure was replaced with private ownership. Use of forest products, relocating agriculture & hunting methods were all subject to restrictions. In

constrict to main stream culture, which was characterized by caste and class inequalities, tribal civilization has historically been egalitarian. They assigned the lower ranks to the tribal people as non-tribals, entered their areas, which made their situation even worse. In order to manage the abundant riches of Indian woods, the government established a Forest Department in 1864, Governmental monopoly over the wooded land was established by the Government Forest Act of 1865 and the Indian Forest Act of 1878.

Key words:

Movement, Prevalent, Tendency, Conservations, Pervasive, Circumstances, Civilization, Egalitarian, Abundant, Monopoly.

Introduction:

Rural India had been inhabited by the tribal population from the beginning. The tribal communities lived in relative seclusion and isolation for centuries and in varying states of economy. In spite of their contacts with the non-tribals they maintained their separate identity. Each tribal community maintained its own socio-religious and cultural life and its political and economic subsistence. Until the arrival of the British in tribal areas, the main means of production and subsistence of the tribals were land and forests. The forests were of great significance for the tribals all over India. They had customary rights to use the minor forest products, firewood, flowers, fruits, leaves, housing material, edible nuts, medical herbs etc., formed the essential items of the daily requirements of tribals. They used forest products for food, constructing houses and shifting cultivation. They grazed their cattle in the forests. The forests provided them with security. About the significance of the forests for the tribals Kr. Sunesh Singh says: “ They can, therefore, subsist on conditions in which members of these more civilized race could not exist.”¹

On the other hand, the tribals responded to their exploitation and oppression in the form of revolts and movements. They identified their enemies in the outsiders-landlords, money-lenders, the kedars and missionaries and European governmental officials. They launched movements against their oppressors in their respective regions. Their agitations against the outsiders could be called anti-colonial. They revolted against them because of their exploitation in the form of encroachment of their land, eviction from their land, annulment of the traditional legal and social rights and customs against enhancement of rent, for transfer of land to the tiller, abolition of feudal and semi-feudal form of land

ownership. On the whole, these movements had social and religious overtone. But they were directed against the issues related to their existence. These movements were launched under the leadership of their respective chiefs. Although the movements initially began on social and religious issues and against the oppression of outsiders. In course of time, they merged with the National movement and with the no-tax campaign.²

Tribal society has undergone changes and so have the issues that agitated the tribals and led to their struggles. K.S.Singh divides the tribal movements into three phases. The first phase was between 1795 and 1860. It coincided with the rise. Expansion and establishment of the British Empire. The second phase covers, the period between 1860 and 1920. It coincided with the intensive phase of colonialism, during which merchant capital penetrated into tribal economy affecting their relationship with the land and forest. The third phase covers 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” movements, but at the same time participated in nationalist and agrarian movements.³

In the later half of the 19th century the first stirrings of tribal movements were manifested. The tribals gave their strong & staunch support in the 1857 Revolt. The tribals found themselves involved in it. The major tribal movements which were essentially anti-colonial in character are highlighted. 1) The tribals of Tamor revolted over seventies between 1789-1832 against the British. They were collectively in the revolt by the tribals of adjoining areas-Midnapur, Korelpur, Bhaldha, Chalshila, Jalda and Silli. They revolted against the faulty align system of the government. The Tamor revolts were led by the Bhola Nath Sahay of Tamor. In 1832, the arrows of war circulated through out the region. Oraons, Mundas, Hos or Kols. Who had distinct social and cultural identity joined insurgents under the leadership of Ganga Narain Singh, a member of Banbhum Raj family. The tribals murdered the ‘dikus’ in each village of the areas. They burnt and plundered their houses. But the movement was suppressed by the government in 1832-33.⁴

Kherwar Movement of the Santhals: The movement was motivated by the desire to return to an idealized past of their tribal independence. At that time, the Santhals (Kherwar) were supposed to have enjoyed absolute independence. They had to pay tribute to their

chief for the protection which he provided to them. This movement started under the charismatic leadership of Bhagirath Majhi. He announced that he would restore the Golden Age of Santhals. If they returned to the worship of God and cleared themselves from their sins. He vowed to liberate them from the oppression of officials landlords and money-lenders. He exhorted them to worship the Hindu God Ram, identifying him, with Santhal 'Caudo'. He banned the Santhal's pigs and fowls. He assured them that their land would be recovered and given back to them. He explained their oppression as a divine punishment for not worshipping God and for turning to veneration of minor and evil spirits.⁵

Santhal Revolt of 1855: The movement of Santhals was against the exploitation of suppression by landlords who had unjust ownership of the land of the Santhals. This movement was also direct against the village money-lenders and officials. The movement was led by two brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu. They had a meeting at Bhagnadih and made the announcement that their oppression could be ended by taking back their land from their oppressors. Around 35,000 Santhals acted as their bodyguards at the meeting. Following the announcement made at the meeting thousands of Santhals marched armed with their traditional weapons-bows, arrows, axes etc.-towards Calcutta for presenting a petition before the Governor. The police offer obstructed them and provoked them into violence. Santhals were massacred at the hands of the British. The Santhal rebellion forced the government to change its policy towards them.⁶

Mukti Larai Movement of 1858-95: This movement took place in various parts of Chotanagpur. It aimed at regarding the tribals ancient right on land by expelling the hated landlords. According to Kt. Suresh Singh, this movement evolved through three phases; the Agrarian phase, the Revivalist Phase and the political phase. The first two phases were marked by the clashes between the landlords and tribal tenants. The tribal tenants revolted against the rise in rent eviction from land and harassment of the tenants by the landlords. During this period, recurrent clashes took place between the landlords and their tenants. From 1890, the Sardar Movement turned against all Europeans, both missionaries and officials, who were suspected to be collaborating with the landlords. People thought the British Rule was the main cause of the maladies and they could be happy only when it ended. When their constitutional means did not yield, the tribals

become violent. They used their traditional weapons such as bows and arrows. In September, 1892, the Sardars hatched a conspiracy to kill the contractors and German missionaries. But their plan misfired because they had no organization to rally behind. The tribals looked for a new leader.⁷

Tribal Uprising against the British in Orissa: The tribal uprising in Orissa in the anti-social set up offers an interesting study. The British Policy of intervention in their religion, social reforms introduced by them. The missionary activities carried on massively in different tribal area and steps taken against their ruler largely contributed to the tribal uprising. The Ghumsar uprising under the leadership of Dora Bissoi and Chakra Bissoi, Keonjhar Uprising under the leadership of Ratna Nayak and Dharanidhar Nayak and the Munda rebellion under the leadership of some of the important tribal uprising of Odisha against the British authority.⁸

Ghumsar was ruled by the Madras authority. The British did not pay proper attention for the administration of Ghumsar. In due course of time, the tribals of Ghumsar led by Dora Bissoi rose against the British authority. After capturing Dora Bissoi and other rebellious leaders, the British Government made some new arrangement with the Khonds. The British appointed Sam Bissoi who had played a great role to capture of Kamal Lochan Dora as the chief of the Khonds. With this the rebellion organized Kamal Lochan Dora came to an end.⁹

The death of Dora Bissoi did not put an end to the Khond insurgency. Chakra Bissoi, the nephew of Dora Bissoi came forward to have another show down with the British authority. He posed a great problem to the British. Be that as it may, the part played by Chakra Bissoi, in the Tribal uprising was commendable. The British failed to capture him even quarter. No doubt, this tribal Khond leader had given a toe challenge to the British authority in the early part of the British administration in Orissa.¹⁰

The Revolt or Meli of Ratna Nayak of Keonjhar, a feudatory state during the British rule in Orissa was certainly eye catching. The tribals of Keonjhar were organized under the leadership of Ratna Nayak. The result of the Ratna Nayak's rebellion was far reaching. It enraged the Bhuyans of Keonjhar. Queen Bishnupriya lived at Cuttack for the rest of her life. Ratna Nayak was awarded Capital punishment with some others. Thus Ratna Meli came to an end. Thus, the Bhuyans under Ratna Nayak gave a toe challenge

to the British regime. Although Ratna Nayak's rebellion ended in a smoke but the Bhuyans did not stop there. They revolted against the British authority more vigorously under the leadership of Dharani Nayak.¹¹

The revolt or Meli of Dharanidhar Nayak, a Bhuyan leader of Keonjhar against Dhanujay Bhanja constitutes another inglorious chapter during the British rule in Orissa. The Bhuyans became more organized under the leadership and challenged the king. Of course, the British Government ruthlessly suppressed it. The result of the Dharani Meli were far reaching. At first, the British Government realized the discontentment of the subjects of Keonjhar. So, the British agent H.P. Wylly came and took over the charge of Keonjhar. After all, the Dharani Meli of Keonjhar came to a dead end by the British intervention of course, the injustice done to Dharanidhar Nayak was not met with justice. His effort was commendable and his name still glitters as a great son of the soils of Orissa.¹²

Paralakhemundi has played a vital role in the formation of Orissa as a separate province. Prior to that the tribals of Paralakhemundi also had opposed the British rule before the English had occupied in 1803. After the British occupation of Orissa, the tribals also opposed the British administration tooth and nail and became constant headache to the British Government. No doubt, the uprising in Paralakhemundi was first of its kind. The Savaras of Paralakhemundi with others fought against the British and showed their courage at different points of time. The rebellious activities of the tribals were sufficient to give a check of time it became a model for others in Odisha to follow against the British as and when required. In subsequent days their Paik rebellion and other uprisings took place in Orissa against the British authority. However, the tribal uprising of Paralakhemundi was first of its kind who challenged the British rule. The people of Orissa were inspired by this rebellion and later on many rebellions took place on this soil against the British authority. Although, the tribal uprising of Paralakhemundi has become a forgotten chapter in Orissan history still its role in making the people of Orissa cautious against the oppressive British rule can never be regarded to distant background.¹³

The movement of Birsa Munda is the most popular movement of the Munda tribes of Singhbhum and Ranchi districts of Chotanagpur region of Bihar. Like the

movements discussed earlier, this movement was also directed against the outsider's dikus-landlords, traders, merchants and government officers. These classes were created by the British. Before the introduction of the British policies in the areas inhabited by Qaron and Munda, their traditional land and social systems had existed. Their land system was known as "Khuntjari system".¹⁴

The Birsa Movement had the same background as the Sardar movement. The objective of Birsa was to attain religious and political independence for Mundas. He felt that this objective could be achieved by ending the oppression of the dikus and by driving the Europeans out of their territory or by killing them. He announced the establishment of the Birsa Raj, in which nobody but only Birsa could be obeyed. Mundas rose against the dikus again under the leadership of Birsa. Birsa Raj could be achieved only in a world free from the Europeans, both officials and the missionaries. Birsa announced that Mundas were the owners of the soil. The British deprived them of their homeland by appointing the non-tribals as the land lords. Birsa exhorted Mundas to stop payment of rent to the landlords, for holding and rent free and for establishing Munda's old rights on land. The movement took a violent form. It broke out as scheduled on Christmas eve (24 Dec. 1899). It was directed against land lords, contractors, police and government officials. The tribals attacked the outsiders with traditional weapons, arrows and burnt their houses. The occasion of the Movement's occurrence symbolized its hatred against Christmas, Europeans and German missionaries. The British clashed with the timber contractors, killing one of them on 6 January 1900. They killed constables and attacked Chaukidars on 5 January 1900.¹⁵

They had an encounter with the Deputy Commissioner on 6 January 1900. Soon the government started counter offensive. It launched beat and search operation from 13 January 1900. He suffered from illness, Cholera and weakness. He died of Chronic dysentery on 9 January 1900. The Birsa Munda movement had its impact on the government attitude towards their problems. The authorities felt the need to prepare the land records so that they could safeguard the tribal interests. The government conducted surveys and settlement operations for the tribals between 1902 and 1910 for achieving this purpose. It decided to abolish the compulsory beggar system and passed the Tenancy Act of 1903 which recognized the Mundari Khunkatti system. Birsa became a legend for

the coming generations. His movement inspired the future social, religious and political movements of tribals.¹⁶

The tribal movement in Orissa between 1921-36 covered the Orissa division of Orissa and Bihar which was composed of Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Angul and Khondmals. The tribals along with the other peasants participated in the national movement in 1920s and 1930s. With the efforts of Satyabadi school which was established by Gopabandhu in 1909, the peasants and tribals of Orissa were drawn into the national movement. The peasants and tribals participated in non-cooperation movement. They implemented the ‘no-rent’ aspect of the non-cooperation movement. By Feb. 1922 the peasants and tribals made inroads into the jungles and violated the forest laws. The peasants decided to stop payment of the taxes. Those who paid taxes were socially boycotted. In May 1921, the authorities promulgated section-144 in the area and arrested the tribals. This agitated the Bhuyan tribals and about 500 of them gheraoed the superintendent’s bungalow. They demanded release of the prisoners. The arrested were tried and imprisoned and the movement gradually subsided.¹⁷

The Rampa rebellion of Alluri Sitaram, which was also directed against the forest rules inspired the tribals of Orissa. In 1920-30, the tribals of Gunpur launched a no-rent struggle. They violated the forest laws. The authorities found it difficult to control them. The Khonds also stopped paying rent. They attacked the police which came to arrest them. In the Koraput and Ganjam tracts, popular responses of the tribals to the civil-disobedience movement grew out of the oppression and exploitation of the tribal by the landlords.¹⁸

Devi Movement in Gujarat: 1921-2: Devi movement was initially a social movement which took place in South Gujarat in 1922-23. It was a movement in which it was presumed that Devi Salanal was giving command to the tribals to abstain from eating flesh, drinking liquor or toddy, to take bath daily, to use water rather than a leaf to clean up after defecation, to keep houses clean, to release or sell goats and chickens and to boycott Parsi liquor dealers and landlords. Those who failed to obey these divine orders were believed to suffer misfortune or go mad or even die. In December 1922, the movement engulfed the entire area inhabited by the tribals along with Surat city. This movement made these classes its target which exploited movement in the beginning but

towards the end of December 1922, it became the part of a non-cooperation movement. The tribals started to advocate the burning of foreign clothes and the boycott of government schools.¹⁹

Gandhinas had ben working among the tribals of Bardoli taluquo and mahal since 1921. Gandhi insisted upon the participation of the Adivasi in the national movement even before a civil Disobedience was launched in their area. The tribals became far more sympathetic to the national movement. In the following years, the name of Gandhi got linked with the name of Devi through the Devi medium. After that the Congress leaders visited Bardoli and attended some Devi meetings. They suggested to the tribals that Devi's command could be reinforced by wearing Khadi. The Congress organized Kaiparaj conference which was presided over by Vallabhabai Patel on 21 January 1923. The conference resolved to advocate the cutting of toddy trees, closure of liquor shops and propagation of Khadi. In the following two decades, in 1920s, 1930-31 and 1942, many Chaudhris of the tribals lived up to the commitment of giving support to the Gabdhian movement.²⁰

Tribal Movement in Midnapur: 1918-24: The Santhals, Bhimiji and Kurmi (Mahto) tribals of jungle Mahal in Midanpur revolted against the British way back in 1760. They Eat India company dispassed chiefs, such as the Raja of pachet, the zamidar of Raipur and ganga Narain. The British introduced permanent settlement and created a class of landlords . By the end of the 19th century, settlers from outside had encroached upon the tribal land. Like the tribals in other regions, here also they were exploited by the outsiders, landlords, money-lenders, traders and officers. There had developed a deep sense of hatred among the tribals against the dikus.²¹

Between 1921 and 1923, the peasants of Jungle Mahals and neighboring tracts in Bankura and Slagbhum rose against landlordism. This peasant movement was mainly led by the adivasi. It could be divided into two phases. The first phase coincided with the period of non-cooperation movement (1921-22) and was marked by Congress participation. The second phase covered the period following Gandhi's arrest. Till 1921, there was no Congress organization in the Jungle Mahals. Attempts had not yet been made to involve adivasis in their national movement. In the early 1921, C.R.Das and

Salcoripati Roy set out the task of involving the adivasis in the non-cooperation movement.²²

Sailajananda Sen in July 1921, led a demonstration of 200 Santhal women and blocked the path of paddy carts belonging to the local landlord. In May 1921, the Congress organized a meeting of 700 Santhals who resolved to abstain from drinking alcohol. The Congress leaders S.N.Sen and Murari Mohan Roy constantly advocated the boycott of foreign goods, especially clothes, in their speeches. In January 1922, the Congress initiated a campaign against foreign cloth. The Midnapur syndicate filled a petition accusing Congress of inciting Santhals to plunder the forests. In January 1922, the Congress campaign against foreign clothes triggered off raids on four heats. The tribals showed their solidarity with the congress between 15 and 21 May 1918, the Santhals in Mayurbhanj rose against what they perceived to be the threat for a forcible conscription to the labour corps bound for France. In the face of an uprising, the government had to abandon recruitment plan. The Santhals rose on 14 June 1918 against encapsulating various outstanding Santhal grievances such as Chaukidari taxes, forest regulation act etc. Having asserted their collective ability to defeat the government measures, the Santhals were new in a position to extend their insurgency against all other kinds of oppression of the government.²³

Jitu Santhal's Movement in Malda: 1924-32: The Santhals of Malda district launched an anti-landlord movement in 1924-32. This movement got intertwined with the national movement. The leaders of the Swaraj party supported the tenants in their struggle against the landlords. The leader of this movement Jitu Santhal or Jitu Chotka was drawn close to the Swarajists. He received instructions from the Swarajists to carry forward this movement. Although this movement was anti-diku, anti-colonial, it suffered from the tinge of Hindu Communalism. The Swarajists worked among the tribals to bring them within the Hindu fold through the Suddhi and Social reform Swarajist Kashiswar Chakraborty, popularly known as Sanyasi Baba toured Malda along with Jitu Santhal in 1925. Jitu Santhal was known as his agent and preacher. They organized a 'Sanyasi Dal' and defied police order in order to perform Kali Puja. This was done with the purpose of giving new Hindu Status to the tribals. They appealed to the tribals to give up tribal identity and promised to give them a new Hindu status. This movement was sparked

off in the background of the deteriorating conditions of the Santhals. The movement was provoked by the sharp rise in the prices of essential items, forcible eviction of the tenants from the land by the landlords, increasing demand by the landlords for the allowances and rent along with other forms of exploitation and harassment.²⁴

Tribal Movement in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland: The tribals of Assam which consisted of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram during the colonial period resisted the move of the British to encroach upon their land. The British province which came to be known as Assam took its shape by 1873. The British annexed with the independent tribal states of Khasi Hills in 1826. Part of Naga Hills were annexed in 1860s and Mizo Hills were annexed in 1870s. The British wanted to transform the agriculture of Assam in tea estates meant exclusively for them. They also wanted to change the culture and traditions of tribals to suit their colonial interests.²⁵

The tribals revolted against the British policies in 1828 and 1829 in rebellions led by Gumdhar Kunwar and Rup Chand Kunwar. They were ruthlessly suppressed by the British. Peali Barphen was executed for his role in the rebellion of 1828. The Khasis waged a war of Independence (1829-33). They were led by U. Tirot Singh. He was head of an alliance of petty republics of Khasis. They had waged guerrilla warfare against the British. The Khasi chiefs fight against the British along with the people.²⁶

The tribals of Assam were inspired by the revolt of 1857. In 1860, two major uprisings against the British took place. One in the Jaintia Hills and the other in the plains of Nowgong. These uprisings were caused by the rise in taxation. The Khasis rose against the increase in taxation under the leadership of their chiefs. They fought for their independence with bows and arrows. They did not surrender until 1863, when the army was sent to crush them. In Nowgong district, the tribals suffered in the cultivation of poppy crop in 1860. It was followed by the increase in revenue. They were also asked to pay increased taxes on betel nut and pan. The government officials used force to collect the enhanced taxes. The tribals of Nowgong, mainly in Phulguri area, revolted against the British.²⁷

The Gothra Mahasabha: The Gothra Mahasabha is an organization which stands for the rights of tribals. It operated in the tribal areas of the state. CK. Janu and M. Geethanandan were the prominent leaders of this organization. In the initial stages the organization

effectively motivated the tribals on their fight to right to land. The land question was one of the major problems faced by the tribals communities in Kerala. They were not given any clear titles to their land holdings as many of these possessions were located near or inside forests. The governmental attitude to the adivasi issue was also not positive.²⁸ These were many developments programmes in the state but many of them failed to bring the intended benefits to the marginalized sections.²⁸

Muthanga Incident: The major incident that consolidated of tribals under Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS) was the Muthanga incident. Muthanga is a place in Wayanad district of Kerala state. The Muthanga has a long history that was closely linked with the land rights of adivasis. As a result of land alientation and consequent economic crisis, in mid July 2001, 32 starvation deaths were reported from the tribal areas of Palakkad, Kannur and Wayanad districts. Responding to this, an intense struggle was launched with the setting up of refugee camps before the residence of the chief minister. It was this struggle that spawned the AGMS and negotiated the historic 2001 accord with the government. Though the event at Muthanga sent shock waves across the state, there were attempts by the government to justify its brutal actions. The government has refused to constitute a judicial probe into the constitute a judicial probe into the incident. However Muthanga incident established the political foundations of Gothra Mahasabha. It proved that tribal political consolidation is no more a myth and that no government can ignore the power of marginalized groups.²⁹

Thus, it can be said that despite several laws and legislations to protect tribal land, tribal land alienation still continuous in different states of India, general tribals have raised their voice and have organized movements to claim their rights over land, water and forest resources as far as their life, livelihood, freedom and identity their life, livelihood, freedom and identity are concerned. But, the post- independence state has followed the colonial legalizes and is trying to suppress tribal voice through every possible measures by suppressing their movement solving the real problem of the tribals, the state is waging war against its own people. On the whole, most of the tribal movements during the British rule in particular, were organized in order to mobilize tribal peasants against oppressions like land lords & the officials of British.³⁰

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