

TRIBAL MOVEMENT (part-1)

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INTRODUCTION

- ▶ Numerous uprisings of tribals have taken place in India in the 19th and 20th century. The important tribes involved in revolt in the nineteenth century were Mizos (1810), Kols (1795 and 1831), Mundas (1889), Daflas (1875), Khasi and Garo (1829), Kacharis (1839), Santhals (1853), Muria Gonds (1886), Nagas (1844 and 1879), Bhuiyas (1868) and Kondh.
- ▶ Some scholars like Desai (1979), Gough (1974) and Guha (1983) have treated tribal movements after independence as peasant movements, but K.S. Singh (1985) has criticised such approach because of the nature of tribals' social and political organisation, their relative social isolation from the mainstream, their leadership pattern and the modus operandi of their political mobilisation.

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- ▶ Tribals' community consciousness is strong. Tribal movements were not only agrarian but also forest-based. Some revolts were ethnic in nature as these were directed against zamindars, moneylenders and petty government officials who were not only their exploiters but aliens too.
- ▶ When tribals were unable to pay their loan or the interest thereon, money-lenders and landlords usurped their lands. The tribals thus became tenants on their own land and sometimes even bonded labourers. The police and the revenue officers never helped them. On the contrary, they also used the tribals for personal and government work without any payment.
- ▶ The courts were not only ignorant of the tribal agrarian system and customs but also were unaware of the plight of the tribals. All these factors of land alienation, usurpation, forced labour,

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minimum wages, and land grabbing compelled many tribes like Munda, Santhals, Kol, Bhils, Warli, etc., in many regions like Assam, Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Maharashtra to revolt.

- ▶ The management of forests also led some tribes to revolt, as forests in some regions are the main sources of their livelihood. The British government had introduced certain legislations permitting merchants and contractors to cut the forests. These rules not only deprived the tribals of several forest products but also made them victims of harassment by the forest officials. This led tribes in Andhra Pradesh and some other areas to launch movements.
- ▶ Raghavaiah in his analysis in 1971 of tribal revolts from 1778 to 1970 listed 70 revolts and gave their chronology. The Anthropological Survey of India in their survey in 1976 of tribal movements identified 36 on-going tribal movements in India.

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- ▶ It was said that though these revolts were neither numerous nor gravely frequent, yet there was scarcely any major tribe in middle or eastern India which at some time in the last 150 years had not resorted to launching movements to register their protest and despair.
- ▶ Some studies on tribal movements have been conducted and reported in North-East and Central India. However, there were an insignificant number of movements or none at all among the tribals of the southern states. This is so because the tribes down south are too primitive, too small in numbers, and too isolated in their habitat to organise movements, in spite of their exploitation and the resultant discontent . L.K. Mahapatra also has observed that we do not find any significant social, religious, status-mobility, or political movement among the numerically small and migratory tribes.

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- ▶ Many of the various tribal groups in India revolted against the forceful and devastating intrusions into their life and region by the British and other Indians. The tribals had been living peacefully and in harmony with nature for hundreds of years in their own forests. The British came and introduced many changes in their way of life and also introduced outsiders into their turf. This reduced them to the status of labourers and debtors from masters of their own land. The uprisings were basically against this unwelcome intrusion, and a fight for their independence.
- ▶ The tribals of India, like other social groups, participated in the anti-colonial movement. The tribal anti-colonial movements were of two types -first, the movements against their oppressors i.e. landlords, money-lenders, traders, thekedars (contractors), government officials and Christian missionaries and second, the movements which were linked to and merged with the Indian National movement.

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- ▶ The first type of movements can be termed as anti-colonial because these movements were directed against those classes which were the creation of British colonialism and who collaborated with the tribals. These classes were considered outsiders by the tribals. According to an estimate there were more than 70 tribal revolts over a period of 70 years (1778 to 1948). These revolts were anti-colonial in varying degrees. The main anti-colonial tribal movements and revolts were: The tribal revolts in Chotanagpur region – Tamar revolt (1789-1832), Kherwar movement of Santhals (1833), Santhal revolt of 1855, Bokta risings, Sardari Larai or Mukti Larai movement of 1858-95, Birsa Munda's movement (1895-1901), Devi movement in Gujarat (1922-23), Tribal movement in Midnapur (1918-1924), Jitu Santhal's movement in Malda (1924-32), Tribals and National Movement in Orissa (1921-.36) and Tribal movements in Assam in the late nineteenth century.

(To be continued)