

TRIBAL MOVEMENT (part-2)

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE TRIBALS

- ▶ 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 organisations.
- ▶ Until the arrival of the British in the tribal areas, the main means of production and subsistence of or the tribals

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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, honey, 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. Suresh Singh says: "They (Tribal communities) can, therefore, subsist on

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conditions in which members of these more civilized race could not exist. When the crop fails, jungle fruits and vegetables of all kinds (sag) are valuable reserve. With the help of these they succeed in teething over the period of stress which could play havoc. “

- ▶ In addition, the tribals practised weaving, basket making, fishing, hunting and food gathering. Their instruments of labour and livelihood were not very developed. Bows and arrows were the main instruments of self-defence and hunting.

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- ▶ The tribal communities had their respective chiefs and clan councils (panehayat) to look after them and manage their social, religious, economic and political affairs. Each tribal paid some amount of land produce to his respective chief. But it was not a legal right; it was a moral requirement. The chiefs were given voluntary contribution in kind and a few days of free labour every year by the people.

THE IMPACT OF THE BRITISH POLICIES ON THE TRIBALS

- ▶ The British policies disturbed the traditional tribal systems. The tribal land system was marked by its corporatorial ownership of land and absence of the landlords. But the British changed the land system of the tribals. They created the hitherto unknown class of zamindars (landlords) in the tribal areas.
- ▶ Brahmins and Rajputs were brought in the tribal areas of Chotanagpur to perform military and religious services. For their roles, they were assigned the zamindari rights in the land.

THE IMPACT OF THE BRITISH POLICIES ON THE TRIBALS

- ▶ The zamindars were considered outsiders by the tribals. The tribals were reduced to the position of tenants. The clan councils of the tribals were replaced by the councils of rajas consisting of their followers.
- ▶ The traditional land system of the British was turned into tenancy systems. The British also introduced contractors (Thekedars) in the tribal areas. The zamindars and thekedars introduced the land rent in the tribal areas.
- ▶ Following the introduction of market economy, a class of traders also developed in the tribal areas. The tribal

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tenants had to pay the rent in cash. As they did not have cash with them, they had to borrow from the money-lenders. Hence, a class of money-lenders also came into being in the tribal areas. The isolated tribal communities were connected with the outside world following the introduction of means of communication and transportation. The self-sufficient tribal economy was converted into market economy. The customary system of justice was replaced by the new legal system. The new legal system was not suitable to the tribals. The tribals could not afford to utilise the new legal system, as they were

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not educated and they did not have money for the fees of the lawyers. The British brought a host of petty government official and clerks in the tribal areas.

- ▶ All these classes - zamindars, thekedars, traders, money-lenders, government officials -were not natives of the tribal areas. Nor did they belong to the tribal communities. They were brought into the tribal areas by the British. They could be Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs or Europeans. Hence, they were considered outsiders - dikus - by the tribals. These classes collaborated with the British administration in the process of exploitation and

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oppression of the tribals. The landlords extracted exorbitant amount of Rent from the tribals, evicted them from their land and extracted begar (forcible labour) from the tribals. In case of defiance, the tribals were physically assaulted by the zamindars. They were deprived of their belongings. The money-lenders exploited the tribals by charging exorbitant amount of interests from them. Many a time the tribals were forced to sell out their belongings and children and wives to meet the requirements of the landlords and money-lenders. The government officials took advantage of their innocence. They were the ally of landlords, money-lenders, contractors and traders in the exploitation of the tribals.

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- ▶ Till the middle of the nineteenth century, the tribals had customary rights in the forest. Their right to use the forest products was recognized. But the forest policy (1884) of the British curtailed the tribal rights to use the forest produce. Moreover, the development of the communication system i.e. telegraphic, roadways and railway services and the introduction of the common administrative system ruined the natural economy of the forests. These developments -affected the tribals all over the country. The dikus were benefited from the British forest policies. The British policies were detrimental to the tribal interests.

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- ▶ The government sometimes paid compensation to the tribals for the loss caused by the encroachment of the forests. But the compensation could not trickle down to them. It was usurped by the clerks, the pleaders and the munshis in between.
- ▶ In addition to the devastation caused to the tribal communities, the famines in the later half of the 19th century worsened the conditions of the tribals. The continuous increase in the prices of the essential commodities made their conditions unbearable.

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- ▶ The land formed for the tribals, not only a source of livelihood, but a spiritual source as well given to them by their ancestors. They were being alienated from their land due to distress. The rights of the outsiders - money-lenders and landlords were recognized over their land. The attack on the tribal system was a threat to their existence.

(To be continued)