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## Colonial Interventions and Tribal Society: Land Settlements and the Expansion of Cultivation

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### ABSTRACT

Although marked by diversities, the impact generated by colonialism on the world of the tribals was increasingly felt by the second half of the nineteenth century in a significant manner. The colonial regime started the process of recording land rights in tribal areas, often giving an individual farmer the right of cultivation. In most cases the effort was to make a direct relationship between the farmer and the state. This impacted tribal societies in three ways. First, in many tribal societies, especially those practicing jhum, there was no individual ownership of land. Land was owned by clans as in the case of khuntkatti system of Chotanagpur or village councils in the Garo and Khasi hills of North East. Since jhum was banned under forest laws, the right to land for jhum cultivators was not recognised. Secondly, though the rights of the tribal peasants were recognised, the increasing burden of taxes led their increasing indebtedness. Finally, the British policy also tried to expand plough cultivation in areas where jhum was being done earlier.

**KEYWORDS:** land rights- ownership- jhum- permanent settlement- agriculture- exploiters

### INTRODUCTION

During the early period of colonial rule, the colonial government exercised minimal control over tribal structure. In 1891, a resident commissioners and Assistant Commissioners in district were appointed in the adivasi land protectorate. These were given jurisdiction as resident magistrates but the jurisdiction of their courts were limited to exclude all cases in which Jharkhand were concerned, unless such cases were in the interest of good order prevention of violence. In 1899, when the Hul Tax was introduced, the chiefs were appointed as local tax collecting officers and they received up to ten percent of the proceeds. In 1920, the native council (renamed the tribals) Advisory Council in 1940) was constituted to serve as an advisory body

on Tribes interests to the Resident Commissioner. In 1934, the native proclaimed was issued which formally recognised the tribal chiefs and their authority. The proclamation did not materially alter the traditional institution but simply formalized it. The chiefs opposed it, as an attempt to codify then authority was perceived by them as a limitation of their erst while sovereignty and unlimited authority. In the same year, the tribal court system and its jurisdiction were formally organised.

## COLONIAL INTERVENTIONS

There was also large-scale interference in the forest by the administrative system established by the British. The fact that they sought to regulate, control and tap the forest resources, undermined the administrative and economic position of the tribal chiefs in their own territories, with village level institutions losing their powers when it came to controlling land and forests. In some part of the Bengal Presidency, especially in areas that had the Permanent Settlement-like Orissa and south Bihar- some of the relatively privileged tribal chiefs were incorporated through the land settlements and brahminical Hinduism's caste system as 'tributary chiefs' (princes) and zamindars, along with sections who were 'outsiders' and who were settled as zamindars. These princes and zamindars emerged as the support base of British colonialism. Besides ensuring a steady inflow of resources in the form of tribute they paid to to the colonial government out of the rents they extracted from the tribals ( and the settled agriculturalists), it also served to draw on the resources and administer the inaccessible forest tracts.

Alongside, one has to also focus on crucial features associated with certain problems within adivasi society and the household. These ranged from the imposition of restrictions through forest laws (for instance the undermining of the medicinal system and the manufacture of liquor), to the resistance to women getting land rights which in turn led to patriarchy attempting to re-assert itself and the increase in witch-hunting/witchcraft<sup>1</sup>. Another dimension which needs to be articulated at this point is the emergence of affluent sections of tribals being settled through land settlements, as a result of colonisation.<sup>2</sup> This impacted practices and production. Besides, the Hinduisation of tribes, with many among these sections getting incorporated into the brahminical order, it also meant the emergence of internal exploiters in the form of landlords and moneylenders from among erstwhile tribal communities. This particular aspect needs to be borne in mind while negotiating terms like dikus (or outsiders) in tribal areas, which some historians do not take into account seriously. After all, we should not miss their insider dikus.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, one has to go way beyond the colonial/anti-colonial theme to explore the fascinating areas of social history. This would not only enable us to see a holistic picture without romanticising the scope and the basis of the apparent anti-colonial 'outburst' more effectively. At the same time, a social historian cannot but observe a pattern of distinct continuities between the colonial and post-colonial. For the magnitude and the level of barbarism inflicted on the world of the adivasis-given its polarised class content-is in many ways more ruthless in this post-modern twenty-first century.

## FORMS OF TRIBAL EXISTENCE

### *Jhum and shifting Cultivators*

By the middle of the nineteenth century, tribal societies had a diverse social and economic organisation. Nevertheless, one can identify certain commonalities. One can mention here the method of shifting cultivation-variously called *jhum*, *bewar*, *dunger* and *podu*- which marked them out as different from those who used the plough. Most shifting cultivators confined their activities-based on the use of the pickaxe and the hoe- to small patches of land that they had cleared inside the forests. After harvesting the produce they shifted their activity to another patch that they cleared, to return only when the forest cover reappeared in the original patch, thereby maintaining a cycle of some years. These shifting cultivators were mainly found in the hilly and forested tracts of north, east and central India. The basic prerequisites involved free access and mobility within the forest.

TABLE I<sup>4</sup>

#### THE AGRICULTURAL CYCLE UNDER BEWAR

INDIAN CALENDAR	ENGLISH CALENDAR	NATURE OF WORK
Chait	March-April	Clearing of undergrowth and large trees
Baisakh	April-May	Firing of bewar field
Jeth	May-June	Broadcasting of seeds
Asadh	June-July	Men work in the fields
Sawan	July-August	Men work in the fields
Bhadon	August-September	Men work in the fields
Kuar	September- October	Beans ripen and are harvested
Kartik	October-November	Kodon and kutki ripen
Aghan	November-December	All crops are harvested
Pus	December-January	Winnowing takes place
Magh	January-February	Shift to new bewar fields
Phagun	February-March	Mostly festival time.

In fact Prasad correctly asserts that scholarship on the Baigas tend to take hunting and gathering as auxiliary or supplementary activities. While emphasising that shifting cultivation would be unsustainable without hunting and gathering, she delineates that these need to be located as essential aspects of 'seasonal survival'.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Hunters and gatherers***

There were also the hunters and the gatherers of forest produce in several parts of the country. The forests were seen by many tribal groups as essential for fulfilling their basic needs. For example the khonds and Santhals of Orissa did their ritual hunt in the forests and divided the meat between the hunters. They also depended on forest product like fruits and roots (e.g. kandha-mula; mula means root which is a type of sweet potato, the name of which seems to have been derived from the Kandhas) for their medicines.<sup>6</sup> These tribal communities also sold forest produce including lacquer and ingredients to produce dyes in the local market, and in turn bought essential commodities like rice and other grains, salt and oil. Given the absence of land and money in their hands they normally depended on a system of exchange (barter) that pushed them closer to the exploitative traders. This particular problem assumed alarming proportions in a context that was marked by increasing monetisation. Thus, tribals worked in exchange of money to meet their needs, leading to the rise of the bonded labour system. This could mean that three generations of a family would be required to pay back a paltry amount of money that had been borrowed by the grandfather of the generation that was still repaying it. Besides the stabilisation of the new system threatened to change the lives of many tribal communities like the Baigas (of Central India) who considered agricultural labour as a job that was below one's dignity, since they looked at the forest as an important source of survival.

### ***Pastoralists and herders***

Another kind of tribal society was that of the pastoralists and the herders like the Van Gujjars of the Punjab hill states or Gujarat, or the Lambadis of Andhra Pradesh who visited the forests and the pasturelands seasonally. They not only concentrated on animal husbandry, but also traded in grains and other products with these who lived in the forests. The stability of their survival system depended on their movement between forests, pastures and land resources.

### **Tribal Society and Settled Cultivation**

As mentioned earlier, colonialism and its administrative agencies saw the logic of civilisation among the tribes in term of their proximity to settled agriculture. In fact, the work culture of colonial capitalism favoured some tribes like the Binjhals, Gonds or santals who owned land and cultivated it with the plough. They were considered as being more advanced in their way of life and therefore 'semi-Hinduised'. In fact, a conscious policy seems to have been followed in some princely states like Kalahandi during the mid-nineteenth century to encourage and settle the kultas to increase agricultural production, since they were found to be more enterprising than the Kandhas. What was never taken into account was the Kandhas were not used to settled agricultural practices and this comparison with the more 'dynamic' Kultas was rather unfair. In many cases, however, what is never mentioned is that tribals were pushed into the hilly interiors after clearing the lands on which they had already practiced settled agriculture. Consequently, although one can see diverse forms of survival practices among the tribals, most of them were also forest-dependent. One needs to be cautious about not seeing these as three different or autonomous worlds outlined by us. In fact, it would be perhaps best to locate them holistically in a transitory context that was marked by the footprints of fluidity.

Besides, one can see the emergence of a system of exploitation that comprised two inter-linked structures imposed by colonialism and the internal exploiters, which included the zamindars and money lenders. The following Baiga song perhaps depicts the manner in which the process of colonialism impacted the tribals:<sup>7</sup>

*In this land of the English, how hard it is to live*

*How hard it is to live.*

*In the village sits the landlord*

*In the gate sits the Kotwar*

*In the garden sits the Patwari*

*In the field sits the government*

*In this land of the English how it is to live.*

*To pay cattle tax we have to sell cows*

*To pay forest tax we have to sell buffaloes*

*To pay land tax we have to sell bullocks*

*How are we to get our food?*

*In this land of the English....*

Similarly, the following Kol song tells us the problems they faced from the zamindars:<sup>8</sup>

*Alas! Under [the grind of ] forced labour*

*Blood trickles from my shoulders*

*Day and night the emissary from the zamindars,*

*Annoys and irritates me , day and night I groan*

*Alas! This is my condition*

*I do not have a home, where shall I get happiness?*

*Alas !*

### ***Forest Laws and their Impact***

Another major factor that impacted tribal societies was the changing nature of forest management in the colonial period. The British declared total ownership of all forestlands and established a system of reserved forests where people were not allowed to freely move around in the forests, practice shifting cultivation or gather forest produce. This had a negative impact on the lives of the pastoralists, jhum cultivators and hunters and gatherers who depended on free movement inside the forest of their livelihood. They were forced to move from such area and go into other areas in search of work and livelihood – a process that is called migration. But the nature of forest management was such that the British were forced to depend on tribal labour for doing work in the forests - since disallowing the tribal people from living inside the forest meant losing out on those who could work for them inside the forest. This also meant a losing the people who had far better knowledge about the forests having lived there for decades as compared to the colonists who had just arrived. Thus, the cultivators a few patches to cultivate land on in their forests, but only on the condition that they would provide labour to the forest department and nurture the forests so that they could grow their crops to the fullest extent. The villages which were established by their forest department inside the reserved forests for the purpose of providing cheap labour to the British rulers were known as forest villages. The tribal people responded by protesting against the forest laws in instances such as Songram Sangma's revolt (1906) in Assam and the forest Satyagraha (1930) in Chotanagpur and the Central Provinces.

### ***Traders and markets***

One of the most important impact of the British rule was the increasing control of the daily life of the tribal people by factors that were external to their existence- colonialism, landlords / moneylenders and middlemen. With the negative effect of the measures describe above the tribal people became more and more dependent on casual labour and gathering forest produce for the market. Besides, the fluctuations in prices that were manipulated meant that food grain prices were lowest immediately after the harvest, and dearest immediately before the harvest. For instance, in the princely state of Kalahandi, the price of rice fluctuated between 12.130 Kg and 16.800 Kg per Rupee and that of Mandia (millet) between 20.527 Kg and 29.857 Kg per Rupee in 1912. Similarly, the price of rice rose from 18.660 Kg per Rupee in September 1918 to 8.864 Kg per Rupee in March 1919, and that of Mandia rose from 23.325 Kg per Rupee in April 1918 to 11.662 Kg per Rupee in March 1919. Local factors like rumours often spread by middle man about impending scarcity as well as general features affecting the colonial economy (viz. the First World War and the 'Great Depression') also reinforced the problem, forcing the tribals to take loans.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere in the central Provinces, one also come across the issue the market networks that created problems for the baigars. For example, this meant walking long distances and hence the baigars were compelled to sell lac at prices that were agreed upon by the lakheras or artisans, who moulded lac and who were superior to baigars in terms of existing social hierarchy.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The colonial administrators could neither understand the aboriginals nor converse with them, hence found it impossible to understand the people. For the knowledge of these people the officers had to naturally confide on reports made by the landlords. The aboriginals' point of view could not be heard. In the void left by ignorance, prejudice and taken up its seat and the calamity of the tribals was not merely that they were not understood, but that they were misled.

The institution of chieftainship and its associated traditional structures have existed in this part of the world from the pre-colonial times. These have survived in Chotanagpur through vicissitudes of colonial times and have continued to exist during the post-independence period with changed status, powers and functions. The traditional leaders (chiefs) enjoyed unlimited and undefined powers over the tribe during the pre-colonial period. The chief was custodian of tribal land and allocated it to tribes men for ploughing or residential purposes.

The British administrators like Davidson and Ricketts unknowingly helped in 'transforming the communal ownership of land into individual ownership in favour of the landlords. They recognised some of the essential features of the land system of the Munda and the Oraons. They also discovered that the aboriginals were severely wronged by the landlords. Even the British judges were very desirous in delivering justice to these aboriginals, yet all their strive attempts to bring peace failed.

## End notes

1. In fact, Shashank S.Sinha's chapter in this book focuses on this aspect.
2. See for instance, P.P.Mahapatra, 'Class conflict and Agrarian Regimes in Chotanagpur, 1860-1950', *Indian Economic social History Review*, vol.28, no.1, 1991. It acknowledges how the British transformed many tribal chiefs into zamindars, p.22
3. Sitakanta Mahapatra, "The Insider Diku: Boundary Rules and Marginal Man in Santhal society", in *Tribal Problems of Today and Tomorrow*, ed. P.C. Mahapatra and D.Panda, Bhubaneshwar: Sabari Cultural Society, 1980, pp.2-3. He points to this problem as a result of among other things, the growth of a market economy and differentiation in terms of wealth.
4. Archana Prasad, *against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity*, New Delhi: Three Essays, 2003, pp.39-40..
5. Prasad, *Against ecological Romanticism*, p.40.
6. See David Hardiman's chapter 'Knowledge of the Bhils and their Systems of Healing', in this collection.
7. Cited in Verrier Elwin and shamrao Hivale, *Songs of the Maikal Hills*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1944, p.316.
8. K.S.Singh, *Birsa Munda and His Movement: A Study of Millenarian Movement in Chotanagpur, 1874-1901*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002, p.4.

9. Nilamani Senapati and D.C.Kumar, *Orissa District Gazetteers: Kalahandi*, Cuttack:Orissa Government Press, 1980,pp.229-31; Das, *Final Report of the Land Revenue settlement in Kalahandi District Ex-State Khalsa area 1945-56*, Berhampur:India Law Publication Press, 1962, p.3; *Report on the Administration of Kalahandi for 1933-34*, Kalahandi State Press, p.16.
10. Prasad, *Against Ecological Romanticism*, p.50.

