UNIT 9 TRIBAL MOVEMENT

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to –

- know about the overall context of tribal movements in India
- understand the significant tribal movements in India
- know about the specificities of issues, focus, leadership, challenges and consequences of different tribal movements in the country.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

It is known to us that social movements have arisen in different parts of the country at various points of time. The specific issues and contexts of different movements have already been highlighted in the previous units. Social issues affect the society as a whole, at large. However, it has also been seen that some factors impact a particular section of the society in a more affective manner. Hence, movements are classified into different types in order to obtain a holistic view of the concerns of all in the society. The study of tribal movements provides an in-depth understanding of the

major problems that affect the tribal society in particular, and their approach towards those problems. This unit shall reflect on these issues.

9.3 OVERVIEW ON TRIBAL MOVEMENT IN INDIA

At the very start, it is important to note that the tribal community of India took part in the anti-colonial movement. The tribal movement in India was of two kinds.first kind of movement challenged their dictators like landowners, money-lenders, merchants, contractors), government administrators and Christian missionaries. The second movement was associated with the Indian, national movement. As per reports there were over 70 tribal rebellions over a time frame of 70 years ranging from1778 to 1948. These uprisings were anti-colonial in varying gradations. Some of the noteworthy tribal revolts took place in:

- Chotanagpur region-Tamar revolt (1789-1832)
- Kherwar movement of Santhals (1833)
- Santhal revolt of 1855
- Munda's movement (1895-1901)
- Tribals and National Movement in Orissa (1921-.36)
- Tribal movements in Assam in the late 19th century

The tribal groups lived in comparative isolation for centuries and despite their acquaintances with the non-tribal people, they continued to maintain their separate identity. Every tribal group preserved its identifiable socio-religious and traditional life along with political and economic institutions.

Until the influx of the British in the tribal regions, the tribal people relied on land and forests for sustenance. The forests were an integral part of tribal life all across India. They had customary privileges to use the minor forest produces like firewood, fruits, housing material, medicinal plants etc. Additionally, the tribal people were well-versed in weaving, basket making, hunting and food gathering. Tribal societies had their individual chiefs and clan councils to manage the social-religious, economic and political business. The British administrative policies troubled the traditional tribal organizations. For example, zamindari (landlords) system was introduced in the tribal

regions. The zamindars were considered foreigners by the tribal people, and in their own land they became tenants. The clan councils of the tribal people were substituted by the councils of Rajas comprising of their supporters. Succeeding the introduction of market economy, a section of traders also emerged in the tribal areas. People were forced to pay rent in cash. And if they did not have cash they were compelled to borrow from the lenders.

Furthermore, the customary tribal justice system was being supplanted by the new legal system which was not appropriate for the tribal community, owing to which they were oppressed in the hands of the colonial rulers and their allies. A final nail in the coffin was embedded with the forest policy of 1884, through which the British barred the tribal privileges to use the forest products. Thus, it was seen across India that the British policies were harmful for the tribal interests.

The famines in the latter half of the 19th century degraded the conditions of the tribal people even further and the situation became unbearable.The tribal groups retorted back for their mistreatment and harassment, by propelling movements against their oppressors in their respective areas. It is important to note that these movements had social and religious insinuations, however they were concerning issues associated to their existence. Tribal movements across India were launched under the headship of their own chiefs.

Though the movements originally began on social and religious problems and against the domination of foreigners, in due course of time, they amalgamated with the national movement and with the no-tax crusade. Traditional weaponries i.e. bows, arrows, lathis (sticks) and axe were used by the tribes to fight the enemy, wherein the movement regularly took a violent turn leading to the murder of dictators.

It is important to note that a large number of the movements were callously repressed by the government and the tribal community had to conform to British policies.

9.4 PROMINENT TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA: EMERGENCE, ISSUES, LEADERSHIP AND IMPLICATIONS

The preliminary stimulations of tribal uprising were noticeable in the latter half of the 19th century. Some examples of significant tribal movements, their emergence, issues, leadership and consequences are highlighted below. The movements have been largely classified on the basis of their temporal and spatial specificities.

9.4.1 Tribal Movements in Pre-independent India

Tamar Revolts (1789-1832)

In between 1789-1832, the tribal people of Tamar rioted against the British administrators more than seven times. Tribal community from Midnapur, Koelpur, Chatshila, Jalda, Dhadha, and Silli joined the uprising led by Bhola Nath Sahay of Tamar. By 1832 the arrows of war disseminated throughout the region and the Oraons, Mundas, Hos or Kols also joined the movement under the headship of Ganga Narain Singh, an associate of Banbhum Raj family.

Kherwar Movement of the Santhals (1833)

Kherwar movement was stirred by the aspiration to return to an idealized past of tribal autonomy. The movement commenced under the leadership of Bhagirath Majhi. He swore to unshackle the Santhals from the subjugation of British officials, landowners and money-lenders. He encouraged the worship the Hindu God, Ram, recognizing him with Santhal “Caudo”. He enforced on the Santhals the code of conduct inspired from the Hindu idea of purity and pollution. Kherwar movement took a political facet for pushing out the non-Santhals out of their territory.

Santhal Rebellion (1855-1856)

Primarily concentrated in Bihar, the Santhals are an agricultural tribal community. The first peasant rebellion took place in the years 1855-1856, as a fallout of the institution of Permanent Land Settlement of

1793. Following this settlement, the British took away the land holding of the Santhals, while in return the zamindars took these lands on auction and game them to the peasants for farming. This gave the zamindars and the government officers to increase the land tax and abuse the common peasants. For some point in time the Santhals did put up with the new system, but soon an uprising took place owing to the following reasons:

a) There were a acts of extortions carried out by the zamindars, the police, the revenue department and the court. The Santhals had no alternative but to pay all the taxes and tolls, alongside being ill-treated and evicted of their own property.

b) The agents of the zamindars, the Karendias, made numerous fierce attacks on the Santhals.

c) Additionally, the affluent peasants seized all the propert and livestock of the Santhals.

d) The moneylenders charged extortionate rates of interest. Moneylenders were commonly called “dikus” implying exploiters.

e) Santhals were hired for railroad construction andmade to work for free. Santhal women were often abducted and murdered.

Given the situation that the Santhals faced, they rose in rebellion and by 1855, the Santhals started to form their own militaries who were proficient in guerilla warfare. This was completely an unusual experience for the British rulers. Without any prior military training, Santhals rasied an army of about 10,000 and they managed to disrupt the postal and railway communications projects entirely. The Santhal rebellion gave a message that it was time that the people rose up against the British. The British took suitable steps after the Santhal rebellion and reorganized Santhal dominated areas as Santhal Paragana. Also, owing to the revolution, the British acknowledged the tribal position of the Santhals and they came under the uniform administration.

Munda Rebellion (1899)

One of the noticeable rebellions of 19th century tribal revolts in the subcontinent of India was the Munda Rebellion. The uprising was led by Birsa Munda in the south of Ranchi, with an aim to institute Munda raj and freedom. Essentially, the Munda rebellion was revivalist movement that targeted to eradicate all the foreign components from the Munda culture so that the original pure character of the Munda community can be retained. The political and agrarian rudiments were then brought into the religious crusade. From 1858, Christian tribal peasants started leading a battle against the foreign landlords and the beth begari system through litigations. Finally, through the investigation and settlement operations of 1902-1910, the administration endeavored to compensate the complaints of the Mundas. With the passing of the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, the Mundas were able to eradicate the beth begari system and managed to get some acknowledgement for their khuntkatti rights. The tribal people of Chotanagpur also got lawful protection of their land rights.

Movement in Andhra Pradesh (1922)

In the hill tribal territories of Andhra Pradesh a rebellion broke out in August 1922, spearheaded by Allun Ramachandra Raju.The Advisees of Andhra hills were successful in engaging the British into a full-blown guerrilla combat. Incapable of surviving the British got in the Malabar Special Force to fight and the combat only ended when Alluri Raju died. As the freedom movement expanded, the Advisees took full part in the independence movement. Numerous landless and severely fraught Advisees united in with upper-caste freedom fighters imagining that the fall of the British would escort in a new democratic age.

9.4.2 Tribal Revolts Post Independence

Regrettably, even after seventy years of independence, the tribal community still has been at war with the administration. Even

though independence has brought extensive improvements for the mainstream of the Indian populace, Dalits and Adivasis have been ignored and new complications have ascended for the tribal population. With the augmentation of the populace since 1947 burdens on land resources has increased. The fundamental disputes leading up to tribal movements in India post-independence are forest alienation, loss of land and job dispossession owing to invasion of the outsiders, cultural submergence, and instable development.

Post India's independence, tribal revolts can be categorized into three clusters (i) movement owing to exploitation of outsiders (ii) revolt arising out of economic dispossession (like the revolts taking place among the Gonds in Madhya Pradesh and the Mahars in Andhra Pradesh) (iii) rebellions due to pro-autonomy inclinations (like the revolts taking place among the Nagas and Mizos).

Furthermore, the tribal movements can be additionally classified on the basis of their orientation into four categories (a) forest-based uprising, (b) socio-religious revolts or social-culture movements (c) movements pursuing political independence and formations of new states (Nagas, Mizos, Jharkhand) and (d) agrarian uprising like the Naxal ban movement of 1967 and Brisadal movement of 1968-69.

9.4.3 Tribal Movements based on spatial location

Tribal uprisings are additionally segmented into two groups along two key divisions of tribes based on the geographic region they inhabit a) Non- Frontier Tribe: It comprised a total of 89 percent of the total tribal population. The non-frontier tribes were primarily limited to central India, West-Central India and Andhra Pradesh. Amongst the tribes that partook in the rebellions were Khonds, Savara, Oraon, Koya, Kol,Santhal, Munda, Gond and Bhil. The revolt of these tribes were moderately impulsive and led to some major uprisings. b) Frontier Tribes: It comprisies of the seven North-eastern frontier states of Assam, Manipur,Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura.

As British dominance in India came to an end, Angami Zapu Phizo, President of the Naga National Council (NNC) announced independence on August 14, 1947. Ever since the Naga Hills has been in tumult, and in spite of the creation of a separate Nagaland state in 1963, the revolt has sustained. Post the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975 by NNC, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was formed by Isak Chisi Swu, Th. Muivah and Khaplang. Since times immemorial the Naga tribes has been known for their pride and autonomous identity, the course of politicization led to the impulse for establishment of separate land for Nagas. The Separatist uprisingis dated back to 1918, with the founding of Naga Club in Kohima by a group of intellectual Nagas. The Club presented a memo before the Simon Commission which wanted the segregation of Nagas from the proposed constitutional reform by British administrators in India.In 1946, the Naga Club was rechristened as Nagaland National Council (NNC). The NNC then asked for an independent autonomous political geography encompassing Naga populated areas of Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myammar (Burma), thus marking the commencement of political struggle between Nagas and the Government of India.

The Naxalite movement in the tribal regions of Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha; the agrarian revolts of the Gonds and Bhils in Madhya Pradesh and the forest- based movements of Gonds were principally propelled for deliverance from domination and discernment, backwardness and removal of a government which was coldhearted to the tribal predicament who lived in scarcity, hunger, unemployment and mistreatment.

The formal revolt of the Bodos residing in Assam demanding the creation of a self-governing state of Bodoland, started under the headship of Upendranath Brahma, member of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) on 2 March 1987. As a matter of fact, the call for the separate tribal motherland is not new in Assam. The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) had the desire to have a single home-land

called “Udayachal”. But, the uprising was repressed by the then government. In order to lead the movement, the ABSU formed a political association called the Bodo People’s Action Committee (BPAC). The revolt of ABSU began with the slogan “Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty”, a fallout of which was the formation of Bodo Accord in 1993. Following the Bodo Accord, the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was established. Later on, the BAC was substituted by the BTQ which was formed in agreement with the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) on 10 February 2003.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. How is the forest important in tribal life?

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Q2. Did British dominance prompt tribal movement?

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Q3. Which combat tactic did the tribal people use?

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Q4. What are categories of tribal movement based on orientation?

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Q5. Name some important tribal movements in India

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9.5 LET US SUM UP

- Prior to the occupation and consequent amalgamation of tribal regions in the British areas, the varied tribes had their own distinct social and economic arrangements.

- The systems were customary laws and custom gratified the needs of the tribal people. The social system of each community was commanded by a chief and they enjoyed autonomy pertaining to the management of their community affairs. The land and forests were chief resources of their livelihood.
- Post the occupation of the tribal regions, the British designed rules which targeted at enduring the colonial benefits. These policies were unfavorable to the welfares of the tribal people which terminated the isolation of tribal communities and linked them with the national economy. This unsettled the moderately autonomous organisation of the tribal societies.
- New legal system was introduced in tribal societies, which was in direct opposition to tribal system of justice. A congregation of classes developed, like the landlords, contractors, traders, money-lenders, and government administrators in the tribal areas.
- These classes of people did not belong to the tribal communities. They were seen as outcasts (dikus) by the tribal people. The tribals of various areas rebelled against the oppressive moves of these classes of people.
- Several tribal rebellions have taken place in the history of India, beginning with one in Bihar in 1772, subsequently followed by countless rebellions in Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Assam, Mizoram and Nagaland.
- It is seen that most of the tribal uprisings had agricultural, religious, political, and economic reasons for their development.
- It is argued that on several occasions, the British and also the governments of independent India evaded the need to understand the open political and democratic ambitions of the tribal people.
- The common viewpoints that surface within tribal movements comprise aspects like reiterating of the tribal self, recollecting the control over resources like land and forest, regaining political dominion, redefining development, etc.