

GS Foundation 2024: Modern India
Handout 16: Tribal and Peasant Revolts (1)
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Popular Resistance

In pre-colonial India popular protest, the Mughal rulers and their officials was not uncommon. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed many peasant uprisings against the ruling class. The imposition of a high land revenue demand by the state: corrupt practices and harsh attitude of the tax collecting officials, were some of the many reasons which provoked the peasants to rise in revolt. However, the establishment of colonial rule in India and the various policies of the colonial government had a much more devastating effect on the Indian peasants and tribes.

British colonization of India's economy and society took place over a protracted period through piecemeal conquest and consolidation. Due to a consistent horizontal and vertical expansion of the British imperial rule, different segments of Indian society encountered the colonialism and intermittently reacted against it. At each step, this process generated discontent, resentment, and resistance. The various resistances against the British rule in 19th century were proto nationalist in nature.

At a time when elite intelligentsia and powerful people in India were focused on reforming the society to address criticisms from the West, rural communities were responding to colonial rule differently. The urban elites benefited from colonialism, but traditional elites and peasants were negatively impacted and reacted with resistance and defense, trying unsuccessfully to restore their old ways of life.

Peasant and Tribal Revolts

With the establishment of British Rule in India, a long-drawn-out tradition of revolts and rebellions commenced. During the first 100 years of British rule, there were many civil rebellions. These rebellions were often led by people who were no longer in power, such as deposed rajas and nawabs, as well as their descendants, uprooted and poor zamindars, landlords, and poligars, and former employees and officials of the conquered Indian states. The backbone of these rebellions was made up of peasants who were charged high rent, artisans who were struggling financially, and soldiers who were demobilized.

There was hardly a year without armed opposition or a decade without a major armed rebellion in one part of the country or the other. From 1763 to 1856, there were more than forty major rebellions apart from hundreds of minor ones. These revolts and rebellions were inherent in the constitution of British Rule because the discontent produced by the sufferings under British Rule came out in the form of revolts and rebellions.

Causes of the Peasant Revolts

The peasant revolts were a response and reaction to the circumstances created by the establishment of the British Rule and rapid changes introduced in the economy, administration, and land revenue system.

1. The British Rule in India was **colonial in character** because it was guided by the interest of Britain.
2. British rule was **alien**, **unfeeling** and **insensible**.
3. Colonial endeavor to draw Indian economy into the **world capitalist system** and attempts to develop capitalist agriculture had in many cases a **devastating** impact on **agrarian relations**.
4. In the British land revenue system, the land **revenue rates** were **exorbitant**. The appropriation of peasants' surplus by the company and its agents, the increasing burden of **taxes** made the **peasants completely** dependent on the mercy of the revenue intermediaries and officials, the merchants and the money-lenders.
5. **Creation of property rights** in land and consequently of a land **market resulted** in the replacement of **customary relationship** with **contractual one**.
6. **The commercialisation of agriculture** ironically promoted **famine and hunger**.
7. Due to the British trade and industrial policy, the **rural handicraft industry declined**. So, thus **impoverished artisans** put a lot of pressure on agriculture.
8. The British power expanded in India at the cost of some popular rules and zamindars. Often, **peasants revolted in favour** of these **dispossessed ruling elites**.
9. The British economic policies caused poverty for Indian peasants, and their grievances were ignored by the **British administration**. The British law and judiciary did not **help** the peasants but instead protected the interests of the **government, landlords, merchants, and money-lenders**. The implementation of new and unfamiliar courts and legal systems led to the oppression of the poor by the rich. As **a result**, the **peasants** took up arms to defend themselves against colonial exploitation and lack of justice.

As a result, it **disrupted agrarian** society, causing prolonged and widespread suffering among its constituents. Discontent produced by this suffering came out in the form of **repealed revolts**.

Causes of Tribal Revolts

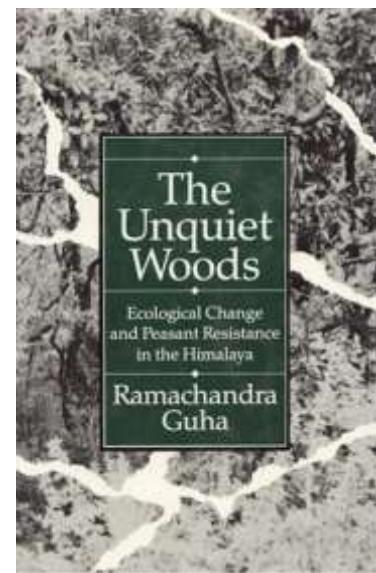
Rural India had been inhabited by the tribal population from the beginning. The tribal communities lived in relative **seclusion and isolation** for centuries and in varying states of **economy**. Each tribal community maintained its own socio-religious and cultural life and its political and economic organisations. They lived at the **periphery of the settled Hindu peasant societies** and enjoyed autonomy of culture, which was based on egalitarian ethos.

Until the arrival of the British in the tribal areas, the main means of production and subsistence for the tribals were land and forests. The forests were of great significance for the tribals all over India. They had depended on the forest for **food, fuel and cattle feed**. They had **customary rights to use** the minor forest products. Their right to use the forest products

was recognized. They practiced shifting cultivation (jhum, podu, etc.), taking recourse to fresh forest lands when their existing lands showed signs of exhaustion.

Tribal communities had chiefs and clan councils that managed their social, religious, economic, and political affairs. The people paid their respective chiefs some amount of land produce, but it was not a legal obligation. Instead, it was a moral requirement, and the chiefs received voluntary contributions in kind and a few days of free labor every year from the people.

During the colonial era, tribals also, being a part of Indian society, shared some problems with the peasants. Additionally, they had some unique features also like -



1. The establishment of British Rule affected the life of tribals in many ways. The colonial administration ended their relative isolation and brought them fully within the ambit of colonialism.
2. 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.
3. Political
 - a. Political independence enjoyed by tribals was taken away. The traditional tribal chiefs were removed from their traditional role. The clan councils of the tribals were replaced by the councils of rajas consisting of their followers. Sometime, British recognized the tribal chiefs as zamindars and introduced a new system of land revenue and taxation of tribal products.
 - b. The customary system of justice was replaced by the new legal system. The new legal system was not suitable for the tribals. The tribals could not afford to utilise the new legal system, as they were 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. Oppression and extortion by policemen and other petty officials further aggravated distress among the tribals.
4. Agrarian Economy: British introduced market economy in tribal areas, the customary tribal rights on forest and land were also taken away. It paved the way for the strengthening of Zamindar-moneylender-contractors nexus, which exploited the gullible tribals.
 - a. The tribal land system was marked by its collective **ownership of land** (eg khuntakatti) and absence of the landlords. But the British changed the land system of the tribals. It introduced and encouraged individual ownership.
 - b. British created the hitherto unknown class of **zamindars** (landlords) in the tribal areas and reduced the tribal position to tenants. These zamindars were considered outsiders by the tribals. The traditional land system of the British was turned into tenancy systems.
 - c. The British also introduced contractors (**Thekedars**) in the tribal areas. The zamindars and thekedars introduced the land rent in the tribal areas.

- d. The tribal 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.
 - e. These outsider middlemen (zamindar-thekedar-mahajan) were the chief instruments for bringing the tribal people within the vortex of the colonial economy and exploitation. They created debt-trap and increasingly took possession of tribal lands. Thus, tribal people increasingly lost their lands and were reduced to the position of agricultural labourers, share-croppers and rack rented tenants on their own land.
5. Colonialism also transformed their **relationship with the forest**.
- a. The forest policy (1884) of the British curtailed the tribal rights to use the forest produce. These new forest regulations appeared as encroachments on their natural rights.
 - b. 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.
- 6. Labour exploitation**
- a. **Begari** – There was a growing discontent among the tribals against the increasingly exploitative 'begari' system. It was further accentuated due to the bonded labourers by the British. The revenue farmers and government agents also intensified and expanded the system of beggar, making the tribals perform unpaid labour.
 - b. Tribal, captured through middlemen, were sent as a 'contract labour' (indentured labour) to various plantation and outside the country where their labour exploited.
7. **Socio-cultural aspects:**
- a. The British interfered in tribal socio–religious practices in the name of reforms.
 - i. Some of the British policies - imposition excise duty on intoxicants in 1822, ban on Jhum cultivation in 1867, ban on opium farming etc. amounted to undue interference in tribal way of life.
 - b. They also resented the activities of Christian missionaries especially in Bihar and Assam.
 - i. Under British rule, Christian missionaries were encouraged to enter tribal areas, resulting in upsetting the socio-cultural dynamics. Moreover, during times of conflict, the missionaries refused to take up arms and discouraged rebellion led to their being viewed as extensions of colonialism.

The colonial intrusion and the triumvirate of traders, moneylender and revenue farmer in sum disrupted the tribal identity to a lesser or greater degree. The sufferings caused by these direct and indirect effects of BR forced the tribals to raise their voice and pick up the weapons resulting in repeated revolts and rebellions.

Evolution of Forest Policy in Colonial India

Lord Dalhousie emphasized the need for a definite forest policy in 1856. With the introduction of the Railways in 1850s, huge amount of timber supply was needed. Also, Indian teak, suitable for ship building, was exploited.

The foundation of scientific forestry was laid when **Sir Dietrich Brandis**, a German forester was appointed as the first Inspector General of Forests in 1864. **Forest department** was founded in that year (1864) on the assumption that the Indians lacked sense of conservation. Passing of the **First Indian Forest Act in 1865** extended the British Colonial claims over forests in India. empowered several local governments to declare certain areas as State Forests.

The Forest Act of 1878 established a virtual State monopoly over the forests in a legal sense. It truncated the centuries-old traditional use by communities of their forests and transformed their customary right to access forest into a privilege that could be withdrawn at will. It secured the colonial governments control over the forestry.

The Indian Forest Act, 1927 (India's main forest law) had nothing to do with conservation. It was created to serve the British need for timber. It also sought to override customary rights and forest management systems by declaring forests state property and exploiting their timber. It established three categories of forests, reserve forest, protected forest and village forest. Reserve forest was the most restricted.



Dietrich Brandis was Inspector General of Forests in India from 1864-83. He formulated new forest legislation and helped establish research and training institutions.



Imperial Forest School (1884), Dehradun is today known as the Forest Research Institute.

Character of Peasant and Tribal Revolts

Colonial authors with sympathies towards the British and the established order viewed these uprisings as a law-and-order issue, overlooking the range of problems faced by these groups from pre-colonial to colonial times. Rebels were often portrayed as primitive savages resisting "civilization." The gullible common people joined the conspiracy of disgruntled leaders because they were misled.

Nationalists tended to rope in peasant and tribal history for anti-colonial purposes, but they sometimes ignored other aspects of the oppressed people's struggle. Those more sympathetic to the cause of the tribals and peasants tried to understand the domain of peasant and tribal action in its own terms.

1. The basis of these peasant revolts was **regional with limited goals**.
 - a. The peasant and tribal revolts were localized in character. Their spread was limited to a small territory. For the Santhals it was a battle for their '**fatherland**' which had been grabbed by the outsiders. Their fight then was for this land which belonged to them in the good old past and was now snatched away from them.
2. **Ethnic ties** were a basic feature of the peasant and tribal rebellions. At this level the solidarity shown was of a very high order.
 - a. Peasants identified more with their cultural groups rather than with their economic class. It was thus easier to mobilize on religion/caste rather than their economic status/class.
3. Often, the leadership of the movement had a **messianic outlook**. They weren't backed by any modern ideology. On the whole, these movements had social and religious overtones. Religion as an ideology brought people together. But they were directed against the issues related to their existence.
4. Some features of the peasant and tribal protest movements demonstrate a certain level of **political and social consciousness**.
 - a. The Kols in 1832 did not attack the tribal population in a clear recognition of who their allies were. Fellow peasants/tribals were never attacked unless they had collaborated with the enemy. At the same time, not all outsiders were attacked as enemies. They identified their enemies in the outsiders (**dikus**) - landlords, money-lenders, thekedars and missionaries and European government officials.
 - b. Being public and open, these rebellions were **political actions, different from crime**. In spite of the attempt of British officials to portray them as criminals, the rebel's mode of action tells another story. The public legitimacy ultimately allowed public conference, planning, assembly and attack. For example, the Santhals gave ample warning in advance to the villages they attacked. This shows that the form of control was attacked rather than just outsiders.
5. The peasant and tribal revolts represented **history from below** because these were revolts of common masses. The participation of elite classes was absent.
6. Mostly, these revolts were **directed against immediate exploiters**. The landlords and money lenders were their main targets. The rebellions dissolved once their **immediate grievances** were addressed. Thus, these peasant movements didn't show a clear understanding of the nature and character of colonial exploitation.
7. Peasants and tribal revolts were **unplanned** and unorganized in character. In most cases these revolts represented sudden outbursts.

8. There was **no continuity of struggle or long-term goal**.
9. These revolts were **violent in nature**, but they didn't use modern weapons. The tribals fought against their enemies with their traditional weapons i.e. bows, arrows, lathis and axe!
 - a. Sometimes, the peasant could take recourse to the judicial legal system in many cases but tribals had no such option. Tribal revolts were far more violent than the peasant revolts because the element of fear and intensity of reaction was far greater among tribals when compared with the peasants.
10. Peasant and tribal revolts **failed** because they were **ruthlessly suppressed** by British rulers.
 - a. They were put down with Exemplary savagery. Eg Santhal Hool.

While most of the peasant and tribal revolts failed, they were not entirely unsuccessful because they set the stage for the significant uprising of 1857. Despite being suppressed, the underlying discontent among these groups persisted. This accumulated discontent ultimately erupted in the form of the 1857 revolt, which is why some argue that the peasant and tribal rebellions paved the way for the events of 1857.

One groups of people in India that never stopped resisting and compromised with the British, who fought them relentlessly, the adivasis in India. For over 100 years they were fighting British, when the remaining elites were negotiating an accommodation in the colonial hierarchy (raja-rani feudal people). So fierce was the resistance that in 1871, the British passed a law - the Criminal Tribes Act (1870s) - criminalizing 200 tribes saying that you are genetically criminals. (The pardhis, the pahariyas etc). It is 60 years before Nazi Germany did a similar thing. But we think that British were sportsmen, and believed in fair play while Nazis were bad...! British anticipated the Nazi ideology by a century.

- P. Sainath

Evolving Character of the Peasant Movements

1. **Early peasant movements** during later of 18th c and first half of 19th c
 - a. Targeted local exploiters such as landlords and money lenders.
 - b. Used violent methods, these exploiters were physically attacked and killed. Their houses were burnt.
2. **After 1857,**
 - a. The struggles were directed towards specific and limited objectives and redressal of particular grievances. The movements were directed against the immediate enemies of the peasant—foreign planters and indigenous zamindars and moneylenders. Colonialism was not the target of these movements.
 - b. There was growing involvement of the **educated middle-class intelligentsia** as spokesperson for the aggrieved peasantry, thus adding new dimensions to their protests. They performed an important role, they tried to connect the localised and isolated peasant and tribal movements to a wider struggle against the undesirable aspects of colonial rule.

- c. The peasants developed a strong awareness of their legal rights and asserted them in and outside the courts. The peasants used peaceful methods to protest the exploiting elements.

3. During the opening decade of 20th century

- a. Though the fundamental causes behind these peasant movements were the same as the ones in the 19th century, their nature had changed.
- b. Now the movements were marked by a new feature: they were deeply influenced by and in their turn had a marked impact on the ongoing **struggle for national freedom**. There was a rise of anti-colonial consciousness.
 - i. During this phase the peasants became a part of the mainstream national movement and didn't remain only against economic grievances.
 - ii. Also, it didn't remain limited to local areas alone.
- c. Role of Indian National Congress
 - i. Despite the fact that the Indian National Congress came into existence in the late 19th century, it took cognizance of the peasant problems only in the second decade of the 20th century. With the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian political scene, the Indian National Congress experienced a metamorphosis. Its sphere of influence was extended, and it assumed a mass character.
 - ii. The Congress formed peasant communities in rural areas and took note of peasants' grievances. However, the peasant movements initiated by the Congress were invariably restricted to seeking relief against the excessive rates of land revenue, and were in no case directed against the zamindars.
- d. Leadership – Led by Congress, Communists also apart from peasant leaders themselves.
- e. The peasant movements of the 20th century had a firm basis of political **ideology**. Peasants organized themselves into various **class associations**.
 - i. UP Kisan Sabha (1918), Awadh Kisan Sabha (1920), Eka movement (1921)
 - ii. The first Kisan Congress held at Lucknow in 1935 led to the formation of the All-India Kisan Sabha. The programme of the Sabha reflected the aspirations and needs of the entire peasantry in agrarian India.
 - i. Towards the last phase of Indian national struggle for independence, the Kisan Sabhas and peasants responded to the call of national leadership and participated in various movements such as Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit Indian Movement, etc. in heroic manner.

2. Post Independence

- a. Communist – Tebhaga, Telangana, Naxalite
- b. Gandhian – Bhudan, Gramdan and Sarvodaya movement
- c. Green Revolution → New Farmers Movement
- d. Intersectional – environmental, feminist, dalit, Adivasi movements etc.