

Chapter – 4: Tribals, Dikus and the Vision of a Golden Age

- 1895 – Birsa – roaming – forests and villages – Chottanagpur, Jharkhand
- People said – he has miracle powers – cure diseases – multiply grains
- Birsa – declared – God appointed him – save his people – free them – slavery – *dikus* (outsiders)
- 1000s – followed Birsa – believing – God
- Birsa – born in family – Mundas – tribal group – Chottanagpur – followers included – other tribals – Santhals and Oraons
- All of them – unhappy – changes under British rule
- Their ways of life – disappearing – livelihood – under threat – religion – in danger
- What happened to tribals under British rule? How did their lives changed?
- Tribals – customs and rituals – different from Brahmins – no social division like caste system
- All – belonged to same tribe – share common kinship – BUT – there were social and economic difference within tribes

How did Tribal Groups Live?

- 19th century – tribal people – different parts of India – different activities

Some were *jhum* cultivators

- Some practiced – *jhum* cultivation – shifting cultivation
- Small land – forests – cut treetop – allow sunlight – reach ground – burn vegetation – clear it for cultivation
- Spread ash – contain potash – fertilize the soil
- Axe – cut trees – hoe – scratch soil – prepare for cultivation
- Broadcast (scattered) – seeds – instead of ploughing and sowing
- Once crop – ready – move to another field – cultivated field – left for years
- Found in – hilly and forested areas – north-east and central India
- Lives – depend on – free movement within forest – use land and forest for crops

Some were hunters and gatherers

- Many regions – tribals – hunt animals – gather – forest produce
- Forests – essential for life
- Khonds – forest of Orissa – collective hunts – divide the meat – ate fruits and roots – cooked food with oil from seeds – *sal* and *mahua*
- Forest shrubs / herbs – medicinal purpose – sold forest produce – local markets
- Local weavers and leather workers – purchase – *kusum* and *palash* flowers for dyes
- Supplies of rice and grains – sometimes – exchanged goods – barter system – other times – purchased – little earnings
- Some – odd jobs – building roads, carrying loads – others – labour in fields
- Supply – forest produce – reduced – tribals – wander – searching work – labours
- Many – like Baigas – central India – believed – below dignity – become labourer
- Tribals – buy and sell – not produced locally – depend on – traders and moneylenders
 - Traders – sold at high prices
 - Moneylenders – gave loan – interest very high
- Tribals – market and commerce – debt and poverty

- Traders and moneylenders – outsiders – reason for misery

Some herded animals

- Many tribal groups – herding and rearing
- Pastoralists (nomads) – moved with herds – according to season
 - Grass – exhausted – move to another area
- Van Gujjars – Punjab – AND – Labadis – Andhra Pradesh – cattle herders
- Gaddis – Kulu – shephards
- Bakarwals – Kashmir – goat herders

Some took to settled cultivation

- Before 19th century – many – settled down – instead of moving place to place
- Began – using plough – got rights of the land they lived on
- Many cases – Mundas – Chottanagpur – land – belonged to whole clan
 - All members – descendants – original settlers – had rights on land
- Very often – some – more power than others – became chief and others followers
- Powerful men – rented lands
- British – believed – settled tribals – Santhals and Gonds – more civilized – BUT – hunter-gatherers or shifting cultivators – wild and savage – needed to be civilized

How did Colonial Rule Affect Tribal Lives?

- Lives – tribals – changed under British rule – how? – let's see

What happened to tribal chiefs?

- Before British – many areas – tribal chiefs – imp. people
 - So much power – control land management – law and order – own police force
- Under British rule – function and power – changed so much
- Allowed – keep titles and land – lost controlling power – forced to obey British law – pay taxes to British – discipline their people
- Lost authority – unable to fulfill – traditional functions

What happened to the shifting cultivators?

- British – uncomfortable – groups – moved from place to place – wanted them to settle down
- Settled peasants – easier to control
- British – wanted regular revenue
- Introduced – land settlements – measured lands – defined the rights to land – fixed revenue demand
- Some peasants – landowners – other tenants
- Tenants – paid rent to owners – paid rent to state
- British effort – settle *jhum* cultivators – nor successful
- Settle cultivation – not easy – water scarce – soil dry
- *Jhum* cultivators – turned to settled cultivators – suffered – field – not produce good yields
- *Jhum* cultivators – north-east India – insisted – traditional practice – widespread protests – British – allowed shifting cultivation – some parts of forest

Forest laws and their impact

- Life – tribals – connected to forests – change on laws – effect on tribal lives

- British – extended – control over forest – declared – forest – state property
- Some forests – Reserved forest – British wanted timber
 - People – cannot move freely – practice *jhum* – collect fruits – hunt animals
- Many *jhum* cultivators – forced to move – another area
- British – stopped tribals – living in forests – where to get labour – forest department – cut trees for railways
- Company officials – idea – *jhum* cultivators – small patch of land in forest – allow to cultivate – condition – those who lived in village – labour in forest department
- Forest department – established – forest villages – cheap labour
- Many tribals – against colonial forest laws – disobeyed – new rules – rose in rebellion
 - Revolt of Songram Sangma – 1906
 - Forest satyagraha – 1930s

The problem with trade

- 19th century – tribal groups – found traders and moneylenders – visiting more often – wanting to buy forest produce – offering cash loans – asking to work for wages
- Tribals – took some time – understand consequences
 - Case of silk growers
 - 18th century – Indian silk – in demand – European markets
 - Fine quality – Indian silk – highly valued – exports – increased
 - Market expanded – East India Company – encourage silk production – meet demands
 - Hazaribagh (Jharkhand) – Santhals – reared cocoons
 - Silk traders – sent agents – gave loans – tribals – collected cocoons
 - ₹ 3 – ₹ 4 – 1000 cocoons – exported to Burdwan or Gaya – sold at 5 times
 - Middlemen – arranged deals between traders and growers – made huge profits
 - Silk growers – earned very little – saw – market and traders – main enemy

The search for work

- Tribals – go far away – search for work – worse situation
- Late 19th century – tea plantation and mining – imp. industry
- Tribals – recruited – large numbers – work at Assam tea plantations – OR – Jharkhand coal mines – low wages – cannot return home

A Closer Look

- 19th and 20th century – tribal groups – different part – rebel – against changes in laws – taxes to pay – restriction on practices – exploitation by traders and moneylenders
 - Kols – 1831-32
 - Santhals – 1855
 - Bastar rebellion – central India – 1910
 - Worli revolt – Maharashtra – 1940
 - Birsa movement

Birsa Munda

- Born in mid-1870s
- Father – poor – grew up around – forests – Bohonda – grazing sheep – playing flute – dancing in local *akhara*

- Poverty – father – moved from place to place – search for work
- Growing up – Birsa – heard tales of Munda uprising – *sirdars* (leaders) – urging people to revolt
- Talked about – golden age – Mundas – free from oppression of *dikus* – right to community - restored
- Birsa – missionary school – listened to sermons – heard – possible for Mundas – attain Kingdom of Heaven – regain lost rights – become good Christian
- Later Birsa – spent time – company – Vaishnav preacher – wore sacred thread – value importance of purity and piety (worship)
- Birsa – influenced by – ideas – came to know – growing-up years
- His movement – aim – reforming tribal society
- Urged Mundas – give up liquor – clean village – stop believing – witchcraft and sorcery
- Birsa – also turned against – missionaries and Hindu landlords – outsiders – ruining Munda way of life
- 1895 – Birsa – urged followers – recover past
- Talked about – golden age – *satyug* – Mundas – good life – built embankments (dams) – used natural springs – planted trees and orchards (field of fruits) – practiced civilization – did not kill – relatives
- Birsa – wanted people – work on own land – settle down
- British – worried – movement – political aim – remove – missionaries, moneylenders, Hindu landlords, government – set up – Munda raj – Birsa as head
- All sources – cause of misery – Mundas suffering
 - Land policies – British – destroying – traditional land system
 - Hindu landlords and moneylenders – taking their land away
 - Missionaries – criticizing – traditional culture
- Movement spread – Birsa – arrested – 1895 – guilty of rioting – jailed for 2 years
- 1897 – Birsa – released – toured villages – gather support
 - Used traditional symbols and language – urged people – destroy “Ravana” (*dikus* and Europeans) – establish kingdom – his leadership
- Followers – target – symbols – *dikus* and European power
 - Attacked police stations, churches
 - Raided property – moneylenders and zamindars
 - Raised – white flag – symbol of Birsa Raj
- 1900 – Birsa died – cholera – movement faded
- Movement – imp. – two ways –
 - Forced – colonial government – introduce laws – land – tribals – not easily taken by *dikus*
 - Showed – tribals – can rebel against injustice – show anger against colonial rule