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## UNIT 3 RESISTANCE AND REVOLUTIONS AGAINST FOREIGN POWERS

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### 3.0 OBEJCTIVES

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The unit tries to capture the historical account of tribal resistance and revolutions against the non-tribal foreign powers. The case of tribals of Chotanagpur and Santals are taken as a concrete expressions of such resistance and revolutions against such powers. It would be applied to other tribals in their own concrete specific situations.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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The tribals of Chotanagpur and Santal Pargana in Jharkhand today have a long history of resistance and revolt against the British administration and its non-tribal collaborators, such as, jagirdars (service tenure holders), thikadars (permanent or temporary land lease holders), zamindars (persons recognized as possessing proprietary rights over land under the British Law), etc. This history of pre-Independence India (1947) is well documented and probably represents by far the best tribal resistance and revolutions against foreign powers that have taken place in different parts of the country in the past. Although Chotanagpur was ceded to the British East India Company (EIC) in 1765, the first entry of the British rulers into this region took place in 1772 when Dripnath Shahi was the ruler of the region. He was in the subordinate position under the EIC and consequently handed over the region into its hands in the same year. He agreed to pay the EIC an annual tribute of 12,000 rupees. For some years the administration of this territory was left in his hands but in 1817 it was handed over to a British magistrate at Ramgarh in the district of Hazaribag.

The British Rule in general and the introduction of the *zamindari* (landlordism) system in particular marked the beginning of tribal conflict and struggle in the above region. Rebellions of various tribal groups of the region against their rulers date from this point. They revolted against the social and administrative arrangements introduced by the foreign rulers. The rebellions were the last

resort of the tribals driven to despair by the encroachment of non-tribal outsiders on the former's land, forest and other economic resources. Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, a British anthropologist specializing in India's tribes had the following observation to make: "Anyone with first hand experience of conditions in areas where aboriginals are subjected to exploitation by more advanced populations must be surprised not by the occurrence of risings, but rather by the infrequency of violent action on the part of the aboriginals deprived of their ancestral lands and the freedom they enjoyed before their contact with populations superior in economic and political power" (Singh 1966: ix-x). In this light, following are some of the well known and important tribal resistance movements and revolutions against foreign powers:

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## 3.2 PACIFICATION OF THE *PAHARIAS*

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The *Maale* or *Sauria Paharias*, are a tribal group in the Rajmahal Hills of Santal Pargana. They had maintained a virtual independence before the British Rule came to India. The early history of this Rule in the Rajmahal area is mainly a record of the British attempt to pacify the *Paharias* (Hillmen). They grew very meagre crops of maize and lentils and had to supplement their diet by hunting. Consequently, in the days gone by they were notorious raiders of the plains and cattle lifters. Their raids rose to their highest during the famine of 1770 which proved very severe on the plains between the Ganges and the Rajmahal Hills. So widespread was the terror these raids occasioned that the plains around the Rajmahal Hills were soon deserted by their non-tribal cultivators. No boat dared to moor on the southern bank of the Ganges after dusk for fear of being plundered and even the Government mail-runners on the roads skirting the hills were often robbed and murdered.

Warren Hastings, realizing the need of putting an end to these raids and acting on the suggestion of General Baker, his military adviser, raised a special corps of about 800 strong in 1772 and placed it under the command of Captain Brooke. His orders were to subdue the *Paharias* and induce them to settle as peaceful cultivators. His kind treatment of the prisoners and their women and children won for Brooke the confidence of the *Paharias* and he was able to induce them to come down and settle on the arable land below the hills. Captain Browne was the next to be put in charge of the Rajmahal Hills from 1774 till 1778. He continued his predecessor's work. He is best remembered for the preparation of a scheme for the pacification and future administration of the *Paharias*, which was later elaborated and implemented by Augustus Cleveland, his successor.

Augustus Cleveland, Collector of the District of Bhagalpur and Rajmahal, appears to have been impressed with the simplicity and truthfulness of the *Paharias*. He accepted their claim of always having been independent of the lowland *rajars*. Thanks to his understanding approach, they showed themselves ready to submit to the Government and to renounce for good all unlawful practices of robbery, murder and pillage, if the government could provide them with some means of subsistence, the lack of which had hitherto driven them to marauding habits. He drafted a plan for enlisting the *Paharias* into a corps of archers under the command of their own leaders, all in the service and pay of the Government. Warren Hastings sanctioned the proposed scheme of Cleveland in 1782, agreeing on an allowance of Rs.10 a month to all the *Sardars* (leaders) and Rs.5 to their *Naiibs* (deputies).

The enrolment of a corps of archers reached the strength of 1,300 men armed with bows and arrows. They were under the command of a certain Jaurah who had once been a notorious and dreaded bandit. He remained throughout life a bold, active and faithful servant of the EIC in different enterprises against outlaws both in the Ramgarh hills and his own mountains. Sanction was also obtained to drill the corps and to arm like regular sepoy and to withdraw the offences of the hill people from the jurisdiction of ordinary courts and to have them tried by tribunal of chiefs presided over by Cleveland.

### 3.3 SANTAL REVOLT (1781-84)

There was a revolt against the British in Santal Pargana under the leadership of Tilka Majhi. He is said to have been a person of extraordinary physical and spiritual powers. Most of the time he moved in the hills around Sultanganj like a Robin Hood. Time to time he came down from the hills and attacked the boats of the East India Company moving along the Ganges, robbed and murdered *dak*-runners passing by the Teliagarhi pass and looted the British treasury. However, he shared the spoils with the poor. He organized guerilla warfare in which the Santal women also participated. Several encounters took place inside the jungles at many places in the *Jungle Tarai* region between Tilka Majhi and his followers with bows and arrows and the British soldiers with guns. In 1784, Tilka and his followers attacked Bhagalpur and it is said that Tilka shot an arrow which passed through the chest of Cleveland and he fell down from his horse and died on the spot on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1784. The main reason for the revolt of the Santals under Tilka was the policy of exploitation, extortion, atrocities and harassment of tax collectors, police officers and the agents of the landlords of the British, Hindus and foreign rulers. The above all reason for the revolt was the suppression of the Santal's freedom by the non-tribal outsiders mentioned above.

#### Tamar Revolt (1798)

The leader of the Tamar revolt was Bholanath Singh of Tamar. This rebellion was very much due to the faulty and alien system of the Government that was thrust upon the freedom loving people of Tamar and its adjoining territories. In this struggle against the British, the discontented rich land owners were the leaders of the revolt. They were aided by the Munda tribals and their chiefs. The revolt was put down by an expedition led by Lt. Cooper.

#### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) What was the observation of Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, a British anthropologist specializing in India's tribes?

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- 2) How did the British authorities manage to win the confidence of the rebelling *Paharia* tribals.

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- 3) What was the main reason of the Santal Revolt under the leadership of Tilka Majhi?

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### Suppression of Ramgarh Collectorship (1800)

The collectorship of Ramgarh was abolished in 1800 and the collector of Bihar became the collector of what was formerly the Ramgarh Hill Tract. The offices of a judge and a magistrate of Ramgarh still continued. To secure better administration, a system of civil justice was introduced, police stations were established and maintained at government expense. In the year 1806, the *Maharaja* and *zamindars* too were encouraged to establish police stations and appoint police officers. This was a very serious mistake, for to have policemen under the control of those who were the enemies of the tribals, could not but lead to unfair treatment of the tribals. From this time the fight between the Hindus and tribals of Chotanagpur took another form, that of calling in the aid of the Police and Court of Law, an arena in which the Hindus soon became the masters of the field. The police were chiefly men of Bihar, the same province from where the *zamindars* originally had come.

The tribals had no title deeds to their land and so could not prove their ownership in the British Court of Law. The court language was Hindi and the tribals did not know how to speak that language and the court officials did not know the languages of the tribals. Hence, when any suit was brought against the tribals, the court officials had to take help of the interpreters who tried to translate the ideas of the tribals into Hindi. The preconceived notions and prejudices of the interpreters against the tribals made it very complicated to get justice from the cases of the tribals presented before the courts. Hopelessly misstated, the cases of the tribals came before the British officers and they found it impossible to rectify anything in this mass of conception and misunderstanding. In keeping with the British legal system, they required documents to prove ownership of land that the tribals did not have. This is the way the British officials favoured those foreigners who had some sort of documents like the ones the *jagirdars* and *thikadars* had. The tribals thus invariably lost their cases in court.

Worse than this oppression perhaps was the effect which the court cases had on judges and tribals. The judges who were all non-tribals, came to believe that the tribals were rascals trying to avoid paying their lawful dues. Their claims to

their land were regarded as false and fictitious. Seeing that to tell the truth in court did not pay, tribals took to lying thus destroying their native honesty and truthfulness. In this context, Sir William Hunter had aptly observed, "In the void left by ignorance, prejudice has taken up its seat and the calamity of the non-Aryan races is not merely that they are not understood, but that they are misrepresented. We have gathered our notions concerning them from their immemorial enemies. In this way, extravagant calumnies attained the dignity of State papers, and are copied from one report into another. Thus ignorance begets misrepresentation, and misrepresentation brings forth bitter political fruits" (1868: 2-6).

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### 3.4 KOL INSURRECTION

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#### The First Kol Insurrection under Rugdeo and Konta Mundas (1820)

The grievances of the Munda and Uraon tribals were directly concerned with the new class of alien landlords called *thikadars*. The Hindu, Muhammedan and Sikh merchants and adventurers from north Bihar and northern India were introduced by the *raja* as *thikadars* (lessees) over the heads of tribal village land owners. The *thikadars* obtained from the *Maharaja* temporary leases of the villages as payment for their goods. They took away land from the tribals and levied rents and other services from them. One of the services taken from the tribals was the *beth begari* or forced labour. In 1820, the ferment of unrest that had been so long seething all over the country burst forth in open revolt. It originated again from Tamar. The leaders of this revolt were Rugdeo Munda and Konta Munda. A war against the alien *thikadars* and *jagirdars* was proclaimed. Destruction of all these alien intruders was the avowed aim of the revolt which spread far and wide, and military operations of an extensive scale had to be resorted to for several months by Major Roughsedge with the Ramgarh Battalion in order to counter it.

#### The Ho Rebellion in Singhbhum (1820-21)

In Singhbhum, the Ho tribals carried out their tactics of irregular warfare and rose in rebellion several times to protect their freedom and check the exploitation by the British and the local *zamindars*. As these were splendid fighting people popularly known as *Larka Kols*, the local *rajas* made full use of them as tools in the game of power-politics in their quarrels with each other. On 1<sup>st</sup> February, 1820, Ghanshyam Singh, *raja* of Porahat, made an agreement with the British by accepting the protection of the EIC government. The main aims of the *raja* were: (i) to be recognised as lord over the chiefs of Kharsawan and Saraikela, (ii) to regain the family idol in possession of the Saraikela chief, (iii) to reduce the Hos to submission with the aid of the British.

This agreement had far reaching consequences for the Hos. The Company now launched an offensive against the Hos in collaboration with the *raja* of Porahat and the *zamindars* of Singhbhum on the pretext that the Hos were entirely destructive and had to be suppressed. Major Roughsedge marched into Singhbhum and camped at Chaibasa. The Hos attacked the British with bows and arrows. Forty or fifty of their men were killed in the encounter. Sometime in March 1820, the whole of the northern *pirs* (generally a *pir* comprised 12 villages) submitted to the British. Then the Major marched into the southern *pirs* and defeated the Hos there. The freedom loving Hos did not give up. They



made a major attack and defeated the British at Pokeree and Chainpur. After this a strong British military expedition was sent against the Hos. By the end of May 1821, the Hos surrendered themselves to the British under the threat of total annihilation.

### **The Great Kol Insurrection (1831-32)**

The horrors of the 1820 uprising were still fresh in the memory of the authorities when towards the end of the year 1831, another outbreak vastly more formidable in its magnitude shook the entire length and breadth of the county. Tribals' deep discontent manifested itself once again in the Kol Insurrection (1831-32). The *thikadars* or the lease holders had obtained from the young *Maharaja* temporary leases of villages as payment for their goods sold to him. They took away the land of the tribals and levied rents and other services from them. They demanded *beth begari* or forced labour from the tribals. The Munda and Uraon tribals were chiefly driven to desperation. Arrows of war were sent along all the countryside by them calling upon their neighbours to join the revolt. With the breaking out of the revolt, various tribal groups and their local non-tribal neighbours of Chotanagpur, such as, (a) the Mundas, Uraons, Hos, (b) the Bhogta and Ghasi of Tori, (c) the Chero, Kharwar and Poliar of Palamu; had all self-consciously joined the revolt in solidarity. Bindrai Manki, Kol leader, explained quite aptly why his people had taken to arms in 1832 as follows:

“The Pathans had taken our *hoormut* (honour) and the *Sing* our sisters and the *Koour* (scion), Harnath Sah had forcibly deprived us of our estates of twelve villages which he had given to the *Sing*. Our lives we considered of no value, and being of one caste and brethren, it was agreed upon that we should commence to cut, murder and eat...It is with this resolution that we have been murdering and plundering those who have deprived us of both honour and homes....”(Guha 1986: 282-83).

The selective violence of the rebellion measured up to the bitterness and anger of the above words. In villages where the tribal people and *dikus* (outside non-tribal exploiters) lived together, it was on the latter that the attack was concentrated. In many cases they were killed while their houses were burnt to the ground. The British authorities were entirely unprepared for an outbreak of such a magnitude. It was not till March 1832 that Captain Thomas Wilkinson with the collective help of all available forces, succeeded in bringing back order in the country. All the risings mentioned above were against the *dikus* who were the new class of middlemen, *zamindars*, moneylenders, government officials and the British colonists at large.

### **Budhu Bhagat and his Revolt (1832)**

Budhu Bhagat of Silligaon was a famous religious leader among the Uraon tribals in the Churia region. He led the insurrection of 1832 in that area. Budhu's whole family and closest disciples fought with bows and arrows against the British. The old leader perished with all his sons and relatives and about a hundred and fifty of his disciples. They preferred to die rather than to submit to a life of subjection.

### **Ganga Narain Revolt in Manbhum and Singhbhum (1832-33)**

While the Government had scarcely recovered from the Kol insurrection, the Bhumij Kols of Manbhum (Barabhum, Patkum, etc.), Singhbhum (Dhalbhum)

also broke out in open arms under the leadership of Ganga Narain Singh, a scion of Barabhum raj family. Bindrai Manki, leader of the Kol Rebellion, also became a leader of this revolt. This revolt was against the British administration and for deliverance from rapacious landlords. The British suppressed this rebellion by sending a strong military force. Ganga Narain fled to Singhbhum where he sought the help of the Hos who were against the *Thakur* of Kharsawan, an ally of the British, against whom Ganga Narain waged war and fell fighting in February 1833.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Which were the negative consequences on the tribals with new administrative changes introduced by the British rulers?

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- 2) How did Bindrai Manki, Kol leader, explain why his people had taken to arms in 1832?

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## 3.5 BRITISH RULE (1834 ONWARDS) AND TRIBALS

The Kol Insurrection (1831-32) brought far reaching changes in the administrative machinery of this region by Regulation XIII of 1833. It was decided in 1834 to put an end to the indirect administration by the EIC in Chotanagpur and to introduce a new system of administration. Chotanagpur became a part of the South West Frontier Agency with headquarters at Kishunpur (Ranchi). This was done because the Government at last found the necessity of a closer administrative and more effective control of the country by the British officers on the spot. Chotanagpur thus came under the management of the Agent to the Governor General. Capt. Wilkinson was appointed the first Agent to the Governor General for Chotanagpur. He was assisted by other British officials who were called Principal Assistants. The Principal Assistants to the Agents came to be called Principal Assistant Commissioners from 1855.

After the Kol Rebellion, the ordinary *Regulations* which had hitherto been in force in the area were withdrawn from it. *Regulations* meant laws and judicial rules passed by the Government between 1793-1834. Chotanagpur and some

of the surrounding territories were separated from the Ramgarh Hill Tract and formed into a *Non-Regulation Province*. Regulation XIII of 1833 exempted these areas from the regulations and placed them under special and new rules for the administration of civil and criminal justice and for the superintendence of police, land revenue, etc. The reason for the change was to provide the backward areas a more flexible form of administration. The district of Lohardaga was constituted as a centre for dispensing justice over 12,500 square miles. At the same time, the new districts of Manbhum and Hazaribag were created. Similarly, the district of Singhbhum was created in 1837 and Kolhan was formed as a Government Estate.

Kolhan, the land of the *Larka* Hos, has the unique distinction of being the last area to come under the subjugation of the British imperialism. This area has the glorious past of remaining independent and isolated throughout history prior to the coming of the British. The comparatively late conquest of this area was due to the stubborn resistance of the *Lakra* Hos to any attempt by aliens to infiltrate into their territory and also due to the difficult terrain of their country. The British knew that it was against their interest to allow the Hos to remain independent for long. Capt. Wilkinson, therefore, sent an invitation to the chiefs of the *Larka* Hos to meet him at Chaibasa or Gumra. The chiefs responded to the invitation readily. They entered into solemn agreements to obey the orders of the British government and not of the *rajas* and other non-tribal chiefs to whom they had previously been required to submit.

Capt. Wilkinson gave his Assistant in Kohan certain simple and practical instructions for the administration of this area. The main features of the administrative set up proposed by Wilkinson were (a) preservation of the indigenous form of government, (b) direct contact between the Assistant and the people without the intervention of subordinate officials, (c) settlement of all disputes as far as possible through village *panchayats* (councils) on the spot, and (d) exclusion of *dikus* (foreigners) from the area. The general principles which were laid down by Capt. Wilkinson in his letter were subsequently embodied in a set of statutory rules which came to be known as 'Wilkinson Rules'. The administration of civil justice in the Kolhan area is still carried on under these rules.

### **Telanga Kharia and his Movement (1850-60)**

Telanga Kharia hailed from the Murhu village of Sisai Police Station, Gumla District. He was a revolutionary and a fearless leader. His movement was against the exploitation of tribals by *zamindars* (landlords) and *mahajans* (moneylenders) during the British Rule. As middlemen for collecting revenue from the tribals to the British authorities, the *zamindars* captured the land of the tribals and made it their own when the latter refused to pay revenue to them. The *mahajans* also captured the land of the tribals when they were not able to pay back the loan taken from the former. To make things worse the British rulers gave their protection and support to the above mentioned exploiters. Due to this the tribals hated the British, *zamindars* and *mahajans* and were determined to fight against them in the leadership of Telanga Kharia.

Telanga's main occupation was agriculture but he was well known for giving training in the skills of archery and sword wielding to young people who visited him from all sides for their training at Sisai *maidan* (ground). It is said that one time he had 900-1500 men at his command to fight against the British and their



agents. Oppression and exploitation of the tribals were at their peak during the year 1849-50. Telanga went about from village to village to make people aware of their exploitation and to unite and organise them to fight against their oppressors. In order to carry out his plan, he started to form major village federations which increased to 13 in number. In his leadership the tribals fought against the British, their native police force and their other agents during 1850-60.

When the British authorities came to know about Telanga's movement, they arrested him at the village of Kumhari in Basia and sent him to jail in Calcutta. He was released from there almost after 16 years and on 23 April 1880, second day of his return to his village, he was shot dead early in the morning by one of his non-tribal traitors. However, his inspiration continued among his followers and in their movement.

### **Establishment of Chotanagpur Division (1854)**

As a result of Mr. Rickett's report (1854), the form of administration was changed by the Act XX of 1854. The South West Frontier Agency was replaced by a Commissionership for the Chutia Nagpur (Chotanagpur) Division, under the jurisdiction of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal as a Non-Regulation Province. It consisted of the districts of Lohardaga, Hazaribag, Manbhum and Singhbhum with the Tributary States of Jashpur, Udaipur, Surguja, Koreya, Chang-Bhakar, Gangpur and Banai, under the jurisdiction of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. Regular civil, criminal and revenue courts were established.

### **The Movement of Morgo Majhi and Bir Singh Majhi in Santal Pargana (1854)**

During the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Santals began to settle in Santal Pargana. They came from Purulia, Bankura and Midnapur. Slowly, their exploiters – the Bengali *Mahajans* – also came among them. Because of the oppression and merciless exploitation by the money lenders, landlords and merchants, the Santals became desperate. A Santal by the name of Morgo Majhi unsuccessfully attempted to organise the Santals of the southern area into a separate kingdom. In the beginning of 1854, Bir Singh Majhi proclaimed that in a vision he had of *Chando bonga* (Supreme Being), he had received magical charms by means of which the Santals' exploiters would be punished. He had an enthusiastic following. They committed many robberies in the houses of the *dikus*.

### **The Great Santal Insurrection (Hul) (1855-57)**

This rebellion was the outcome of a long course of oppression silently and patiently submitted to by the Santal tribals. There were four grievances which were chiefly responsible for the rebellion: (a) mean and greedy spirit of the money lenders in their transaction with the Santals, (b) increasing misery caused by their unjust system of allowing personal and hereditary bondage for debt, (c) unparalleled corruption and extortion by the police in aiding and supporting the *Mahajans*, (d) impossibility of obtaining redress from courts by the Santals.

The small traders could make good profits by buying rice or oilseeds from the Santals and selling them in plains. The Santals got their money for paying rent or for personal purposes like wedding from the money-lenders who kept false accounts and used false measures and weights. The rate of interest charged was

sometimes to the extent of five hundred percent per year. As a result, many Santals ran deep into debt so much so that they became bonded labourers for life which was made hereditary. This was broadly the social setting in which the *Hul* or Santal Rebellion (1855-56) started in the Santal Pargana and later embraced the rural population across an extensive area inhabited by them.

The Santal peasants had become dependent on merchants for loans in kind or cash at high interest rates. Almost their entire harvest went to pay debts. The Santal peasant worked the creditor's land without pay and did not have time to cultivate his own. The system of loans finally forced the Santals to pay their debts with the very lands they had opened to cultivation. These lands gradually passed into the *diku* hands. From the beginning of 1855, the Santal peasants sent petitions to the Collector, Commissioner and Government demanding that usury be stopped and all the *dikus* expelled from the Santal lands. These petitions remained unanswered or were considered too late when the Santals had already taken to armed struggle.

Four Santal brothers from the village of Bhagnadih were selected as leaders. Two of the brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu, emerged as the actual leaders of the movement. They had become landless peasants after their father had lost his lands to the *dikus*. The main goal of the movement was the elimination of merchants, moneylenders, colonial officials and alien landlords. The final objectives were to achieve Santal independence, land restoration and establishment of a Santal government.

On 30<sup>th</sup> June 1855, more than 30,000 Santals assembled at Bhagnadih. They were armed with bows and arrows to march to Calcutta and place their petition of grievances before the Governor General. A police inspector, instigated by some Hindu and Muslim money lenders tried to arrest the leaders but this enraged the mob so much that they hacked him and nine others to pieces. The cry *hul!hul!!* was now raised everywhere and the rebellion broke out in its full fury. The above march led on 7th July, 1855, to an open armed struggle. It was the last resort to obtain redress. After intermittent battles lasting over a year, the movement became openly anti-British. Consequently, the colonial power ruthlessly suppressed the rebellion. The Santal insurgents suffered heavy losses and the ring leaders were rounded up, summarily tried and hanged.

### **Creation of Santal Pargana (1855)**

After the suppression of the Santal rebellion, an inquiry was made into the grievances of the Santals by Ashley Eden. Its outcome was the Act XXXVII of December 22, 1855 for forming the territory into a separate non-regulation district called Santal Pargana and placed it under the control of the Commissioner of Bhagalpur. A special system of administration was also introduced through which an attempt was made to use the Santal village organisation in administering the area.

### **Santal Revolt in Hazaribag (1855-56)**

There was a fierce rising of the Santals in Hazaribag. Their leaders were Lubia Majhi and Bairu Majhi. The rising was widely spread in the Hazaribag district in April 1856. The jail at Hazaribag was stormed and set on fire. The rebellion was due to the same pattern of reasons which had led to the Santal *Hul* in Santal Pargana. Cruel measures were taken to put down the Santals.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Which were the main features of administrative set up in the 'Wilkinson Rule'?

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- 2) What were the grievances of Great Santal Insurrection (Hul) (1855-57)?

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### Government attempts a Record of Rights (1858)

In 1858, the Mundas rioted once more against the landlords but were put down by the British. Now the Government seriously discussed the question of registering the land tenures (rights over land) of Chotanagpur. Accordingly, on 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1858, the Government appointed Lal Loknath Sahi, a local landlord and sub-assistant commissioner, to prepare a register of all *bhuinari* lands belonging to original settlers of a village. The officer worked from August 1860 till his death in August 1862 without accomplishing much. The operations he had carried out extended only over 572 villages in the pargana of Lodhma, Khukhra, Udaipur, Sonapur, Doensa, Korambe and Basia. With his death, the investigations were discontinued.

### The Chotanagpur Tenures Act (Act II of 1869) Bhuinhari Survey and Settlement

The Chotanagpur Tenures Act (Act II of 1869) was passed to ensure the settlement of the title to *bhuinari* (privileged) lands. Rakhal Das Haldar, a special Commissioner, was appointed to survey and demarcate the *bhuinari* lands of the tenants and the *majhihas* lands of the landlords. The Act is also called the *Bhuinari* Survey and Settlement or simply the *Bhuinari* Settlement. Unfortunately, the Act did not define the term *Bhuinari* land which was related to the *Bhuinars* or original settlers in a village of Chotanagpur. It was a term used in court language. The *Bhuinari* Settlement reveals the full extent of the appalling ruin brought on the tribals' economic and social sphere. It was found in 1869 that in the 35 *parganas* alone, to which the above Settlement extended, 2,482 villages had lost all their rights, privileges and the social and moral safeguards that the community had laid down in the immemorial customs regulating the life of the village community. Only a few scraps of land were left to them as ancestral property. The survey operations lasted till 1880. The Settlement of 1902 found that there were only 152 villages in the whole of the *Maharaja's* estate of Chotanagpur that still preserved the greater part of the ancient rights. This area was hardly more than one per cent of the *Maharaja's* estate.

High hopes entertained at the introduction of the Settlement Act (1869) were far from being fulfilled. The operations failed to restore confidence of the tribals in the Government. Neither did it succeed in its main aims to protect the people against the future attacks on their ancestral lands and to give back lands to those who had been wrongfully dispossessed during the previous 20 years. The reasons for this failure is not far to seek. First of all, the Act came too late. Secondly, the tribals had no more confidence in the Government. Only a few of the *bhuinari* relied on the good intentions of the Government and understood the purpose of the Act. A great many of them looked with suspicion on the proceedings of the surveyors and the Special Commissioners. The landlords started a rumour that the officials intended to find out the exact number and size of *bhuinari* fields in order to charge a new and heavier tax for each plot. As a result of the suspicion of the people, helped on by the trickery of the landlords, several of the tribals declared no fields at all as their own and many more declared less than they really possessed. Their lands then were appropriated by the landlords.

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### 3.6 TRIBAL MOVEMENTS

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#### **Bhagirath Majhi and Sapha Hor Movement among the Santals (1871)**

The period following the Santal Insurrection (*Hul*) of 1855 was not entirely peaceful. The oppression by the *Mahajans* still continued in Santal Pargana. A spirit of resentment swept throughout the district brining the Santals once again to the point of mass upsurge. They felt that no good could be achieved unless a revitalization of their society was brought out. This realization was the beginning of a new consciousness which manifested itself in another social movement called the Kharwar movement. It was motivated by the desire to return to the Golden age of tribal independence and glory that is celebrated in the Santal myths.

The movement achieved prominence in 1871 when a charismatic leader called Bhagirath Majhi proclaimed himself the king of the Santals and representative of God. He announced that he would restore the golden age to the Santals if they returned to the worship of one God and cleanse themselves of their sins. His movement tried to raise the status of the Santals by emulating the Hindu socio-religious practices. When the movement began to turn political, the government arrested Bhagirath and imprisoned him. This movement spread also to Hazaribag where Dubia Gossain and his men preached on the lines of Bhagirath and they resisted the first census operation among the Santals in 1881. This movement too was suppressed but not before they convinced the people that their uplift lay in purifying themselves and regenerating themselves as *Sapha Hors* or pure men.

#### **Sardar Movement (1858-95)**

The term *sardar* meant leader. It was applied to the organisers of the movement in Chotanagpur. It was largely the struggle of the Christian tribals against the landlords. They were educated in the Lutheran mission which had come to Ranchi in 1845 and had opened schools in the surrounding areas. The movement was called the *Sardar Larai* or *Mulki Larai* (1858-95). It gained momentum after the failure of the Chotanagpur Tenures Act (1869) and the operations following it. The *sardars* had sent a petition to the Commissioner of Chotanagpur early in 1867 complaining against the oppression of the landlords.

Among the forms of oppression especially mentioned were the attempts of the landlords to eject the tenants from their land by taking it away from them and destroying their crops, houses, etc. They also complained about the collection of tax which was collected several times over, as the landlords refused to give receipts for the tax paid. A further complaint was that the landlords exacted more tax than they were entitled to receive. The petitioners asked the Commissioner for two remedies in order to stop these forms of oppression, (i) to take measures to mark out definitely and clearly the boundaries of the tax-free lands, (ii) the people be allowed to pay their taxes directly to the government. The Commissioner rejected their petition. The *sardars* then appealed to the Lieutenant Governor in a petition dated September 21, 1867 but he too refused to listen to their requests. Following it, the *sardars* sent a petition again to the Chotanagpur Commissioner in Ranchi on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1879, with the above requests but he too rejected their petition.

The memorialists then appealed to London. In addition to the claims which they had made to the Commissioner, they asked that they be allowed to form themselves into village communities directly under the government. They wished to be freed from the landlords. The Secretary of State for India, Lord Hartington, rejected the petition. The request of the Mundas to be directly under the Government was found to be extravagant and unreasonable. Besides, London agreed with the officials in Ranchi that the *Bhuinari* Survey mentioned above was the most that the Government could do for the people.

The *Sardar* Movement was characterised by a tone of forceful but reasonable argument with the government. The *sardars* said, 'We do not like to see the *Rajah* and *zemindars* reigning in *our country*. Our forefathers came into this country and cleared the jungle. Now the Hindus rob us of *our fields*....Every nation has its own Government, only we *Mundas* and *Uraons* have not' (Thapar & Siddiqi 1979: 49-50). The *sardars* were representing the tribals of Chotanagpur and their hopes and aspirations. They were expressing their resentment against the petty *rajahs* who had established their political power base under the Chotanagpur *maharaja* and were lording over them.

### **Birsa Movement (1895-1900)**

The *sardars* were in need of a leader who could lead the people to their liberation from bondage. This leader who emerged was young Birsa Munda of the village Chalkad in the Ranchi district. In the early monsoon of 1895, he presented himself as a new prophet to liberate his fellow tribesmen from the foreign dominion. He claimed to possess miraculous powers. In his youth educated by Christian missionaries and a *Vaishnava* monk, he instituted a new religion and forbade the veneration of deities and spirits. At the same time, he encouraged his disciples to defy the Government and disobey its officials. He soon found a large following and pilgrimages were started to him who had called himself the *Dharti Abba* (father of the earth). He prophesied a terrible catastrophe, a deluge, in which all his opponents would be drowned and his followers would survive.

Birsa's movement gradually began to assume a political character. He informed the people that the *raj* of the *Maharani* (Empress Victoria) was over and the Munda *raj* had begun. He passed an order that the *raiyats* (cultivators) were to pay no rents in the future. They were to hold their lands rent-free. Several times he planned an armed rising. In 1897, he was arrested on the eve of the



rising and jailed. Pardoned in the jubilee year of the Queen Victoria, he planned another rising. The day fixed for the outbreak was Christmas of 1899. A large number of attacks occurred in various places in the police *thanas* (stations) at Khunti, Tamar, Basia and Ranchi. The Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi rushed with troops to the spot of rioting. On the Dumbari hill he encountered the main body of the Munda forces. In the encounter, many Mundas were killed. Birsa himself escaped for the moment but was captured later on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1900, in Singhbhum. He died of cholera on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1900 in the Ranchi jail.

The Birsa movement was a manifestation of the socio-economic and religious unrest among the Mundas. They saw in him a prophet and saviour who would redeem them from the oppression of the *dikus* – the hated foreigners whether British or Indian and would establish for them a Munda *raj*. The movement was agrarian in its root, violent in its means and political in its end. Birsa in his speeches emphasised the agrarian factors and sought a political solution of the problems facing his people, that is, the establishment of the *Birsait Raj* under the new king (himself)' (Singh 1966: 191). The movement had such a tremendous impact that the foundation of the British rule in Chotanagpur was shaken for sometime.

### **Survey and Settlement Operations (1902-1910)**

An immediate result of Birsa's uprising was the authorities' awareness of the urgency of preparing a record of rights for the lands of discontented Mundas. The earlier *Bhuinari* Settlement (1869) did not extend over the Munda areas of Khunti, Tamar, Bundu and Sonahatu police stations. It was precisely in these areas that Birsa's movement centred. The new settlement operations began in these police stations. All praedial services (relating to land and its products) were changed to cash payments throughout the district. The praedial conditions (*abwabs* and *rakumats*) were also changed to cash payments. The *abwabs* were various kinds of taxes exacted by landlords and public officers from the cultivators while the *rakumats* were payments in kind. Both the *abwabs* and *rakumats* were the secondary cause of dispute in the region.

### **Passing of Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908)**

This Act was of capital importance. It came into force in November 1908. Through the Act, the *khuntkattidar* and *Mundari khuntkattidar* tenancies were legally defined. The Settlement Operations of the Revenue Department restored to some Mundas their *khunkatti* and *bhuinari* rights as original clearers of the land. The Act safeguarded a number of points which the Mundas had claimed as a central part of their social system. According to this system, the land within the boundaries of the village is the common property of the village family. The members of this village family are the direct descendants of the original founder of the village. No individual can sell or divert his land. The Deputy Commissioner is empowered to eject forcibly any alien who may have acquired lands in a *khuntkattidar* village. There are restrictions on the sale and transfer of a Munda's lands. However, so far as the safeguard of *khuntkatti rights* was concerned, the Act came late because more than nine-tenths of the Mundas had meanwhile lost their *khuntkatti rights*.

### **Tana Bhagat Movement (1914-20)**

This movement was initiated in 1914 by a young man named Jatra Uraon. He was about 25 years old, a resident of the Chingri village in the Gumla district.

The movement was known as the *Tana Bhagat* movement. Jatra declared that *Dharmes* (Supreme Being) had told him in a dream to give up (a) ghost findings and exorcism and belief in spirits, (b) all animal sacrifices, animal food and liquor, (c) ploughing their fields which entailed cruelty to cows and oxen but failed to save the tribe from famine and poverty, and (d) working as coolies or labourers under men of other castes and tribes. He proclaimed that the *Uraon raj* was about to begin and that he would be its first king.

The *Uraon bhagats* (prophets) promised their followers safety and relief from the oppressive and unjust revenue system and exploitation by landlords, usurers and Government officials. In the leadership of young Jatra, his followers were determined to put an end to the system of *beth begari* or forced labour extracted from them by the *diku oppressors* without any payment. Jatra told his followers to (a) stop paying tax for lands which were theirs, (b) pray to one true God, and (c) throw out all spirits from their rituals and beliefs. Because of their refusal to work for the *zamindars* and Government, Jatra and his disciples were arrested and put in jail. However, other *bhagats* like Sibu Bhagat of Mandar in the Ranchi district; Balram Bhagat and the woman bhagat Deomania of the Batkuri village in the Gumla district took over from Jatra and continued the movement.

### The Kisan Movement (1917)

The *Maharaja* of Surguja exacted excessive *beth begari* from the people. The oppression of the money lenders in the area was unbearable. The cattle of the *Ahirs* (cowherds) were wildly destroying crops. All these roused the Kisans (Nagesia tribals) to rise in revolt under the leadership of Labur Kisan. He was an ardent Tana Bhagat. The *Uraon Tana Bhagats* of the Palamu district partially backed him and his movement. Labur boasted that he could fly at will to Germany and back to Surguja in a secret flying machine. He also showed his followers a secret machine (a long and large glass tube) for the purpose of destroying his enemies at long range. Once the foreigners had been destroyed, Labur would be the king of the Kisans on the Jamira plateau in Surguja.

The Kisans revolted against their *Maharaja*. In the police station of Kusmi, they killed one of the *Maharaja's* native magistrates, some Hindu money lenders and the *Ahirs*. They stopped one of the Hindu collectors from coming to them. An armed police force was rushed in from the British territory to the troubled area. Similarly, a detachment of soldiers from the Central Provinces with the British Political Agent at their head marched to the area to suppress the rebels. Labur Kisan was caught, tried and hanged at Ambikapur, capital of the Surguja native state. His skeleton was displayed to the public view as a warning to other would be rebel leaders of Surguja.

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## 3.7 LET US SUM UP

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Encounter of tribal societies with outside incoming non-tribals resulted in acute institutional changes which gave rise to radical disruption of tribal organizational structures. This led to various tribal resistance movements and revolutions against foreign powers. It was mainly the revolutionary change in the land tenure system that brought about the disruption of the traditional way of life of the agricultural tribal societies. Freehold of lands and their crops formed not only the basis of their livelihood, but also of their status system, as well as of their administrative

and economic organizations. After these institutional changes had taken place, the tribals rose in repeated armed rebellions but they were put down by the British arms. Next they tried a legal defence of their agrarian rights with the help of European education which had entered among them already towards the end of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the existing legal system which was introduced by the British could not protect the agrarian rights of the tribals because the non-tribals had been cultivating their lands for a very long time. Thus, their ancestral lands had now passed into the hands of the non-tribals for ever. In this desperate situation, leaders like Bhagirath Majhi, Birsa Munda, Jatra Uraon, etc. attracting large number of their followers rose against the prevailing foreign powers. Their resistance movements against these powers succeeded to some extent in drawing the British rulers' attention to their legitimate grievances and their solutions. Following this, the age old agrarian unrest among the tribals in central and eastern India has not surfaced in a wide spread manner during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, what they are fighting against now are the persistent forces of land grab by the corporate companies that are much worse than the anti-tribal forces working against them during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries discussed above.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Which were the orders of Birsa Munda to his disciples? Highlight the main characteristics of his movement.

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- 2) How did Jatra Uraon and his disciples try to bring about liberation of their oppressed people through the Tana Bhagat Movement (1914 - 20)?

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- 3) Why was the passing of the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) of capital importance for the tribals?

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- 4) In the light of the past tribal resistance movements and revolutions, give your comments as to why the present day corporate model of development is highly disturbing among the tribals in India.

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