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# UNIT 1    HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE TRIBALS

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## 1.0    OBJECTIVES

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The purpose of this study is to get to know who the tribes are in general and to have an insight of the history of some major tribes living in the hilly terrains of the eastern regions of India. This region is full of dense forests and hill ranges and underneath in the womb of the earth there lie many rich minerals. Here in remote regions live the simple honest and unsophisticated people whom we call the primitive people, tribes or the Adivasees.

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## 1.1    INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit we will focus our attention to the history of two major tribal races, first, the Kolarian race whom historians preferred to call the Munda race which comprises of the tribes like the Mundas, the Santals, Kharias, Hos, Asurs and Korwas and second, the Dravidian race in this region embracing the tribes like Oraons, Gonds and the Maltos. All these tribes live mainly in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Chattisgarh and the adjacent districts of MP. These tribes are also in a very good number working in the Tea estates in Assam and settled there since 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The history of these tribes go far back in the past thousands of years ago reaching to the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro of the Indus Valley. Besides their history other aspects of the tribal life too are quite interesting. Their languages and literature, customs and rituals, their religion and philosophy, their social and political organizations, arts and culture, dance , songs and the whole tribal ethos may as well be an engrossing study. As for now we will limit our study to the historical roots of these tribes and their struggles for survival through ages. So far the writers in the past on the tribal history and even the tribals in general

thought of forts of Rohtasgarh or Ruidasgarh on the Kaimur hills in South Bihar belonging to their ancestors. But off and on some of the tribal people of this region spoke of Ajamgarh, Harappa ;and Mohenjodaro and the long sojourn of their ancestors through the valley of the twin rivers Ganges and Yamuna. These names do come in their folk songs.

The history of the Mundas and the Oraons caught the attention of some researchers ever since some archeological findings came to light during the last century. Archeologists, anthropologists, linguists and historians began to take keen interests in them. The academic interests grew. This study may be the continuation of this curious search about the past of the ancestors of the Mundas and the Oraons. Several questions arise as to the origin of these tribes, their possible exodus from the Indus Valley and their long journey southeast to reach the Mountain regions of Chotanagpur now called Jharkhand the name given to it by the Mughal emperors in 16<sup>th</sup> century. Before going further, we may try to understand what the connotation tribe means and what are the other names in use for them.

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## 1.2 DEFINITION

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The word “tribe” appears to have been derived etymologically from the Latin word “tribus” which means “group”. The Romans used terms like” tribus barbari” meaning the the Barbarian group or tribes with beards and shabby hair unlike the Romans. In English such people were named as primitive people(L . Primus populus - the first people). They are also called the aborigines ( L. ab origine - from the origine). These people are also called the indigenous people meaning those naturally existing in a place or country rather than arriving from another area according to Cambridge dictionary. In India these primitive people are called the “Adivasees” (H. adi vasee - first settler) one who has first come to a particular place and cleared the jungles and made it habitable. If we closely examine the definitions given by several scholars we find the following characteristics of the tribes:

(1) that it is a group of people of homogenous unit, (2) speak a common language or dialect (3) share common culture, (4) governed by customary laws of their own under a chief, (5) have common ancestry and history, (6) have their habitat in isolated geographical regions preferably in the forests and hilly terrains, (7 ) have a compact community life and (8) generally averse to mixing with people of other society of the plains.

People with the above characteristics are the aborigines or the Adivasees, the first settlers. The Indian government has scheduled some of these aboriginal tribes on the recommendations of the States to give them some benefits and opportunity to develop and come at par with other advanced society economically and socially. The States recommend or do not recommend an aboriginal tribe for scheduling by the Central government, all depends on the discretion of the States. It is a fact that many States have not recommended many a genuinely aboriginal tribes for scheduling. The stark example is Assam which just refuses to recommend about three million of Munda , Oraon and Santal tribes in Tea estates to be put in the scheduled tribe category. Such portion of the large group of Indian aborigines thus scheduled and not yet scheduled spread in the hilly tracts. Only those scheduled are recognized as tribes in the government records and are

called the Scheduled tribes. The Indian government is some how allergic to calling the Indian aborigines as aborigines in the International forum. It prefers to call them only as Scheduled tribes. But it is a fact that all Scheduled tribes may be aborigines but not all aborigines are Scheduled tribes. And this makes the enumeration of the aboriginal tribes lopsided and incomplete and more often misleading. The government has no Census record of the aboriginal tribes in the real sense. It has only the Census records of the Scheduled tribes.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is your understanding of tribes?

2) Enumerate the characteristics that differentiate them from other people.

### 1.3 TRIBAL POPULATION

According to the Census report of 2001, Indian population has reached one billion. Out of that there are 80 million Scheduled tribes (ST) which comes to 8% of the total population of India. These Scheduled tribes are divided in 692 different ethnic groups. There are many million aboriginal tribes who are not included in the scheduled category. The first six major Scheduled tribes whose population is recorded more than one million as per the government Census of 1971 are (1) Bhils 5.2mn.,(2) Gonds 4.8 mn., (3) Santals 3.6 mn., (4) Oraons 1.7 mn., (5) Meenas 1.5 mn, and (6) Mundas 1.1 mn. The Mundas, the Oraons , the Santals and Gonds are found in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and adjacent districts of Madhya Pradesh.. The region covering these States is heavily inhabited by the tribes we are trying to study.

### 1.4 THE MUNDAS

When we speak of the Munda we refer here to the Munda race which embraces the Mundas, Santals, Kharias, Hos, Asurs and Korwas. These tribes are put in one category and called the Kolerian or the Munda race by the historians and others because their languages are similar to each other since they all have the

austric characteristics About the origin of the Munda race there are several scholars with different views. S. C. Roy would say that the Mundas came from the side of Aravali hills. Bongard-Levin a Russian scholar is of the view that Mundas were somewhere close to Harappa and probably they came in contact with the people of Indus civilization. Dr Diwakar Minj refers to several western scholars who hold the view that Yunnan, a place in south –east China was the original place wherefrom they moved North to central Asia and later moved southward and entered the Indus valley. A group of scholars however believed that Munda race moved from Yunnan to South and via Burma they entered the Indian soil. Historian R. C. Majumdar supporting the theory of B. S. Guha an anthropologist, writes that the Proto-Australoids came from the west and entered the Indian soil. They probably came in contact with the Negritos who had migrated from Africa in the Paleolithic age ( c. 40,000 years ago). By admixture with others, specially with the Negritos who came before the Mongoloids, they gave rise to Kol or the Munda race, a Mon-khmer type in Assam, Burma and IndoChina. If this theory is true, we may assume that the Munda race inherited the dark complexion from the Negritos and the austric accent and characteristics of the Australoids in their Mundari language. We are then further led to believe that the original place of habitat of the Munda race was quite probably the Indus valley where five rivers flow according to the Munda folk. The Munda race was in this region reportedly some nine thousand years ago even before the arrival of the Dravidian race here in c. 3500 B.C. The Dravidians did meet the original people who had already settled and spread in the Indus Valley. Could they be the very Munda race we are trying to trace?

Profesosr Irfan Habib, a historian speaks of the people of Kot-Diji culture who were spread in the Indus Valley even reaching to the southern region of Afghanistan before the Dravidians entered the Indus Valley. Kot- Diji is the ancient name of a place. Prof. Habib does not give any name to the people of the Kot-Diji culture. Could they be the Munda race? Logically speaking two big races may not exist simultaneously spread over the same region at the same period with the same influence without any record of fights . According to some scholars the ancient names like Harappa and Mohenjodaro are not the Vedic names. Mundas still claim that these names have some meaning in their Mundari language. There are names of places like Gumla town in the Gomai ghat of Hindukush Mountain ranges in North-west , Muree, Sarai khela, Naushera, Torobogo, in Present Pakistan and Baluchistan , Ghaghar and so on . How it is that these names are also found in Jharkhand the place where Munda race is still today. It just cannot be a chance occurance if we consider the veracity of the theory of migration of names along with the human race.

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## 1.5 THE ORAONS

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The Kurux language is the mother tongue of the Oraon tribes which linguistically belongs to the Dravidian linguistic family. It is therefore the Oraons are put in the Dravidian race. That may be good enough to assume that the Oraons were once upon a time the residents of the Indus Valley. But let us see other reasons also to assume that the Oraons were in the Indus Valley and had some share in the building up the Indus civilization along with their distant cousins the Tamils, Telugus, Kannads, Malyalees and other races of the Dravidian stock.

Ever since the excavations have started in Mohenjodaro and Harappa in 1922, there have been about 4000 seals collected mainly from Harappa the second biggest ancient city of the Indus civilization during period 2600 B.C. – 2100 BC.. The pictograms on some of the seals have been deciphered by scholars like Prof. Asko Parpola indicate that the meanings of such inscriptions like min/ vin (star, fish,) vel (velir, beler – chief , king) mey (meysga – roof) surprisingly tally with the Kurux language spoken by almost two million Oraons in India today. Even some festive rituals in Sarhul, the Spring festival of the Oraons appear to be very similar to those probably celebrated by the people in Harappa more than 4500 years ago. Scholars are inclined to hold the view that Kurux was probably one of the spoken languages of Harappa. If that be so, the Oraons most probably had their habitat in the Indus valley during the Indus valley civilization.

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do the different scholars say about the origin of the Munda race?

2) Why Oraons are said to have been in Harappa during the Indus civilization?

## 1.6 EXODUS FROM THE INDUS VALLEY

The question is if the Mundas and the Oraons were once in the fertile valley why had they to leave this place and live in the forest and hilly tracts? The answer is simple. Stronger race drives away the weaker races. It has happened also with the Dravidian people. In c. 1750 BC the Aryan race entered the Indus Valley from West via the Gomal Ghat of the Hindukush mountain ranges destroying the small town Gumla there according to historians. Bones excavated and discovered in the ancient streets of Harappa indicate that there had been ferocious fights between the Dravidians and the invading race . Drastic destruction and savage massacres of men, women and children had happened in big cities of the Indus Valley . The Indus civilization was destroyed. No victor retains the culture of the victims. The Vedic literature gives enough evidences of the destruction of the

enemies whom they called the Dasyus (the non-Aryans). The Dravidians fled to South leaving the Indus Valley and so did the Mundas and the Oraons who instead of moving towards south they fled eastward along the Gangetic valley.

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### 1.7 FINAL SETTLEMENT

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The Mundas and the Oraons had a long sojourn through the Gangetic valley before they reached the Kaimur hills in south Bihar . They had hard times to flee and occasionally fight back their common enemy the Aryans chasing them . The Mundas and the Oraons had to stick together and remain united because that was their only solution to survive against the enemy. This may be the reason why despite the differences of their Mundari and Kurux languages these two tribes have one culture and one ancestral religion . They have lived together like two brothers. The Mundas and the Oraons had lived quite some time in Rohtasgarh before they left the place under the menaces of the invading Chero tribe around 600 BC and moved south and settled down in the dense forests and hilly terrains of Khukra Desh later called Jharkhand and later again named the Chotanagpur plateau.

Upto the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Mundas and the Oraons lived in peace clearing the forests and making the land habitable with agriculture in the valleys and mountain slopes. They had the social and administrative organizations like Parha, Patti Manki systems. It was in 1616 when the first invasion of the Mughals disturbed them. The Marhatta marauders led by Bhaskar Rao Pandit, Balaji Rao and Raghuji raided Jharkhand and looted and burnt the tribal villages from 1743 to 1810. The British rule entered Jharkhand in the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century with Colonel Dalton reaching Palamau. With the coming in of the Britishers the exploitations and oppression of the Mundas and the Oraons started as the landlords started exorting more and more heavy taxes on the tribal agriculturists. This happened because the Britishers wanted more money from land revenue. and did not care for the welfare of the tribal cultivators. Moreover the Britishers promoted and protected the zamindars when the tribals vehemently protested heavy land taxes and forced labour.. All this led to series of tribal agrarian revolts in Jharkhand starting from 1779. The major tribal revolts in the Jharkhand plateau were the Larka Kol Revolt (1820) in Sighbhum, Great Kol Rising (1831-32), Santal Revolt (1856-57), Sardari Larai (1862 –1890) and the last Birsa Munda Revolt 1895-1900). The tribals fought violently against the British troops who always came to protect the land-grabing zamindars and the exploitations. Thousands of Mundas and the Oraons were killed in these revolts they waged in order to protect their lands and survive.

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### 1.8 PRESENT PERSPECTIVES

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The reasons why the Munda and the Oraon tribes have left the fertile land of the Indus Valley with other Dravidians have been amply explained above. They were literally chased out of the Indus Valley by the Aryans some 4000 years ago. The enemies were on their heels even when these two tribes were on their long sojourn through the Gangetic valley until they reached the Kaimur hills and settled there to build the Ruidas fort (Rohtas garh) in Shahabad district of Bihar. When later attacked by the Chero tribes from north, first Mundas left Rohtasgarh and moved

to Chotanagpur via the North Koel river and little later the Oraons also followed them. This happened during period c.600 B.C. – 400 B.C.

For several centuries Mundas and the Oraons had relatively undisturbed life. In 16<sup>th</sup> Century the Mughals did attack Chotanagpur but had not much impact on the people as such though Khukhra Raja Darjansal was arrested and jailed in Gwalior by the Mughals in 1616. The Oraons and Mundas of Chotanagpur suffered under the constant attacks of the Marahatta marauders led by Bhaskar Rao Pandit, Balaji and Raghuji during 1743-1810.. The real tortures, exploitations, slavery and killings of the tribes of Chotanagpur came during the British Rule durring 1765 - 1947 in the region. The British Rulers imposed heavy taxes on the petty rajas and landlords big and small who in turn levied all kinds of taxes on the tribal raiyats. Extortions and forced labour were at its height. Tribes were herded like animals to Purnea and Katihar in North Bihar to cultivate indigo and to Assam and Bengal to work in the tea gardens in thousands since 1928 onwards. Instead of giving protection to the tribes against the atrocities perpetrated by the Zamindars(landlords), the Britishers rather patronized the cruel Landlords.. The consquencee was that series of tribal revolts broke out. According to one contemporary report every corner of Chotanagpur was burning. Some major revolts of the aboriginal tribes in Jharkhand during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the Larka Kol Larai 1920, in Singbhum by the Ho tribes, the Great Kol Riisings 1831-32 by the Oraons under Budhu Bhagat in the Oraon belt of Lohardaga, Gumla and Ranchi districts, the Santal Revolt 1855-56 by Santals under Sidhu-Kanhu brothers, the Sardari Larai 1869-87 and the Birsa Revolt 1895-1900 under Birsa Munda by the Mundas in Khunti , Bundu and Tamar areas.. Unfortunately the government and its tamed historians know only the last one Birsa Munda Revolt and the hero Bhagwan Birsa Munda.They are shamefully ignorant(ignorancia elenci) and know mighty little about the series of tribal Revolts of earlier period ; some of them like Great Kol Risings of 1831-32 led by Budh Bhagat Oraon was greater and more ferocious than what we see in Birsa Revolt in Jharkhand. In the tribal revolt thousands and thousands of tribal heroes and martyrs have shed their blood for freedom and survival.

The tribes of Chotanagpur (Jharkhand) are now facing new type of dangers that threaten their very existence in their ancestral land and centuries old habitats. Jharkhand is very rich in minerals where the tribes live. Government has signed no less than 69 MoUs inviting hundreds of big and small industrial companies to tear open the lands for coal, iron ore, bauxite , mica and uranium and set up industries of all kinds and make big dams too. The tribal lands are being acquired by fair or foul means. Lakhs of tribal people have been already displaced without any satisfactory settlement or compensation for the loss of their lands the only source of their sustenance. The ecological balance too will be destroyed. Environmental vandalism is bound to come. Besides, Naxalism in the area is becoming menacingly dangerous. Government is bent upon putting into action 75000 para-military forces to flush out the Naxalites from the jungles where the tribes live. When two elephants fight the tender blades of grass are crushed ruthlessly. It is any body's guess what is going to happen to these hapless tribes. They will be killed as Naxalite suspects, informers or supporters though they are innocent. Recent incidents in Gumla and Latehar districts of Jharkhand show that such things can happen again to create panic and serious apprehension. The aborigines will be forced to vacate their villages and seek shelter in the improvised government set up camps where they are just herded in like animals. Meanwhile

they are dispossessed of their lands which will be cleared for the MoUs implementation. Such is the pathetic situation of the sons of the ancient tribes and the process of genocide goes on unabated in the present day civilized society. The urgent need is the economic developments at the grassroots for the people who are living hand to mouth and not the developments for the big industrial magnates. Out of 25 million population in Jharkhand 30% are the aborigines. In the State 48% are below poverty line, of this almost 80% are the tribal people . It is paradoxical that Jharkhand is the richest in mineral resources with the poorest people in the State. During the last nine years, on the one hand the unstable governments, corruptions to the hilt and mismanagement of administration have aggravated the miseries of the common man in utter poverty and unemployment and on the other hand the same have encouraged the spread of Naxalism in the State. It is not the gun-trotting police or para-military forces required here but urgent execution of economic developmental projects suited to the needs of the people struggling for survival.

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**1.9 LET US SUM UP**

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To sum up we may say that the Munda and the Oraons have struggled from the beginning of their history for survival. Today their condition is far from satisfactory. Their social, economic and political situation is just pitiable. Their struggles continue but very poorly as compared to their ancestors’ struggles for survival. In this unit we have tried to understand who the tribes are and where do they come from. We have also seen their long sojourn and final settlement in Jharkhand. In order to save their lands, they had series of revolts against the landlords and the British rule.

**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

‘ b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Why did Mundas and Oraons leave the Indus valley?

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2) After final settlement in Jharkhand why had Mundas and Oraons series of revolts in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries?

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## 1.10 KEY WORDS

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- Homogenous people** : People having the same language, culture, customs and lifestyle opposed to heterogenous people meaning different cultures, customs and so on.
- Kolerian Race** : People who lived from beginning in Koleria, the ancient name of India and often called the Kols.
- Pictogram** : Engraved picture on seals which are deciphered accordingly, like the picture of man with hands and legs read in Harappan language “Al” which in Kurukh (Oraon) language means “man”.

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## 1.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 1.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) A tribe is a group of people who are called aborigines, the primitive people, the indigenous people or the Adivasees.
- 2) The main characteristics of the tribes are that they live in remote and isolated hill tracts, speak the same language, have same customs, rituals and cultures and have one chief or leader.

### Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) About the original place of dwellings of Mundas, many Western scholars hold the view that Munda race came to India from Yunnan a place in south

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east region of China. But many scholars believe that admixture of two ancient races the Negritos and the Proto-australoids gave rise to a third race called the Munda race in the Indus valley more than nine thousand years ago.

- 2) The Oraons belong to the Dravidian family and lived in the Indus valley in Harappa. Dravidian race whose ancestors were said to be the Mediterranean peoples who entered the Indus valley in c. 3500 BC much later than the emerging of the Munda race in the area.

### **Answers to Check Your Progress III**

- 1) Mundas and Oraons left the fertile land of the Indus valley after the Aryan race invaded the Indus valley from the west and destroyed the Dravidian civilization c. 1750 BC. As a result the Mundas and Oraons fled eastward. After a long journey they crossed the gangetic plains and reached the Taimur hills. And finally they settled in Khukra desh later called Jharkhand and Chotanagpur. Outsiders – dikus – non-tribes in course of time entered here and seized the lands of the tribes.
- 2) Even the British rulers joined hands with the landlords in extorting heavy land taxes from the Munda and Oraon cultivators. Therefore the Mundas and Oraons revolted against them in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to protect their lands and independence. Such were their long struggles to survive.