

THE ANATOMY OF TRIBAL AGITATIONS: FOUNDATIONS, COMMONALITIES AND TYPOLOGIES OF INDIGENOUS PROTESTS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study is undertaken to highlight the various tribal movements in mainland India as well as in the Northeastern region of India focusing on the origin, affinities and typologies of aboriginal protests that would clearly revealed that there were varied tribal movements in most of the tribal dominated regions of India with varying nature, degrees, dimensions, and issues mainly ranging from socio-economic, cultural, religion, political etc. This study would be, therefore, revealing more or less the similar kind of factors and forces that were mainly instrumental in bringing about most of the tribal movements in India. Many tribals of India suffered the same agony of destitution, poverty, hardship and misery even though some of them had flourishing dynasties in various historical periods.

As the study of the Tribals in India by many scholars revealed more or less the similar traits having genomic features such as isolation, backwardness, shyness, simple and easy minded, cultural distinctiveness characterized by dialects, life styles, social structures, rituals, values etc., the study of their movements also surfaced some distinct affinities in their problems, issues and genesis of their uprisings. The tribal communities of India have similar issues and encountered the same either one or the other problems ranging from encroachment, immigration, land alienation, conversion and assimilation, identity crisis, script and language issues, backwardness, illiteracy, insecurity, political crisis and so on.

KEYWORDS: Tribals of India, Affinities, Movements, Economic exploitation, Land alienation.

INTRODUCTION

In anthropological term, a tribe is a social group the members of which lives in a common territory, have a common dialect, uniform social organization and possess cultural homogeneity having a common ancestor, political organization and religious pattern. However, possibly it would be very hard to find many tribal groups in India who possess all these characteristics. The classification of tribal population in India is rather complex and difficult. Moreover, recognition of new communities as scheduled tribes also influenced the total tribal population. Roy Burman in 1971 noted 427 tribal communities in India (*B. Chaudhuri: 1992: vii-viii*). The Anthropological Survey noted 314 communities in 1967. The number of scheduled tribes was 212 in 1950 and Danda noted in 1973 that out of 642 communities identified, data on 32 tribes are lacking and in 226 cases, they are mostly sub-tribes. The 1981 Census Shows that the tribal population comprising 427 communities was 51,628,638 constituting 7.76 per cent of India's total population (*B. Chaudhuri: Ibid: vii*). However, ethnographic data on a number of tribal communities are lacking. Many of the large tribal communities are scattered and circulated in a wide region and usually profess to different occupations. Again, a few tribal groups are divided into a number of sub-groups which are practically distinct tribal groups. Besides these, the scheduling of tribes has also created a problem as in many cases; a tribe may be scheduled in one state and not so in another State or even within the State so as the case with Bodo-Kacharis living in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam (*B. Chaudhuri: Ibid: viii*).

The Tribals in India are basically engaged in agricultural and related production. They had a compact economy with tribal forms of property ownership and communal mode of production relations. They were ecologically more or less insulated, geographically concentrated in certain contiguous areas, economically wedded to land and forest, culturally enjoyed a distinct style of life, with distinct language heritage, love for freedom, and respect of self identity. They revolted more often and far more violently than any other community in India when oppression and exploitation bore harshly on them (*M. C. Paul: 1992: 297*). There seem to be less socio-economic differentiations within a tribal community than among caste-Hindu peasants; and their community consciousness is strong. While the peasant movements tend to remain purely agrarian as peasants lived off land, the tribal movements were both agrarian and forest based, because the tribals' dependence on forests was as crucial as their dependence on land. There was also the ethnic factor. The tribal revolts were directed against *zamindars*, moneylenders and petty government officials not because they exploited them but also because they were aliens (*K. S. Singh: 1986: 166*).

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER:

1. To highlight the origin, background and common factors of the movements.
2. To highlight the outlining affinities of the Tribal Movements in India.
3. To highlight the types of the Tribal movements in India.

METHODOLOGY

In this research work I have followed the systematic applications of Socio-Anthropological and Historical methods mainly basing on secondary sources.

Foundation and Background of the Tribal Movements in India

Tribal movements are not a new development in our country and have their origin in the Colonial Raj. Subsequently tribal agitations have taken varied types, forms and dimensions in various pockets of the country. In the past the articulation of movements were different and were mostly in the form of out-burst, depredations, uprisings, or raids and these were described as incidents or episodes as their character could not be ascertained. But they may be characterized as movements as they are an integral part of social system. The basic forces underlying these movements were more economic and ethnic. These movements were regarded as attempts on the part of a group to effect changes in the face of resistance. During the course, the movement became more political in articulation, and the political culture became a strategy of the movement or consequences of the various forces rather than a determining factor. Of course, the tribal movements do have, invariably, political implications in the social system (*K. S. Singh: 1978: 1221*).

To begin with, like any other tribal regions of the world, the British colonial rule initiated the early phase of destruction by exploiting the socio-economic resources of the tribals; followed by their agents, their petty administrative officials, traders, moneylenders who in different ways oppressed and suppressed the simple and illiterate tribals of the various region and compelled them to scattered around and split over into various pockets of the Indian regions bringing them into abject poverty stripping them off their ancestral lands and habitats. Next was the ultimate legal sanction provided by the successive Governments' policies during British regime as well as by the post-independence rulers of the different states of the Indian Union to the encroachers, immigrants and outsiders to settle down and snatch off the tribal lands made them so miserable and pathetic that in their own soil of origin they became landless wanderers. Lack of pro-active political will on the part of the Government to uplift and safeguard the tribal interests made them all the more insecure, hostile and alienated. Lack of education, backwardness, illiteracy, identity crisis due to linguistic and cultural assimilations, insecurity, lack of political consciousness had made them all the more vulnerable for exploitations by the more advanced neighbouring

communities. But, all these factors would be appearing as the guiding spirit for the leaders to articulate who would be easily aware of their miserable and pathetic conditions, and they would any longer yearn for their community to remain latent as a vulnerable, insecure, exploited, backward, marginalized and deprived of rightful privileges in their own native land. So, they ultimately took the leadership and led their own communities into movements.

In the past, their self-awareness might have been of limited range and depth, but there were numerous instances of their participation in the socio-cultural and political processes. The tribals reacted sharply when their economic interests got affected, cultural beliefs scoffed at and their freedom attacked. They got infuriated when their traditional customs and manners were curtailed; their judicial system and their codes were ignored (*M. C. Paul: 1992: 358*). The Indian tribals have been in general a peace loving people. The tribals of India, as witnessed, in most cases, traditionally lived in their ancestral habitat dependant on nature, and having meager wants, they were complacent with their life. Even when there were intrusions in their areas and exploitation by outsiders, they were slow to react. However, as and when the atrocities of the money-lenders, the confiscation of their lands by the landlords reached unbearable heights they reacted, at times violently, against those established interests who had the backing of the Government. This ultimately, became a fight against the Government or political power which represented the status-quo. In some cases the tribal movements were also against the social evils like liquor addiction, superstitions etc. During the last hundred years, due to rising awareness in the tribals, the agitations against bonded-labour practices, land alienation, economic exploitation increased. Leaders from tribals and non-tribals were instrumental for such movements (*S. G. Deogaonkar: 1992: 297*).

From the time perspective, Surajit Sinha traces the origin of tribal movements and even points out that during the pre-British period also there were contradictions and conflicts between high- castes Hindu Aryans and the tribals. He says that even though the Aryans evolved stable regional economic and social units in which the relatively isolated and backward ethnic groups (tribes) also found a place in terms of corporate social status and economic and political functions at least at the time of Buddha through as a liberal process of Hindu method of Tribal Absorption while assuring cultural autonomy to the newly integrated tribes, ultimately released a cultural process by which the dominated and lowly ranked tribes gradually emulated the cultural pattern of the dominant Hindu upper caste, and this process, on the whole provided the tribes with sufficient economic, social and cultural security so as to generate large-scale rebellion, yet, in spite of this general pattern of harmony the tribes were not without an awareness that they were looked down upon and given a low status (*S. Sinha: 2002: 254-255*).

Whereas the Aryans permitted the residual tribals to practice their own ways of life in the relatively remote terrain and to gradually evolved patterns of regional synthesis, the British became right away became anxious with setting up of a uniform network of law and order throughout their empire. It is well known that the illiterate and economically backward tribals failed to take advantage of the British introduced courts and lost large portions of their land to the non-tribals in various regions. Opening of new channels of communication increased the volume of non-tribal immigration into these regions. Later on opening of mines in these regions further increased the tempo of immigration (S. Sinha: *Ibid*: 255). Thus the confrontation between the indigenous tribals and the immigrants attained a massive proportion without allowing enough time to evolve a regional cultural synthesis and inter-ethnic moral order. Under such a situation of economic, social and cultural threat a series of tribal revolts took place during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In response to these tribal uprisings the British government, after an initial stage of suppression, initiated a series of protective legislations and administrative strategies in favour of the groups officially labeled as tribals and very shortly tribe as a social category distinct from the Hindu and the Muslim peasantry crystallized. In the process, while certain areas like Chhotanagpur, Central Provinces (now Madhya Pradesh), etc., continued to have interaction with the non-tribal sections of Indian population, other areas, such as NEFA, Naga Hills District, etc., were virtually cordoned off from contact with Indian civilization.

The spread of the British administration into these areas was closely followed by the coming of the European missionaries. In general the missionaries harped on the social and cultural differences between the Hindus and the tribals and also pointed out that the Hindu civilization was essentially backward, superstitious and repressive on contrary to the benevolent Christian (European) civilization. The Westerners thus appeared as a reference group for the new tribal elite. This was also the period when literacy and formal education spread among a section of the tribals, some of whom moved into jobs as clerks, officers, and teachers and so on. Thus, educated elite class had emerged. This schism between the so called tribals and the non-tribal Hindus was further accentuated by the creation of special tribe constituencies in terms of the India Act of 1935 which laid down the historical basis for forming various tribal associates like Jharkhand Party (S. Sinha: *Ibid*: 255-256).

A special feature of the peasant rebellions had been the role of the tribal population. A large number of the peasant uprisings were spearheaded by the tribals – the *Kols*, *Mundas*, *Oraons* and *Santals* of East India, *Bhils* and *Meos* of the North and *Koyas* in South (S. Banerjee: 1984: 24). The major tribal communities like the *Santhals*, *Oraons*, *Mundas* and *Hos* had their original homelands in the fertile Gangetic plains and from where they had been pushed into the inaccessible, and wild beast-infested forest areas by the more advanced Indo-Aryans who forcibly occupied the plains and further enriched themselves with their vast pastoral experience, skill

and adventure. The successive rulers of the country commencing from the Hindu kings down to the British, looked upon the tribal people as mere curios and object of benevolent amusement and were content with leaving them severely alone. This policy of non-interference was continued by the British rulers till portions of Assam were annexed by them and as a result of which the suspicions of the border tribes were roused. The tribals of Assam who justly apprehended that their freedom, culture and safety were threatened by the British Raj, retaliated effectively and this sparked off several clashes that broke out between the British and the freedom loving tribes of Assam (*V. Raghaviah: 1971: 13*). The tribals were thus the first to bear the brunt of expropriation by the British colonizers, traders and money lenders in league with the feudal landlords. The tribals believed that unless they resisted with all their might, their freedom and also their culture would be wiped out by the foreigners and non-tribals who had shown no regard for their religious beliefs, their mythological heroes and their cultural traditions. It is this spirit that marked all the uprisings amongst the tribals that broke out in India against the British Government.

Land alienation in the tribal areas had been continuing for the last several decades and in the face of a situation where very large areas of land had passed hands from tribals to non-tribals, it is therefore quite natural for the tribals to feel agitated. Large scale industrial ventures, hydro-electric projects, irrigation dams involve displacement of the tribal land on which he had been completely dependent hitherto. From 1961 to 1981, the percentage of tribal cultivators had gone down from 68.18 percent to 54.43 percent, and the percentage of landless agricultural labourers among tribals had gone up from 19.71 percent to 32.67 percent. All this goes to suggest the process of pauperization among the tribals. Thus, it is no wonder that there had been a feeling of deprivation among the tribals which manifested itself by their joining hands with the leaders of Naxalite movement in the state of West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh (*R.R. Prasad & G. Rajanikanth: 1992: 273-274*).

Tribals generally are denizens of forests and their life style is completely inter-woven and dependent on forests. It is only natural in this situation that they would resent introduction of any regulation which curtails their hitherto unlimited access to forests on which they subsist. But the customary rights of tribals in the forest have been frequently encroached upon right from the year 1894 when the Forest Policy Resolution was announced by the colonial Administration. Likewise, the commercial plantations in the forest areas that deprived the local tribal population of their life systems have led to popular strife in the tribal areas (*R.R. Prasad & G. Rajanikanth: Ibid: 274*).

As mentioned above, the genesis and roots of tribal movements in India lies in the colonial rule of the British. The British, in the nineteenth century, came into conflict with different tribes in different parts of the

country when they occupied tribal kingdoms and introduced colonial administration in the tribal areas. The tribals on the whole and the chieftains in particular felt the loss of power and resources in the new system of administration. They revolted against the British (*Ghanashyam Shah: 2004: 97*). The ultimate aim of British colonialism was to exploit the rich and untapped socio-economic resources of the country and drain them off to make the British Empire prosper (*R. Palme Dutt: 1979: 8-12*). With this aim in view they subjugated progressively various part of India and expanded the complex network of exploitation to encompass every nook and corner which could not spare even the tribal areas. The expansion and consolidation of colonial power set free different forces and brought the economy of India into the orbit of the world capitalist order. The rulers of the princely states and the landlords were either crushed totally or co-opted by the British through concessions (*K. Gough: 1972: 1393*). The introduction of new form of colonial system into the tribal economy in turn created new types of property owning systems which in turn gave rise to fresh and new social formations, which were unknown to the tribals in the past. The British brought them into the historical process of conflict and change. This had broken the compactness of tribal social relations and their mode of production. The tribal-feudal social formation came in direct conflict with colonial production system with its new market forces, administrative and politico-legal system to safeguard the emerging system. An enormous amount of multi-caste and multi-community village organization and territorial system emerged. This gradually led to the collapse of tribal-feudal system based on communal land relationships. Money as a medium became capital. Land was transformed into commodity for the first time and was thrown open to market for sale. This made the traditional communal rights on land obsolete. The new system of land ownership resulted in the emergence of a novel class of landlords, a lower rank of cultivating tenants, and large scale of tribal agricultural landless labourers. The colonialists empowered their agents and new breed of landlords to evict the peasants, at any time, if they did not pay tax (*K. Gough: Ibid: 1393*). Thus, the tribals' image of their own world came in direct conflict with the new world image of bourgeois imposed on them.

A variety of socio-economic forces set free by the colonial rule increasingly encroached upon tribal lands and forests, and thereby distorted their socio-economic set up. Unique types of repression had fallen on them and they had been reduced to the extremity of wretchedness. This was due to the growth of money market with rack-renting, lopsided terms of trade, usury, corvee, and even slave labour that were order of the day and the obligation to grow more cash crops for little or no return made the tribal existence bitter and choked. Land ownership gradually slipped away from the tribals to non-tribal landlords who came with the expansion of commercial economy. New forces of modernization like missionaries, modern education created a new minority social group who increasingly began possessing the socio-economic resources at the cost of majority mass of tribal peasants (*M. C. Paul: 1992: 299*). For more than last two centuries the tribals had been undergoing a diverse socio-

economic changes and much of which were initiated by the penetration of British colonialism. The British introduced a new economic system gradually in consonance with their own economic system. It was characterized by commercialization of land and forests, well-defined property rights, occupational structure, marketing of agricultural surplus, etc. These in turn, produced unprecedented contradictions in the tribal society which was earlier based on relatively undifferentiated economic relations collective mode of production and consumption. The colonial penetration had diverse purposes and motives to exploit the socio-economic resources of the native economy and this thus introduced new social tensions and conflicts in the society. In other words, the colonial intervention resulted in the gradual encroachment upon their entire way of life (*M. C. Paul: 1989: 13-14*).

In number instances, there were riots, revolts, uprisings, etc. against the British rule and its exploitative socio-economic set-up. In almost all pockets of India, tribals were surging with resistance of this sort against the deprivation of their land and forests. Surface-observation of these phenomena may lead us to categorize them as scattered events or episodes and not as movements. But, these events of resistance by the tribal people were centred around the issues affecting their existence itself. Resistance, as we know, is a core characteristic of a social movement (*Paul Wilkinson: 1971: 52*). Observed from a particular period of time and space it may not seem like a movement in proper sense of the term but these events was certainly phases of a movement where people in hundreds and thousands rose against the high-handed oppressive forces. Over a period of time, during the colonial rule such movements in tribal society might have taken different nature, forms, dimensions and magnitudes. But these were surely sustained attempts on their part to oppose the exploitative system which affect their existence in one way or the other. Such attempts have continued even after independence and have not ceased (*M. C. Paul: 1989: 14*).

COMMONALITIES OF THE TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

There were various tribal movements in most of the tribal dominated regions of India with varying nature, degrees, dimensions, and issues mainly ranging from socio-economic, cultural, religion, political etc. There were more or less the similar kind of factors and forces that were mainly instrumental in bringing about most of the tribal movements in India. Many tribals of India suffered the same agony of destitution, poverty, hardship and misery even though some of them had flourishing dynasties in various historical periods. Tribals in India possessed more or less the similar traits having genomic features such as isolation, backwardness, shyness, simple and easy minded, cultural distinctiveness characterized by dialects, life styles, social structures, rituals, values etc., the study of their movements also surfaced some distinct affinities in their problems, issues and genesis of their uprisings. The tribal communities of India have similar issues and encountered the same either one or the

other problems ranging from encroachment, immigration, land alienation, conversion and assimilation, identity crisis, script and language issues, illiteracy, insecurity, backwardness, political crisis and so on.

There are variations in tribal movements from region to region. In the Northeast, the tribals are in an overwhelming majority; the tribal system, both social and economic, is relatively secure excluding Assam plains and Tripura where, like elsewhere in India, the immigration and encroachment issues are creating unrest and tension. Tribal unrests in this area have been basically political and secular in nature. As against this, the condition is far more complex in middle India. The tribals have been reduced to a minority in many areas, and have been exposed to the process of rapid change. Industrialization has come about in a big way; the centers of industrial development have shifted from the coastal and metropolitan pockets to the tribal regions. Agrarian problems have also been in the forefront. Therefore, the tribal movements in this region have developed an essentially agrarian character, even while the tribes have emphasized ethnicity and articulated demands of a political nature. There are no agrarian movements in the northeast except in Tripura (*K. S. Singh: 1083: x-xi*).

In reality, the fundamental factors underlying the contemporary tribal movements are the same as in the past. The difference lies in relation to their articulation and dimension of the movement. The tribal peasants reacted sharply when their communal land ownership was disturbed, their religious beliefs were scoffed at, their independence were attacked; when traditional customs, manners and civic rights, standard of etiquette and prestige, code of conduct were brushed aside, and deep-rooted conventions ignored, insulted and violated. Directly or indirectly the policy of colonialism created a lot of contradictions in the tribal self-sufficient economy and social relations. The perpetuation of the same system with some modifications in the post-independence period with its inherent characteristics like inequalities, underdevelopment and deprivation became the catalyst of social movements of various forms, nature and dimensions. All the movements, of course, embodied ideas of freedom from undue socio-economic exploitation and deprivation. The underlying factors of these movements, in varying degrees, were more of economic than religious and political in character. The later was progressively used as an instrument of mobilization when the movements get articulated on the basis of ideology (*M. C. Paul: 1992: 299-300*).

K.S. Singh (*K. S. Singh: 1985: 9-10*) divides the tribal movements in India in pre-independence period into three phases. The first phase was between 1795 and 1860 that coincided with the rise, expansion and founding of the British Empire. The second phase covers the period between 1860 and 1920. It coincided with the intensive phase of colonialism, during which merchant capital penetrated into tribal economy affecting their relationship with the land and forest. The third phase covers the period from 1920 till the achievement of

independence in 1947. During this phase the tribals not only began to launch the so-called separatist movements, but at the same time participated in nationalist and agrarian movements.

TYPOLOGIES OF THE TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

A range of scholars have developed different typologies of tribal movements in India. Mahapatra (*L.K. Mahapatra: 1972: 162-163*) applies the typologies widely used for social movements to tribal movements: (1) reactionary; (2) conservative; (3) revisionary or revolutionary. The reactionary movement tries to launch a movement to bring back the good old days, whereas the conservative movement tries to maintain the status-quo. The movements that are organized for improvement or purification of the cultural or social order by eliminating evil or low customs, beliefs or institutions are called revisionary or revolutionary movements. Surajit Sinha (*S. Sinha: 1968: 96*) classifies the movements into: (1) ethnic rebellion; (2) reform movements; (3) political autonomy movements within the Indian Union; (4) secessionist movements; and (5) agrarian unrest. K.S. Singh (*K. S. Singh: 1982: 11-12*) makes more or less the same classification except that he uses the terms Sanskritization instead of reform movement and cultural movements instead of ethnic movements. S.M. Dubey divides the tribal movements in Northeast India into four categories: (1) religious and social reform movements; (2) movements for separate statehood; (3) insurgent movements; (4) cultural rights movements (*S. M. Dubey: 1982: 11-12*). There is no extensive dissimilarity among the scholars who use different typologies. Mahapatra keeps out political movements while others do not. These typologies do not include the recent movements around the issues of forest rights and environment, and displacement of the tribals due to development programmes of the state and the market. K.S. Singh observes that in recent years with the rise of the international movement of indigenous people in the post-modernist phase, the focus has shifted to self-determination or self-management of the resources, identity, and ethnicity. The environmental movement has focused on communities *in situ*, their relationship to resources, their rapport with nature, their world-view. Therefore with the growing concern for environment, particularly bio-diversity, pluralism, ethnicity, and identity - all are now interrelated - the tribal movements are assuming a new character. They are all now becoming more and more identity-based movements, with various issues concerning control over resources etc. being considered as ramifications of this central issue (*K. S. Singh: 1998: 9-10*).

Surajit Sinha (*S. Sinha: 1993: 310*) categorically placed five types of tribal movements in India that occurred since the British rule and thereafter. The following are some of the examples of tribal movements which fall under these five categories:

- (i) Ethnic or Tribal rebellions during the early days of the British rule in the 18th and 19th centuries: Sardar Larai (1885) and Birsa movement (1895-1900); Ganganarayan Hangama (1832) among the Bhumij, Kol Rebellion (1832), Santal Rebellion (1857-58), Rebellion of the Kacha Nagas (1880s) and so on.
- (ii) Reform movements emulating the cultural pattern of the higher Hindu castes: Bhagat movement among the Oraon, Vaishnavite reform movement among the Bhumij, social mobility movement among the Bhumij for Rajput recognition, Kherwar movement among the Santal and so on.
- (iii) Emergence of inter-tribal political associations and movements for recognition as tribal states within the Indian Union in the post-Independence period. Jharkhand movement among the tribes of Chotanagpur and Orissa, Hill States movements in the Assam Hills, Adisthan movement among the Bhils and so on.
- (iv) Violent secessionist movements among the tribes located near the international frontier. Nagaland movement, Mizo National Front movement, ULFA, NDFB and so on, and;
- (v) Pockets of violent political movements in the tribal belt linked with the general problem of agrarian unrest, political aspirations and Communist movement. Hajng unrest (1944), Naxalbari movement (1967), Gijran Rebellion at Srikakulam (1968-69), Birsa Dal movement in Ranchi (1968-69), Statehood movements of Chotanagpur Plateau like Jharkhand and several ethnic groups of the North East India.

CONCLUSION

Thus, tribal movements are not a new development in our country and have their origin in the Colonial Raj. Since then tribal movements have taken varied types, forms and dimensions in various pockets of the country. On the whole, in the pre and post independence period the entire parameter of social changes and the consequent emergence of tribal Movements for survival of identity, equality, political and civil rights, economic and social justice, right to land; language and culture, refinement of custom and traditions, awakening of national consciousness bear the same testimony and affinities among all the tribal movements in India.

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