

8th Standard- Social Science

History-Tribals, Dikus and the Vision of a Golden Age

Affect of Colonial rule: The tribal life was disrupted in many ways by the colonial rule. There was a significant change experienced by the tribal people after they came into contact with the colonial rule and the outsiders whom they described as 'Dikus'.

Some of them were hunters and gatherers: These people managed their livelihood by hunting wild animals and by gathering forest products such as fruits, roots and medicinal shrubs. They also sold the forest products in the local markets and supplied sal and mahua flowers.

Impact of Forest Laws: Tribals were intimately connected with the forests. British regulations made them vulnerable as some forests were declared reserve forest and declared as the property of the state.

Affect on shifting cultivators: The Britishers wanted the tribal groups to settle down to bring them under the ambit of revenue assessment. Therefore, the measurement of land took place. Some peasants were declared landowners and others as their tenants.

What happened to tribal chiefs: The privileges enjoyed by the tribal chiefs were lost as soon as the Britishers arrived. They were forced to pay tributes. They lost the administrative powers that were enjoyed by them previously.

Search for work: The tribals who went far away from their respective homes were the major sufferers. Plantation agriculture began in the late 19th century and they were employed in this industry. Their position became pathetic, as they were not allowed to go home.

The problem with trade: Moneylenders and traders frequently visited the tribal areas. Their motive was to make profit by exploiting the tribals as per their wish. Soon the tribals understood their interest and started maintaining distance from them.

Some were Jhum cultivators: Some tribal communities practised Jhum cultivation, i.e. they cleared a patch of the forest and cultivated it for few years and when it lost its fertility, they moved to other sites. It is also called slash and burn technique.

Herded animals: There were some groups who lived the life of pastoral nomads. They migrated from one place to another with the change in season along with their livestock in search of fodder.

Birsa Munda: Birsa Munda was born in mid-1870s in a poor family. His family was moving in the search of work. Since his childhood, he had seen the elder members of the tribes urging the younger members to rebel against the exploitation.

Settled cultivation: Some tribal communities settled down and cultivated the same field year after year.

They started using plough and cleared the fields around the Chhotanagpur plateau; thus they became the first settlers. These were the people of Munda tribes.

The customs and rituals of tribal societies differ from those laid down by the Brahmans. Unlike the caste societies, the societies of tribals did not have the sharp social divisions. Those who belonged to the same tribe shared common ties of kinship. But, this did not mean that there were no social and economic differences within tribes.

By the 19th century, tribal people in different parts of India were involved in a variety of activities.

Some tribal people engaged in jhum or shifting cultivation. In this type of cultivation, small patches of land were made cleared off trees. The cultivators burnt the vegetation and spread the ash from the firing, which contained potash to fertilise the soil. They used equipments like axe and hoe for preparing the soil for cultivation. They did not plough the land and sow the seeds. Instead they used to scatter the seeds on the field. Once the crop was ready and harvested, they moved to another field.

Shifting cultivators were found in the hilly and forested tracts of north-east and central India.

Some tribal groups earned their livelihood by hunting animals and gathering forest produce. They saw forests as essential for survival. The Khonds were such community living in the forests of Orissa.

They ate fruits and roots collected from the forest. They used many forest shrubs and herbs for medicinal purposes and sold forest produce in the local markets.

At times they exchanged goods—getting what they needed in return for their forest produce. Some of them were engaged in some odd jobs in villages such as carrying loads or building roads, etc.

But a time came when supplies of produce shrank. As a result, more and more tribal people began to wander around in search of work.

However, Baigas remained in the forest. They did not go anywhere.

Several tribal groups were engaged in herding and rearing animals. They were pastoralists who moved with their herds of cattle or sheep according to the seasons. The Van Gujjars of the Punjab hills and the Labadis of Andhra Pradesh were cattle herders, the Gaddis of Kulu were shepherds and the Bakarwals of Kashmir reared goats.

Many tribal groups preferred to settle down instead of moving from one place to another. They began to use plough, and gradually got rights over the land they lived on.

The British officials found the settled tribal groups like the Gonds and Santhals more civilised than hunter-gatherers or shifting cultivators.

The British rule, however, changed the life of the tribal people.

The tribal chiefs were considered important people because it is they who controlled their territories. Under the British rule they lost their administrative power and were forced to follow law made by British officials in India.

The British never liked those tribal groups who moved about and did not have a fixed home. They wanted these tribal groups to settle down. Settled peasants were easier to control and administer than people who were always on move.

The British also wanted a regular revenue income for the state. Hence, they introduced land settlements—that is, they measured the land, defined the rights of each individual of that land and fixed the revenue demand for the state.

The British effort to settle jhum cultivators was not very successful.

The British brought several changes in forest laws. This affected the tribal lives. The British extended their control over all forests and declared that forests were state property. Some forests were classified as Reserved Forests for they produced timber which the British wanted. In these forests people were not allowed to move freely and practise jhum cultivation. As a result, several jhum cultivators moved to other areas. Now, the British faced a problem of shortage of labour. Hence, they decided that they would give jhum cultivators small patches of land in the forests and allow them to cultivate these on the condition that those who lived in the villages would have to provide labour to the Forest Department. After this forest villages were established around the Forest Department.

Many tribal groups reacted against the colonial forest laws.

During the 19th century, traders and moneylenders began to come into the forests. They offered cash loan to the tribal people and asked them to work for wages.

The case of the silk growers is worth-mentioning in this regard. In the 18th century, Indian silk was in great demand in European markets. Hence, the East India Company officials tried to encourage silk production to meet the growing demand.

The Santhals of Hazaribagh reared cocoons. The silk traders sent in their agents who gave loans to them to collect the cocoons. The growers were paid three to four rupees for a thousand cocoons. These were then exported to Burdwan or Gaya where they were sold at five times the price. Thus, the silk-growers earned very little.

The plight of the tribals who had to go far away from their homes for work was even worse.

Finally, the tribal groups in different parts of the country rebelled against the changes in laws, the restrictions on their practices, the exploitation by traders and moneylenders, etc. The movement that Birsa Munda led is worth-mentioning here.

Birsa Munda himself declared that God had appointed him to save his people from trouble, free them from the slavery of dikus (outsiders). Soon, thousands became the followers of Birsa. They all were unhappy with the changes they were experiencing and the problems they were facing under British rule. They wanted to recover their golden past.

A movement began under the leadership of Birsa Munda. The political aim of the Birsa Movement was to drive out missionaries, moneylenders, Hindu landlords and the government and to set up a Munda Raj with Birsa at its head.

As the movement spread, the British officials arrested Birsa in 1895.

In 1897, he was released. Afterwards, he toured the villages to gather support. He urged people to destroy 'Ravana' (dikus and the Europeans) and establish a kingdom under his leadership.

Birsa died in 1900 and the movement initiated by him faded out, but its significance cannot be undermined.

Dikus: Outsiders or foreigners

Jhum Cultivation: In this type of cultivation, the cultivators clear off a patch of land, burn the vegetation and spread the ash from the firing, which contains potash to fertilise the soil. Then they prepare the soil for cultivation. They scatter the seeds on the field. Once the crop is ready they move to another land.

Fallow: A field left uncultivated for a while so that the soil recovers fertility.

Mahua: A flower that is eaten or used to make alcohol.

Bewar: It is a term used in Madhya Pradesh for shifting cultivation.

Sleeper: The horizontal planks of wood on which railway lines are laid.

Akhara: Wrestling ground

Sirdars: Leaders

Vaishnav: Worshippers of Vishnu

Satyug: The age of truth

