
UNIT 15 ANTI-COLONIAL TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Socio-Economic Profile of the Tribals during the Colonial Period
- 15.3 The Impact of the British Policies on the Tribals
 - 15.3.1 Introduction
 - 15.3.2 Forest Policy
- 15.4 Salient Features of the Tribal Movements
- 15.5 Some Major Tribal Movements in India
 - 15.5.1 Tamar Revolts (1789-1832)
 - 15.5.2 The Kherwar Movement of the Santhals (1833)
 - 15.5.3 Santhal Revolt of 1855
 - 15.5.4 Bokta Rising, Sardari Larai or Mukti Larai Movement of 1858-95
 - 15.5.5 Birsa Munda Revolt (1895-1901)
 - 15.5.6 Devi Movement in Gujarat (1922-23)
 - 15.5.7 Tribal Movement in Midnapur (1918-1924)
 - 15.5.8 Jitu Santhal's Movement in Malda (1924-32)
 - 15.5.9 Tribals and National Movement in Orissa (1921-36)
 - 15.5.10 Tribal Movement in Assam (the then Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram)
- 15.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 15.7 Some Useful Books
- 15.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

15.0 OBJECTIVES

In the preceding units of this block, you have studied the impact of colonialism on caste order and the ideas and activities of the leaders who championed the cause of lower-castes. After studying this unit you should be able to understand:

- the socio-economic conditions of the tribals during the colonial period
- impact of the British policies on the tribals
- the tribal movements which were against colonial exploitation and oppression.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

The tribals of India, like other social groups, participated in the anti-colonial movement. The tribal anti-colonial movements were of two types — first, the movements against their oppressors i.e. landlords, money-lenders, traders, thekedars (contractors), government officials and Christian missionaries and second, the movements which were linked to and merged with the Indian National movement. The first type of movements can be termed as anti-colonial because these movements were directed against those classes which were the creation of British colonialism and who collaborated with the tribals. These classes were considered outsiders by the tribals. According to an estimate there were more than 70 tribal revolts over a period of 70 years (1778 to 1948). These revolts were anti-colonial in varying degrees. The main anti-colonial tribal movements and revolts were: The tribal revolts in Chotanagpur region — Tamar revolt (1789-1832), Kherwar movement of Santhals (1833), Santhal revolt of 1855, Bokta risings, Sardari Larai or Mukti Larai movement of 1858-95, Birsa Munda's movement (1895-1901), Devi movement in Gujarat (1922-23), Tribal movement in Midnapur (1918-1924), Jitu Santhal's movement in Malda (1924-32), Tribals and National Movement in Orissa (1921-36) and Tribal movements in Assam in the late nineteenth century.

15.2 SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE TRIBALS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Rural India had been inhabited by the tribal population from the beginning. The tribal communities lived in relative seclusion and isolation for centuries and in varying states of economy. In spite of their contacts with the non-tribals, they maintained their separate identity. Each tribal community maintained its own socio-religious and cultural life and its political and economic organisations.

Until the arrival of the British in the tribal areas, the main means of production and subsistence for the tribals were land and forests. The forests were of great significance for the tribals all over India. They had customary rights to use the minor forest products. Firewood, flowers, fruits, leaves, honey, housing material, edible nuts, medical herbs etc. formed the essential items of the daily requirements of tribals. They used forest products for food, constructing houses and shifting cultivation. They grazed their cattle in the forests. The forests provided them with security. About the significance of the forests for the tribals Kr. Suresh Singh says: "They (Tribal communities) can, therefore, subsist on conditions in which members of these more civilized race could not exist. When the crop fails, jungle fruits and vegetables of all kinds (sag) are valuable reserve. With the help of these they succeed in teething over the period of stress which could play havoc."

In addition, the tribals practised weaving, basket making, fishing, hunting and food gathering. Their instruments of labour and livelihood were not very developed. Bows and arrows were the main instruments of self-defence and hunting.

The tribal communities had their respective chiefs and clan councils (panchayat) to look after them and manage their social, religious, economic and political affairs. Each tribal paid some amount of land produce to his respective chief. But it was not a legal right; it was a moral requirement. The chiefs were given voluntary contribution in kind and a few days of free labour every year by the people.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What was the significance of the forests for the economy of tribals?

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15.3 THE IMPACT OF THE BRITISH POLICIES ON THE TRIBALS

15.3.1 Introduction

The British policies disturbed the traditional tribal systems. The tribal land system was marked by its corporatorial ownership of land and absence of the landlords. But the British changed the land system of the tribals. They created the hitherto unknown class of zamindars (landlords) in the tribal areas. Brahmans and Rajputs were brought in the tribal areas of Chotanagpur to perform military and religious services. For their roles, they were assigned the zamindari rights in the land. The zamindars were considered outsiders by the tribals. The tribals were reduced to the position of tenants. The clan councils of

the tribals were replaced by the councils of rajas consisting of their followers. The traditional land system of the British was turned into tenancy systems. The British also introduced contractors (Thekedars) in the tribal areas. The zamindars and thekedars introduced the land rent in the tribal areas.

Following the introduction of market economy, a class of traders also developed in the tribal areas. The tribal tenants had to pay the rent in cash. As they did not have cash with them, they had to borrow from the money-lenders. Hence, a class of money-lenders also came into being in the tribal areas.

The isolated tribal communities were connected with the outside world following the introduction of means of communication and transportation. The self-sufficient tribal economy was converted into market economy. The customary system of justice was replaced by the new legal system. The new legal system was not suitable to the tribals. The tribals could not afford to utilise the new legal system, as they were not educated and they did not have money for the fees of the lawyers. The British brought a host of petty government official and clerks in the tribal areas.

All these classes — zamindars, thekedars, traders, money-lenders, government officials — were not natives of the tribal areas. Nor did they belong to the tribal communities. They were brought into the tribal areas by the British. They could be Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs or Europeans. Hence, they were considered outsiders — dikus — by the tribals. These classes collaborated with the British administration in the process of exploitation and oppression of the tribals. The landlords extracted exorbitant amount of rent from the tribals, evicted them from their land and extracted begar (forcible labour) from the tribals. In case of defiance, the tribals were physically assaulted by the zamindars. They were deprived of their belongings. The money-lenders exploited the tribals by charging exorbitant amount of interests from them. Many a time the tribals were forced to sell out their belongings and children and wives to meet the requirements of the landlords and money-lenders. The government officials took advantage of their innocence. They were the ally of landlords, money-lenders, contractors and traders in the exploitation of the tribals.

15.3.2 Forest Policy

Till the middle of the nineteenth century, the tribals had customary rights in the forest. Their right to use the forest products was recognized. But the forest policy (1884) of the British curtailed the tribal rights to use the forest produce. Moreover, the development of the communication system i.e. telegraphic, roadways and railway services and the introduction of the common administrative system ruined the natural economy of the forests. These developments affected the tribals all over the country. The dikus were benefited from the British forest policies. The British policies were detrimental to the tribal interests.

The government sometimes paid compensation to the tribals for the loss caused by the encroachment of the forests. But the compensation could not trickle down to them. It was usurped by the clerks, the pleaders and the munshis in between.

In addition to the devastation caused to the tribal communities, the famines in the later half of the 19th century worsened the conditions of the tribals. The continuous increase in the prices of the essential commodities made their conditions unbearable. The land formed for the tribals, not only a source of livelihood, but a spiritual source as well given to them by their ancestors. They were being alienated from their land due to distress. The rights of the outsiders — money-lenders and landlords — were recognized over their land. The attack on the tribal system was a threat to their existence.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What changes were brought about by the British policies in the economy of the tribals?

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15.4 SALIENT FEATURES OF THE TRIBAL MOVEMENTS

The tribals responded to their exploitation and oppression in the form of revolts and movements. They identified their enemies in the outsiders (dikus) — landlords, money-lenders, thekedars and missionaries and European government officials. They launched movements against their oppressors in their respective regions. Their agitations against the outsiders could be called anti-colonial. They revolted against them because of their exploitation in the form of encroachment on their land, eviction from their land, annulment of their traditional legal and social rights and customs, against enhancement of rent, and for transfer of land to the tiller, abolition of feudal and semi-feudal form of land ownership. On the whole, these movements had social and religious overtones. But they were directed against the issues related to their existence. These movements were launched under the leadership of their respective chiefs. Although the movements initially began on social and religious issues and against the oppression of outsiders, in course of time, they merged with the National movement and with the no-tax campaign. The tribals fought against their enemies with their traditional weapons i.e. bows, arrows, lathis and axes. Their movement often took a violent turn resulting in the murder of oppressors and the burning of their houses. Most of the movements were ruthlessly suppressed by the government. The tribals had to comply with British policies which were detrimental to their interests. The government introduced protective administration in tribal areas. The government thought that the normal laws could not be applied in the tribal areas. The government passed the Scheduled District Act (1874) and categorised the tribal areas as excluded areas in the Govt. of India Act of 1935.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1 What were the salient features of the tribal movements in India?

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15.5 SOME MAJOR TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

The first stirrings of tribal revolt were manifest in the later half of the 19th century. The tribals participated in the 1857 revolt which spread all over the tribal areas. The people found themselves involved in it. Some of the main tribal movements which were essentially anti-colonial in character are discussed in the following pages.

15.5.1 Tamar Revolts (1789-1832)

The tribals of Tamar revolted over 7 times between 1789-1832 against the British. They were joined in the revolt by the tribals of adjoining areas — Midnapur, Koelpur, Dhadha, Chatshila, Jalda and Silli. They revolted against the faulty align system of the government. The Tamar revolts were led by Bhola Nath Sahay of Tamar. In 1832 the arrows of war circulated throughout the region. Oraons, Mundas, Hos or Kols, who had distinct social and cultural identity joined the insurgents under the leadership of Ganga Narain Singh, a member of Banbhum Raj family. The tribals murdered the “dikus” in each village of the areas. They burnt and plundered their houses. But the movement was suppressed by the government in 1832-33. The Ho-country was annexed as government estate. Simple rules of administration were drawn up, though the system of government through the “Ho” tribal head was maintained.

15.5.2 The Kherwar Movement of the Santhals (1833)

This movement was motivated by the desire to return to an idealised past of tribal independence. The word “Kherwar” is said to be an ancient name of Santhals and in their opinion, it is linked to the Golden age of their history. At that time, the Santhals (Kherwars) were supposed to have enjoyed absolute independence. They had to pay tribute to their chief for the protection which he provided to them. This movement started under the charismatic leadership of Bhagirath Majhi. He assumed the title of ‘Babaji’. He announced that he would restore the Golden age of Santhals, if they returned to the worship of God and cleared themselves from their sins. He vowed to liberate them from the oppression of officials, landlords and money-lenders. He exhorted them to worship the Hindu God Ram, identifying him with Santhal “Caudo”. He banned the Santhal’s pigs and fowls. He assured them that their land would be recovered and given back to them. He explained their oppression as a divine punishment for not worshipping God and for turning to **veneration of minor and evil spirits**. He imposed on the Santhals the rules and behaviour which reflected the Hindu notion of purity and pollution. This movement took a more political turn later for driving the non-Santhals out of their habitat.

15.5.3 Santhal Revolt of 1855

This movement of the Santhals was against the exploitation of oppression by landlords, who had unjust ownership of the land of the Santhals. This movement was also directed against the village money-lenders and officials. The movement was led by two brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu. They held a meeting at Bhagnadih, and made the announcement that their oppression could be ended by taking back their land from their oppressors. Around 35,000 Santhals acted as their bodyguards at the meeting. Following the announcement made at the meeting, thousands of Santhals marched armed with their traditional weapons — bows, arrows, axes etc. — towards Calcutta for presenting a petition before the Governor. The police officer obstructed them and provoked them into violence. Several Santhals were massacred at the hands of the British. The rebellion (movement) lasted 60 days. The Santhal rebellion forced the government to change its policy towards them. Around 5000 sq. miles areas was carved out as “Non-Regulation” district, which came to be known as “Santhal Parganas”. An administrative head was appointed to recover the alienated land.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What were the Tamar revolts and how did the government respond to them?

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- 2) Against whom the Kherwar movement of Santhals (1833) was directed and how did its leaders relate Hindu religion to it?

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- 3) What were the consequences of the Santhal Revolt of 1855?

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15.5.4 Bokta Rising, Sardari Larai or Mukti Larai Movement of 1858-95

This movement took place in various parts of Chotanagpur. It aimed at regaining the tribals' ancient right on land by expelling the hated landlords. According to Kr. Suresh Singh, this movement evolved through three phases: (i) The Agrarian phase, (ii) the Revivalistic phase and (iii) the Political phase. The first two phases were marked by the clashes between the landlords and tribal tenants. The tribal tenants revolted against the rise in rent, eviction from land and harassment of the tenants by the landlords. During this period, recurrent clashes took place between the landlords and the tenants. From 1890, the Sardar movement turned against all Europeans, both missionaries and officials, who were suspected to be collaborating with the landlords. People thought that British rule was the main cause of the maladies and they could be happy only when it ended. When the constitutional means did not yield, the tribals became violent. They used their traditional weapons such as bows and arrows. In September 1892, the Sardars hatched a conspiracy to kill the contractors and German missionaries. But their plan misfired because they had no organisation to rally behind. The tribals looked for a new leader. This leadership was provided to them by Birsa Munda.

15.5.5 Birsa Munda Revolt (1895-1901)

The movement of Birsa Munda is the most popular movement of the Munda tribes of Singhbhum and Ranchi districts of the Chotanagpur region of Bihar. Like the movements discussed earlier, this movement was also directed against the outsiders dikus — landlords, traders, merchants and government officers. These classes were created by the British. Before the introduction of the British policies in the areas inhabited by Oaron and Munda, their traditional land and social systems had existed. Their land system was known as 'Khuntkari system'. The tribals enjoyed customary rights over their land. The system was marked by the absence of the class of landlords. The tribals worked on their land and paid tributes to their chiefs. By 1874, the British replaced the traditional khuntkari system by the zamindari system. The introduction of zamindari system created the classes of zamindars (landlords) and ryots (tenants). The tribals now had to pay rent to the landlords and failure to do so resulted in their eviction from land. The landlords exploited the tribals in the following ways: They brought the peasants into the tribal lands from the adjoining areas and evicted the tribals from their land, harassed them by brute force, encroaching upon their land, enhancing their rent, changing the collective payment of rent into individual payment, forcing them to do begar (enforced labour), inflicting physical injury on them, extracting different kinds of allowances from them, i.e. horse, palki, milch cow, gifts at birth of a child, marriage and charges on the occasion of death in the family of the landlords.

Following the monetisation of economy, the tribals had to depend on cash for paying the rent and for meeting their daily needs. This made them dependent on

the money-lenders. The money-lenders charged exorbitant interests from the tribals for the loan which they advanced to the tribals.

The landlords, money-lenders and the government officers collaborated with each other in exploiting the tribals. Even the social system of the tribals did not remain unaffected by the British policies. Their clan councils which provided them justice without any fees were replaced by the modern courts. Apart from the exploitation and oppression of the Mundas caused by the outsiders and the disruption caused to their traditional social and political systems, natural calamities also worsened their conditions. Two famines in 1896-97 and 1890-1900 made them suffer from starvation.

The mundas held the dikus and the missionaries responsible for their miseries. Therefore, they developed feelings of hatred against the dikus. They felt that their miseries could be ended only by removing the outsiders and establishing their independent raj. Even before the Birsa Munda revolt, the Sardar movement had turned against all Europeans, both missionaries and officials, who were suspected to be hand in glove with the landlords.

This movement was led by Birsa Munda.

Birsa Munda

The exact date of Birsa's birth is not certain. According to Kr. Suresh Singh, the year 1874 or 1875 might be regarded as the year of his birth. He was born in a poor Munda tribal family in a house built of bamboo strips without a mud plaster or secure roofs. Having passed lower primary examination from the German Mission of Buzru, he was sent to Chaibasa for further studies. His long stay at Chaibasa from 1886 to 1890 constituted the formative period of his life. He was expelled from the School for his criticism of missionaries. His expulsion from the school was a turning point in his life. He would often exclaim 'Saheb, Sahab ek topi hai' ('all white, the British and the missionaries wear the same cap'). His perception of the missionaries and the government made him anti-missionary and anti-government. He perhaps had finished studies up to the primary stage. In 1860, his family gave up the membership of the German Mission in line with the Sardars' movement against it.

He went to Bandgaon in 1891, where he came in contact with Anand Paure. Anand Paure was munshi to Jagmohan Singh, a zamindar of Bandgaon. He was well versed in rudimentary Vaishnavism and in the Hindu epic lores and enjoyed some reputation and influence. Munda got influenced by him; he adopted the sacred thread, wore sandal mark and advocated prohibition of cow slaughter. Birsa grew into a "prophet". He declared himself a god or Bhagwan. He preached his religion (ideals) among Mundas. Thousands of Mundas became his followers, who came to be known as Birsaites. He exhorted his followers to pray thrice a day, to live clean and live in love and harmony with one another and organise collective progress. He mobilized them against the British government, foreigners and exhorted them to be independent and establish Birsa Munda Raj. He died in jail on 9 January 1900.

Progress of the Movement

The Birsa movement had the same background as the Sardar movement. The objective of Birsa was to attain religious and political independence for Mundas. He felt that this objective could be achieved by ending the oppression of the dikus and by driving the Europeans (British) out of their territory or by killing them. He announced the establishment of the Birsa Raj, in which nobody but only Birsa could be obeyed. He exhorted the Mundas not to pay rent. The government decided to arrest Birsa on 22 August 1895. Birsa was convicted along with others on 19 November 1895 on the charge of rioting. He was sentenced to imprisonment for two years and ordered to pay a fine of Rs. 50. In default of the payment of fine, he was to undergo an additional term of rigorous imprisonment for six months. However, on the basis of an appeal on 22 June 1895, the orders of the lower court were modified and the sentence of imprisonment was reduced to two years from two and a half years. The arrest of Birsa accentuated the anti-government bias of the movement. About the intensity of the 1895 riots Rev. Hoffman wrote: "Most of the aliens outside Ranchi would certainly have been massacred, had the government not moved

promptly.” About this movement Kr. Suresh Singh has said: “the movement of 1895 was an unfinished story. It was not a rising but the beginning of a widespread movement.”

Mundas rose against the dikus again under the leadership of Birsa. Birsa Raj could be achieved only in a world free from the Europeans, both officials and the missionaries. Birsa announced that Mundas were the owners of the soil. The British deprived them of their homeland by appointing the non-tribals as the landlords. Birsa exhorted Mundas to stop payment of rent to the landlords, for holding land rent free and for establishing Munda’s old rights on land.

According to Rev. Hoffman, there was “absolute fanaticism and hatred of the foreigners, whether Hindus or Europeans”. It is noteworthy that this movement was directed against those outsiders who formed the exploiting classes. It did not make these classes its target, which were outsiders but who belonged to the low classes, i.e. workers, artisans, weavers, carpenters, barbers, etc.

The movement took a violent form. It broke out as scheduled on Christmas eve (24 December 1899). It was directed against landlords, contractors, police and government officials. The tribals attacked the outsiders with traditional weapons i.e. arrows and burnt their houses. The occasion of the movement’s occurrence symbolised its hatred against Christians, Europeans and German missionaries. Birsaites shouted “chop the black, chop the white Christians” Soon the movement “had become general”. The Birsaite clashed with the timber contractors, killing one of them on 6 January 1900. They killed constables and attacked chaukidars on 5 January 1900. They had an encounter with the Deputy Commissioner on 6 January 1900. They killed a constable on 7 January 1900. Soon the government started counter-offensive. It launched beat and search operation from 13 January to 26 January 1900. On 28 January, two leading Munda sardars and 32 others surrendered following the attachment of their property. Police arrested Birsa on 3 February 1900. He suffered from illness, cholera and weakness. He died of chronic dysentery on 9 January 1900. The arrested Mundas were tried in a ruthless manner. A correspondent of a Calcutta newspaper reported on the trial of Mundas (Birsaites), “I have had a nigh of thirty years’ experience.... I have never known any proceedings more inconsistent with ideas of British justice than those which have been adopted in Munda riot cases.” The arrested Mundas were imprisoned and sentenced to death. The result of the trial weakened the Munda movement.

Impact of the Movement

The Birsa Munda movement had its impact on the government attitude towards their problems. The authorities felt the need to prepare the land records so that they could safeguard the tribal interests. The government conducted surveys and settlement operations for the tribals between 1902 and 1910 for achieving this purpose. It decided to abolish the compulsory begar system and passed the Tenancy Act of 1903 which recognised the Mundari Khuntkatti system. The Government also passed the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act in 1908.

Birsa became a legend for the coming generations. His movement inspired the future social, religious and political movements of tribals. These movements contributed to the growth of consciousness among the tribals. The Birsaite of the Thursday School and Thana Bhagats played an important role during the national movement in the 1920s. They fought against the British. They prayed for their expulsion in the following way :

“O Father Tana, pull out the enemies on the border,
Pull out the witches and spirits,
Pull out the British Government.”

Birsa’s name was evoked by the Indian National Congress and Forward Bloc to enlist the support of Birsaite in the national movement. Both Congress and Forward Bloc observed Birsa day in 1940.

Check Your Progress 5

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What was the land system of the Munda known as?

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2) Who was Munda and what was the impact of the movement led by him?

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15.5.6 Devi Movement in Gujarat (1922-23)

Devi movement was initially a social movement which took place in South Gujarat in 1922-23. It was a movement in which it was presumed that Devi Salabai was giving command to the tribals to abstain from eating flesh, drinking liquor, or toddy, to take bath daily, to use water rather than a leaf to clean up after defecation, to keep houses clean, to release or sell goats and chickens (which were kept for eating or sacrifice) and to boycott Parsi liquor dealers and landlords. Those who failed to obey these divine orders were believed to suffer misfortune or go mad or even die. By December 1922, the movement engulfed the entire area inhabited by the tribals along with Surat city. This movement made those classes its target which exploited the tribals and which were dealing with the liquor trade. These classes included Parsi money-lenders and landlords, who were also liquor sellers. The tribals decided to boycott the Parsis and the Muslims, not to work with anyone linked with the trade of liquor and to take bath when crossed by the shadow of a Parsi.

This movement was a religious movement in the beginning but towards the end of December 1922, it became the part of a non-cooperation movement. The tribals started to advocate the burning of foreign clothes and the boycott of government schools. In Jalapur taluqa, the tribals used Devi medium to force a Parsi toddy shop owner to pay a fine of Rs. 120 to a nationalist school. Gandhians had been working among the tribals of Bardoli taluqa and Mahal since 1921. Gandhi insisted upon the participation of the Adivasis in the national movement even before a Civil Disobedience was launched in their area. Until then, the Adivasis had shown no interest in the national movement. Kunravji Mehta, a Congress leader worked among the tribals and the tribals became familiar with the name of Gandhi. The tribals became far more sympathetic to the national movement. In the following years, the name of Gandhi got linked with the name of Devi through the Devi medium. After that the Congress leaders visited Bardoli and attended some Devi meetings. They suggested to the tribals that Devi's command could be reinforced by wearing Khadi. The Congress organised Kaliparaj Conference which was presided over by Vallabhabhai Patel on 21 January 1923. This conference was attended by about 20,000 adivasis. The conference resolved to advocate the cutting of toddy trees, closure of liquor shops and propagation of Khadi. In the following two decades, in 1920s, 1930-31 and 1942, many chaudhris of the tribals lived up to the commitment of giving support to the Gandhian movement and the Indian National Congress against the British rule.

15.5.7 Tribal Movement in Midnapur (1918-1924)

The Santhals, Bhumiji, and Kurmi (Mahto) tribals of Jungle Mahal in Midnapur revolted against the British way back in 1760. They rebelled against the East India Company for dispossessing the tribal chiefs of their land in 1760. The East India Company dispossessed chiefs, such as the Raja of Pachet, the zamindar of

Raipur and Ganga Narain. The British introduced permanent settlement and created a class of landlords. By the end of the 19th century, settlers from outside had encroached upon the tribal land. Like the tribals in other regions, here also they were exploited by the outsiders, landlords, money-lenders, traders and officers. There had developed a deep sense of hatred among the tribals against the dikus.

Between 1921 and 1923, the peasants of Jungle Mahals and neighbouring tracts in Bankura and Singhbhum rose against landlordism. This peasant movement was mainly led by the adivasis. It could be divided into two phases. The first phase coincided with the period of Non-Cooperation Movement (1921-22) and was marked by Congress participation. The second phase covered the period following Gandhi's arrest. Till 1921, there was no Congress organisation in the Jungle Mahals. Attempts had not yet been made to involve adivasis in the national movement. In the early 1921, C.R. Das and Satcowripathi Roy set out the task of involving the adivasis in the non-co-operation movement.

The Congress made the MZC (Midnapur Zamindari Company) its target. The MZC controlled by the European landlords were oppressive towards the adivasis. The adivasi workers working in these companies were paid paltry wages. They received 4 ais for carting wood up to a distance of 14 miles, 8 ais for 35 miles. Satcowripathi Roy successfully organised the strike of the workers. The MZC responded by using force to bring the adivasis back to work. A scuffle took place in which one 'loyal' adivasi was killed. Adivasis now threatened to loot the jungles. The MZC decided to move the court. Meanwhile the movement had developed from a strike into a general revolt against the MZC. The confrontation established the credibility of the Congress among the adivasis. The MZC was identified with the outsiders.

In July 1921, Sailajananda Sen led a demonstration of 200 Santhal women and blocked the path of paddy carts belonging to the local landlord. In May 1921, the Congress organised a meeting of 700 Santhals who resolved to abstain from drinking alcohol. The Congress leaders Sailajananda Sen and Murari Mohan Roy constantly advocated the boycott of foreign goods, especially clothes, in their speeches. In January 1922, the Congress initiated a campaign against foreign cloth. The Midnapur Mining Syndicate filed a petition accusing Congress of inciting Santhals to plunder the forests. In January 1922 the Congress campaign against foreign clothes triggered off raids on four haats. Foreign clothes were destroyed. These raids were marked by "Anonymous written messages which (were) circulated inciting Santhals to loot haats". Ranajit Guha has described such "anonymous messages" as "Insurgent Peasant Communication". The tribals showed their solidarity with the Congress. A crowd of 1000 people gathered outside the court where Congress workers were tried. The subdivisional officer set the bail on each of the accused at an exorbitant amount of Rs. 700. The crowd did not ask for reduction in bail money. It would have been tantamount to accepting the authority of the government. Instead, the tribals demanded immediate release of the prisoners. The superior officer wrote about the crowd: "These people are completely out of hand and require to be shown that there is still a government." But even as the agitation was in the process of getting generalised, Gandhi called off the non-cooperation movement after the incident of Chauri Chaura. The effect of the termination of non-cooperation was that the struggle of the Adivasis was isolated and deprived of wider outside links.

Between 15 and 21 May 1918, the Santhals in Mayurbhanj rose against what they perceived to be the threat for a forcible conscription to the Labour Corps bound for France. In the face of an uprising, the government had to abandon recruitment plan. The Santhals rose on 14 June 1918 against encapsulating various outstanding Santhal grievances such as chaukidari taxes, Forest Regulation Act etc. Having asserted their collective ability to defeat the government measures, the Santhals were now in a position to extend their insurgency against all other kinds of oppression of the government. In August 1922, the adivasis asserted their traditional rights to use the jungles and fish in the tanks. The movement was no more confined to the MZC; it moved out into the areas under Indian landlords.

15.5.8 Jitu Santhal's Movement in Malda (1924-32)

The Santhals of Malda district launched an anti-landlord movement in 1924-32. This movement got intertwined with the national movement. The leaders of the Swaraj Party supported the tenants in their struggle against the landlords. The leader of this movement Jitu Santhal or Jitu Chotka was drawn close to the Swarajists. He received instructions from the Swarajists to carry forward this movement. Although this movement was anti-diku, anti-colonial, it suffered from the tinge of Hindu communalism. The Swarajists worked among the tribals to bring them within the Hindu fold through the Suddhi (purification) and social reform. Swarajist Kashishwar Chakrabarty, popularly known as Sanyasi Baba toured Malda along with Jitu Santhal in 1925. Jitu Santhal was known as "his (Sanyasi Baba's) agent and preacher". They organized a "Sanyasi Dal" and defied police order in order to perform Kali puja. This was done with the purpose of giving new Hindu status to the tribals. They appealed to the tribals to give up tribal identity and promised to give them a new Hindu status. He exhorted the tribals to renounce the use of pigs and fowl. If they did so, the higher castes would accept water from them without any fear. They were exhorted to accept Jitu as their leader. There were even rumours that Jitu Raj had been accepted.

In 1928 Jitu instructed Santhals to loot the autumn crop. He promised the tribals that they would be accorded the status of tenants, not of the sharecroppers (adhiars) in the settlements. There were several instances of loot by the Santhals. On 3 December 1932 Jitu converted Santhals to Hinduism. He occupied the ruins of Adina Mosque with the purpose to convert it into a temple in the historic city of Padua. He called himself Gandhi. He declared the end of the British Raj and the establishment of his own government inside the occupied mosque. Jitu became a legend. His association with the Swarajists and the Hindustani movement earned him the sympathy of the nationalist Hindus of Malda town. The movement saw the mutual dependence between the Swarajists and Hindu communalists.

This movement was sparked off in the background of the deteriorating conditions of the Santhals. The movement was provoked by the sharp rise in the prices of essential items, forcible eviction of the tenants from the land by the landlords, increasing demand by the landlords for the allowances and rent along with other forms of exploitation and harassment. These problems increased manifold in the 1930s. A Santhal reported, "We must kill all hens, pigs and Musalmans."

15.5.9 Tribals and National Movement in Orissa (1921-36)

The movement covered the Orissa Division of Orissa and Bihar which was composed of Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Angul and Khondmals. The tribals along with the other peasants participated in the national movement in 1920s and 1930s. With the efforts of Satyavadi School which was established by Gopabandhu in 1909, the peasants and tribals of Orissa were drawn into the national movement. The peasants and tribals participated in non-cooperation movement. They implemented the "no-rent" aspect of the non-cooperation Movement. By February 1922, the peasants and tribals made inroads into the Jungles and violated the forest laws. The peasants decided to stop payment of the taxes. Those who paid taxes were socially boycotted. In May 1921, the authorities promulgated Section 144 in the area and arrested the tribals. This agitated the Bhuyan tribals and about 500 of them gheraoed the Superintendent's bungalow. They demanded release of the prisoners. The arrested were tried and imprisoned and the movement gradually subsided.

The Rampa rebellion of Alluri Sitaram, which was also directed against the forest rules inspired the tribals of Orissa. In 1920-30, the tribals of Gunpur launched a no-rent struggle. They violated the forest laws. The authorities found it difficult to control them. The Khonds also stopped paying rent. They attacked the police which came to arrest them. They refused to pay 'kists' (instalments) to the Maharaja of Jeypore. In the Koraput and Ganjam tracts, popular responses of the tribals to the Civil Disobedience movement grew out of

the oppression and exploitation of the tribals by the landlords, money-lenders and the faulty forest laws.

15.5.10 Tribal Movement in Assam (the then Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram)

The tribals of Assam, which consisted of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram during the colonial period resisted the move of the British to encroach upon their land. The British province which came to be known as Assam took its shape by 1873.

The British annexed the states of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam along with the independent tribal states of Khasi Hills in 1826. Part of Naga Hills were annexed in 1860s and Mizo hills were annexed in 1870s. The British wanted to transform the agriculture of Assam into tea estates meant exclusively for them. They also wanted to change the culture and traditions of tribals to suit their colonial interests. The tribals revolted against the British policies in 1828 and 1829 in rebellions led by Gundhar Kunwar and Rup Chand Kunwar. They were ruthlessly suppressed by the British. Peali Barphukan was executed for his role in the rebellion of 1828. The Khasis waged a war of Independence (1829-33). They were led by U. Tirot Singh. He was head of an alliance of petty republics of Khasis. They had waged guerrilla warfare against the British. The Khasi chiefs fought the British along with the people. But they had to submit ultimately.

The tribals of Assam were inspired by the revolt of 1857. In 1860, two major uprisings against the British took place — one in the Jaintia Hills and the other in the plains of Nowgong. These uprisings were caused by the rise in taxation. The Khasis rose against the increase in taxation under the leadership of their chiefs. They fought for their independence with bows and arrows. They did not surrender until 1863, when the army was sent to crush them. In Nowgong district, the tribals suffered in the cultivation of poppy crop in 1860. It was followed by the increase in revenue. They were also asked to pay increased taxes on betel nut and pan. The government officials used force to collect the enhanced taxes. The tribals of Nowgong, mainly in Phulanguri area, revolted against the British. They were inspired in their revolt by the tribals of Jaintia Hills who had revolted a little earlier.

Check Your Progress 5

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Why was the tribal movement in Gujarat (1922-23) known as "Devi Movement" and what were its characteristics?

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- 2) Discuss the role of the tribals in the Indian National movement.

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- 3) Which of the tribal movements suffered from the scourge of communalism?

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15.6 LET US SUM UP

Tribals formed part of the exploited social groups during the colonial period. Before the annexation and subsequent incorporation of tribal areas in the British territories, they had their social and economic systems. These systems were traditional in nature and satisfied the needs of the tribals. The social system of each community was headed by a chiefs. The affairs of a tribal community were managed by these chiefs. They had to follow customary laws and traditions for managing their affairs. They also enjoyed independence regarding the management of their affairs. The land and forests were main sources of their livelihood. The forests provided them with basic items which the tribals required for survival. The tribal communities were isolated from the non-tribals. This isolation, however, was not absolute.

Having occupied the tribal territories, the British introduced policies which aimed at surviving the colonial interests. These policies were detrimental to the interests of the tribals. They ended the isolation of tribal communities and connected them with the national economy. They disrupted their relatively self-sufficient communities. The British introduced the new legal system, which proved beyond the capacity of the tribals. They created a host of exploiting classes — landlords, contractors, traders, money-lenders, and government officials in the tribal areas. These oppressors did not belong to the tribal communities. They were considered outsiders (dikus) by the tribals. They collaborated with each other along with the British administration in exploitation of the tribals.

The tribals of different regions revolted against their oppressors. Their movements were anti-colonial in nature because they were directed against the colonial administration and the exploiting classes (dikus). The movements against the dikus were anti-colonial because these classes were part and creation of the colonial structure. The tribals revolted under the leadership of their respective chiefs. Their movements against the encroachments of forest and oppression of Indian exploiters often got linked or merged with the national movement. The tribals used traditional weapons, mainly bows and arrows and often turned violent. They killed their oppressors and burnt their Houses.

They were met with a heavy hand by the administration. They were declared criminals and anti-socials. Their property was confiscated. They were imprisoned and many of them were hanged. The British were even forced to enact some land legislation. These legislations could not change the conditions of the tribals. The tribal movements in India were mostly confined to regions. They could not assume the form of an all India movement. The tribals did not lag behind other social groups as regards participation in the anti-colonial movements.

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15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Section 15.2

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Section 15.3

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Section 15.4

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Section 15.5.1
- 2) Section 15.5.2
- 3) Section 15.5.3

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) Section 15.5.4
- 2) Section 15.5.5

Check Your Progress 6

- 1) Section 15.5.6
- 2) Sections 15.5.7, 15.5.8 and 15.5.9
- 3) Section 15.5.8