

8th – Tribals, Dikus and The Vision Of A Golden Age I



Tribal people live in communities or groups. They lead a life that is closely interwoven with, and depend on, nature. However, tribal people are careful never to overexploit nature. Tribal people own land collectively. India has a sizable tribal population. They are called adivasis or the original settlers. Towards the half of the medieval period in India: by around 1500, tribal societies had started forming kingdoms, some of which became powerful, like the Gond Kingdom of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. However, the vast majority of adivasis continued to live deep inside forests, practicing subsistence farming or herding. The mughals left them largely undisturbed, as long as the adivasis paid a nominal amount of money to show their allegiance to them.

Life of Tribal Groups: By the nineteenth century, tribal people in different parts of India were involved in a variety of activities.

Jhum Cultivators Some of them practiced jhum cultivation that is, shifting cultivation. This was done on small patches of land, mostly in forests. The cultivators cut the treetops to allow sunlight to reach the ground, and burnt the vegetation on the land to clear it for cultivation. They spread the ash from the firing. Which contained potash, to fertilize the soil? They used the axe to cut trees and the hoe to scratch the soil in order to prepare it for cultivation. They broadcast the seeds, that is, scattered the seeds on the field instead of ploughing the land and sowing the seeds. Once the crop was ready and harvested, they moved to another field. A field that had been cultivated once was left fallow for several years.

Hunters and Gatherers: In many regions tribal groups lived by hunting animals and gathering forest produce. They saw forests as essential for survival. The khonds were such a community living in the forest of Orissa. They regularly went out on collective hunts and then divided the meat amongst themselves. They ate fruits and roots collected from the forest and cooked food with the oil they extracted from the seeds of the Sal and mahua. They used many forest shrubs and herbs for medicinal purposes, and sold forest produce in the local markets. The local weavers and leather workers turned to the khonds when they needed supplies of kusum and palash flowers to color their clothes and leather. Tribal groups often needed to buy and sell in order to be able to get the goods that were not produced within the locality. This led to their dependence on traders and moneylenders. Traders came around with things for sale, and sold the goods at high prices. Moneylenders gave loans with which the tribal's met their cash needs, adding to what they earned. But the interest charged on the loans was usually very high. So far the tribal's, market and commerce often meant debt and poverty. They therefore came to see the moneylenders and trader as evil outsiders and the cause of their misery.

Herding Animal: Many tribal groups lived by herding and rearing animal. They were pastoralists who moved with their herds of cattle or sheep according to the seasons. When the grass in one place was exhausted, they moved to another area. The van gujjars of the Punjab hills and labadis of Andhra Pradesh were cattle herders.

Settled Cultivation: Many from within the tribal groups has begun settling down, and cultivating their fields in one place year after year, instead of moving from place to place. They began to use the plough, and gradually got rights over the land they lived on. Tribal groups like the Gonds and Santhals are more civilized than hunter- gatherers or shifting cultivators.



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Effects of Colonial Rule on Tribal Lives The lives of tribal groups changed during British rule. With the coming of the British, the largely peaceful life of the tribal people was disturbed. During the second half of the 18th century, most of the tribal areas in the North-East and in Central India were taken over by the British. This spread disaster for the adivasis.

Effects on Tribal Chiefs Under British rule, the functions and powers of the tribal chiefs changed considerably. They were allowed to keep their land titles over a cluster of villages and rent out lands, but they lost much of their administrative power and were forced to follow laws made by British officials in India. They also had to pay tribute to the British, and discipline the tribal groups on behalf of the British. They lost the authority they had earlier enjoyed amongst their people, and were unable to fulfill their traditional functions.

Effects on the Shifting Cultivators The adivasis had no concept of private ownership of land. Land was commonly owned by the members of a tribe, and the produce of the forests was there to use freely. The British were uncomfortable with groups who moved about and did not have a fixed home. They wanted tribal groups to settle down and become peasant cultivators. Settle peasants were easier to control and administer than people who were always on the move. The British also wanted a regular revenue source for the state. The British introduced the concept of land that could be owned by individual. With the eye on the fertile tribal lands, the British imposed entirely new revenue system on the tribal people. So they introduced land settlements- that is, they measured the land, defined the rights of each individual to that land, and fixed the revenue demand for the state. Some peasants were declared landowners, others tenants. The tribal people had no written proof of ownership of land. Even if they were allowed to retain that land, they had to pay exorbitant rates of revenues. Unable to pay the revenue, the adivasis often went to the newly arrived moneylender for a loan, usually they have high rate of interest. If they could not pay revenues or repay the loan, their land was taken away.

Forest laws and their impact: The British extended their control over all forest and declared that forest were state property. The British tried to establish a centralized system of administration over tribal areas, a system which took away the freedom of the adivasis. Some forests were classified as reserved forests for they produced timber which the British. In these forests people were not allowed to move freely, practice jhum cultivation, collect fruits, or hunt animals. But once the British stopped the tribal people from living inside forests, they faced a problem. Colonial officials came up with a solution. They decided that they would give jhum cultivators small patches of land in the forest and allow them to cultivate these on the conditions that those who lived in the villages would have to provide labor to the forest department and look after the forests.