



The problem with trade: The chota Nagpur region had ore, bauxite, coal and mica, minerals that were vital for British industries. It also had dense teak and Sal forests. Timber was needed by the rapid expanding of British Empire for buildings, for the railways, and for fuel. Forests were cut down like never before. The adivasis were compelled to grow cash crops like indigo and cotton. Tribal groups found that traders and money-lenders were coming into the forests more often, wanting to buy forest produce, offering cash loans, and asking them to work for wages. Considering the cases of the silk growers, in the eighteenth century, Indian silk was in demand in European markets. The fine quality of Indian silk was highly valued and exports from India increased rapidly. As the market expanded, east India company officials tried to encourage silk production to meet the growing demand. Hazaribagh, in present-day Jharkhand, was an area where the Santhals reared cocoons. The traders dealing in silk sent in their agents who gave loans to the tribal people and collected the cocoons. The growers were paid Rs 3 to 4 for a thousand cocoons. These were then exported to burdwan or Gaya where they were sold at five times the price. The middlemen- so called because they arranged deals between the exporters and silk growers- made huge profits. The silk growers earned very little. Tribal groups saw the market and the traders as their main enemies. Adivasis in North-East India lived on land that was important to the British. Though the North-East lay their link to Indo-China and Burma. The region also needed to be kept protected against possible stacks from China and Japan. As a result of these economic, social and religious issues, there was a series of tribal revolt across India between 1765 and 1847.

The tribal revolt of chota Nagpur The strongest resistance to British policies came from the adivasis communities of the Chota Nagpur region of Jharkhand. The major tribes were the Santhals, the Munda, the Kols and the Oraons.

The Kol rebellion The immediate cause of the Kol uprising was the oppression of the local tribal's by the non- adivasis thikadars (contractors) of farmers of rented lands. The Kols, the Munda's and the Oraonsa joined and burnet the houses of many diku (outsiders) landlords and killed many of them. The British suppressed the rebellion with great effort.

The Santhals rebellion: The Santhals occupied large area of present- day Jharkhand. When the Permanent settlement Act was passes in 1793, they found that the land was no longer there. It was now owned by the British, who gave it to the Santhals to cultivate, for which the Santhals had to pay the British revenue. Their positions were made worse by the activities of the moneylenders and traders who captured large areas of Santhals land. Finally in 1855, the Santhals rose in a major rebellion. The Santhals attacked and killed moneylenders, traders, police and agents of the company. But after the initial setback, the British sent in the army. Thousands of Santhals were killed, and the rebellion was crushed.

Tribal revolt in the North-East: Before the coming of the British, there were considerable interactions between the tribal and non-tribal populations in North-East India. But between 1826 and 1947, the situation changed radically. Assam was annexed by the British in 1826. To establish their control, the British followed the policy of divide and rule to ensure that there would be very little intermingling or contact between the tribals and the non-tribals. Most of the tribal areas in the North-East were declared 'excluded areas' as per the government of India act in



1835. Soon tribal groups in the North-East started resenting and then actively fought against the exploitive policies of the British.

The Assam Rebellion: In 1823, the British discovered tea plants growing in the forests of Assam. Soon they established tea estates there for producing tea on a commercial scale. Tea becomes one of the biggest earners of revenue for the East India Company, and the need was felt to gain total control over Assam. The British stayed on in Assam, and annexed it to their empire in India in 1838. The British then started tea plantations in Assam. For this, vast tracts of tribal land were acquired using the provisions of the Waste Land Regulation. The displaced tribal groups were largely employed as poorly paid tea picked in the tea estates. The tribal groups of Assam also had to pay very high revenue for the land they still held. As British exploitation increased the adivasis of Assam rose in a series of rebellions. In 1920, the British formed Assam province between tribal and non-tribal groups and thereby ensuring that they would not unite to fight against the British.

Birsa Munda and Munda Revolt: The revolt of the Mundas sought to reassert their right as the real owners of the soil and to expel middlemen and the British. In 1865, the British government passed the Forest Regulation Act, which gave them right to declare and forest land to be government. There was no provision for the traditional rights of the adivasis. As the adivasis continued their protest at such arbitrary acts, the British passed the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, which labeled all the adivasis groups that had rebelled against the British as criminals. The most important uprising of the Mundas was the one led by Birsa Munda.

Birsa was born in the mid-1870s in a family of Mundas- a tribal group. The son of a poor father, he grew up around of bohonda, grazing sheep, playing the flute, and dancing in the local akhara. Forced by poverty, his father had to move from place to place looking for works. As an adolescent, Birsa heard tales of the Munda uprising of the past and saw the sirdars (leaders) of the community urging the people to revolt. They talked of a golden age when the Munda had been free of the oppression of dikus, and said there would be a time when the ancestral right of the community would be restored. Birsa went to the local missionary school, and listened to the sermons of missionaries. There too he heard it said that if was possible for the munda's to attain the kingdom of heaven, and regain their lost rights. This would be possible if they became good Christian and gave up their "bad practices". Later Birsa also spent some time in the company of a prominent Vaishnav preacher. He wore the sacred thread, and began to value the importance of purity and piety. Birsa was seen roaming in the forests and villages of chottanagpur in Jharkhand. People said that he had miraculous powers- he could cure all diseases and multiply gain. Birsa himself declared that god has appointed him to save his people from trouble, free them from slavery of dikus (outsiders). Soon thousands began following Birsa, believing that he was bhagwan (god) and had come to solve all their problems. But his followers include other tribals of the region- Santhals and Oraons. All of them in different ways were unhappy with the changes they were experiencing and the problems they were facing under British rule. Birsa was deeply influenced by many of the ideas he came in touch with in his growing- up years. His movement was aimed at reforming tribal society. He urged the munda's to give up drinking liquor, clean their village, and stop



believing in witchcraft and sorcery. In 1895 Birsa urged his followers to recover their glorious past. He talked of a golden age in the past- a satyug (the age of truth) - when munda's lived a good life, constructed embankments, Tapped natural springs. Birsa also wanted people to once again work on their land, settle down and cultivate their fields. what worried British officials most was the political aim of the Birsa movement, for it wanted to drive out missionaries, moneylenders, Hindu landlords and the government and set up a Munda raj with Birsa at its head. The land policies of the British were destroying their traditional land system, Hindu landlords and moneylenders were taking over their land, and missionaries were criticizing their traditional culture. As the movement spread the British official decided to act. They arrested Birsa in 1895. Convicted him on charges of rioting and jailed him for two years. When Birsa was released in 1897 he began touring the villages to gather support. he used traditional symbols and language rouse people, urging them to destroy "ravana" (dikus and the Europeans) and establish kingdom under his leadership. They attacked police stations and churches, and raided the property of moneylenders and Zamindars. They raised the white flag as a symbol of Birsa Raj. In 1900 Birsa died of cholera and the movement faded out. However, the movement was significant in at least two ways. First- it forced the colonial government to introduce laws so that the land of the tribal's could not be easily taken over by Dikus. Second- it showed once again that the tribal people had the capacity to protest against injustice and express their anger against colonial rule.

The search for work: The plight of the tribal who had to go far away from their homes in search of work was even worse. Tribal's were recruited in large numbers to work the tea plantations of Assam and the coal mines of Jharkhand. They were recruited through contractor who paid them miserably low wages, and prevented them from returning home. They expressed their anger against colonial rule.

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