

TRIBAL COMMUNITIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PRE-COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL ERAS

Dr. J. MEKALA DEVI,

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, PG & RESEARCH DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY,
THE STANDARD FIREWORKS RAJARATNAM COLLEGE FOR WOMEN,
SIVAKASI - 626123.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the social, economic, and cultural conditions of tribal communities during the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods. In the pre-colonial era, tribal societies were largely autonomous, governed by their customs, and interacted minimally with external powers. Colonial rule, however, brought profound disruptions to their traditional way of life, including land dispossession, economic exploitation, and cultural marginalization. The imposition of British laws, forest policies, and revenue systems eroded tribal self-governance and livelihoods. Post-colonial India introduced legal protections and affirmative action for tribals, yet many challenges persist, including displacement, loss of land, and limited access to education and healthcare. This paper traces the historical trajectory of tribal struggles, highlighting the continuity and change in their socio-political status across these two eras.

KEYWORDS: Tribal communities, British colonialism, Land dispossession, Tribal self-governance, Economic exploitation.

The tribal communities of India, like other social groups, actively participated in the anti-colonial struggle. Tribal resistance movements can be categorized into two distinct types: the first involved uprisings against local oppressors, such as landlords, moneylenders, traders, contractors, government officials, and Christian missionaries; the second type consisted of movements that were connected to and eventually merged with the broader Indian National Movement. The former can be characterized as anti-colonial because they were directed against groups that had been empowered or created by British colonialism and collaborated with the colonial administration. These groups were perceived by the tribals as outsiders. Between 1778 and 1948, there were over 70 recorded tribal revolts, each expressing varying degrees of opposition to colonial rule.

TRIBALS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Rural India has been location to tribal gathering for centuries, where they lived in relative isolation, holding distinct socio-cultural and religious practices. Despite limited interaction with non-tribal groups, these communities preserved their traditional ways of life. Before British rule, the primary sources of livelihood for tribals were the land and forests. Forests were vital to their sustenance, providing essential resources such as firewood, fruits, flowers, honey, leaves, housing materials, edible nuts, and medicinal herbs. These resources met their daily needs for food, shelter, and shifting cultivation. Tribals also engaged in weaving, basket-making, fishing, hunting, and gathering. Although their tools and technologies were basic, they sufficed for survival. Bows and arrows served as the main tools for hunting and self-defense. Each tribal community was governed by chiefs and clan councils, which oversaw their social, religious, economic, and political affairs. Tribals would contribute a portion of their produce to the chiefs as a form of tribute.

THE IMPACT OF BRITISH POLICIES ON TRIBALS

The arrival of British colonial rule profoundly disrupted the traditional systems of tribal life. Tribal land ownership, which was once communal and free of landlords, was transformed by the British into a system of private landownership, creating a new class of Zamindars in tribal regions. This change relegated tribals to the status of tenants. Traditional clan councils were replaced by councils of Rajas and their followers, undermining the tribes' self-governance. The introduction of contractors into tribal areas brought further exploitation, as they, along with the Zamindars, imposed rent on the tribals' land. The adoption of a market economy and the development of a trader class led to increased economic hardships for the tribals. Forced to pay rent in cash, many tribals had to borrow from moneylenders, pushing them into debt. Their once self-sufficient economy became dependent on external forces, with severe consequences for their livelihoods. Additionally, the British replaced the customary tribal justice system with a formal legal system, which was unfamiliar and inaccessible to most tribals. Lacking education and financial resources, they could not navigate the new system effectively or afford legal representation. British authorities also

introduced government officials, clerks, and other outsiders into tribal regions, further eroding tribal autonomy. The new land and forest policies imposed by the British curtailed the tribals' customary rights to forest resources.

Tribal resistance to British encroachment was frequent, often resulting in violent confrontations. The British responded with a combination of military force and strategic reconciliation. They encouraged exploitation by allowing moneylenders, contractors, Zamindars, and government officials to prey on tribal lands and resources. The displacement of tribals, particularly in regions like Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal, triggered several uprisings between 1789 and 1808. Over time, the British recognized the limitations of using force and shifted toward policies aimed at pacifying the tribals. In 1919, during British rule, initial efforts were made to provide reservation opportunities for the depressed sections of society, including tribals. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar played a significant role in advocating for the rights of these marginalized groups. By 1923, the British government passed a resolution mandating that educational institutions could only receive government funding if they admitted children from depressed classes. A committee formed in 1928 in Bombay state categorized backward castes into three groups: Depressed Castes, Tribals, and Backward Castes.

POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

In post-independence India, tribal communities were officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes under the Indian Constitution. This classification strengthened their identity as distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups. Independent India sought to ensure social equality by providing equal opportunities for all citizens, including tribals, in the social, cultural, and economic spheres. However, the legacy of colonial policies still lingers, as the challenges of land dispossession, exploitation, and marginalization continue to impact tribal communities. The tribal resistance to colonial exploitation, which was labeled as rebellion by the British, remains a vital part of India's history, extending even into contemporary struggles for tribal rights in the context of globalization and identity preservation.

MEDIEVAL INDIA: TRIBAL RELATIONS AND MOVEMENTS

The historiography of the relationship between Adivasis and the broader Indian society is fragmented. Historical records mention alliances, such as those between the Ahom kings of the Brahmaputra Valley and the hill-dwelling Nagas. However, the relative autonomy and collective land ownership enjoyed by Adivasis was severely disrupted with the arrival of the Mughals in the early 16th century. Among the early rebellions against Mughal authority was the Bhil Rebellion of 1632.

SALIENT FEATURES OF TRIBAL MOVEMENTS

Tribal communities responded to exploitation and oppression through revolts and movements. They identified their oppressors as outsiders—landlords, moneylenders, contractors, missionaries, and European government officials. These movements were regionally focused, targeting those who exploited tribal lands and undermined their rights. These agitations can be seen as anti-colonial, as they opposed various forms of exploitation, such as land encroachment, eviction, the abolition of traditional legal and social customs, and rent hikes. The movements also called for the transfer of land to the tillers and the abolition of feudal and semi-feudal land ownership. Though these uprisings had social and religious dimensions, they primarily addressed the core issues of survival and existence. The movements were typically led by tribal chiefs, who rallied their people to fight against outside oppression.

Initially centered around social and religious grievances, these tribal movements gradually merged with the broader Indian national struggle, including the no-tax campaigns. The tribals fought with their traditional weapons, such as bows and arrows, and often resorted to violent methods, which included killing oppressors and burning their properties. Most of these movements were brutally suppressed by the colonial government. To counter the growing discontent, the British government introduced "protective administration" in tribal areas, deeming that regular laws could not be applied to them. The Scheduled District Act of 1874 and the Government of India Act of 1935 categorized tribal regions as excluded areas, limiting the influence of outside laws. Two major colonial policies caused significant tribal unrest and exploitation: the failure to recognize communal property rights under the Indian Forests Act of 1927, which made tribals illegal occupants of their own land, and the oppressive features of the 19th-century Land Acquisition Act. Without reforming these two laws, all discussions of tribal welfare were deemed futile.

POST-INDEPENDENCE CHALLENGES AND ECONOMIC REFORMS

In recent decades, tribal communities have increasingly raised their voices against injustice, with protests growing louder since the mid-1990s. Economic reforms introduced by the Indian government have further marginalized them, reducing tribals to the status of "targeted" people. Successive central governments, particularly since India's independence in 1947, largely neglected these communities. Under the leadership of the Nehru dynasty, economic mismanagement nearly bankrupted India by the late 1980s. In 1991, the government was forced to pledge its gold reserves to international lenders in exchange for financial aid, marking the beginning of economic liberalization. These economic policies—liberalization, privatization, and globalization—soon shifted in favor of the wealthy. The government began handing over natural resources, mineral mines, water bodies, and tribal land to corporate houses for industrial development and other projects. Unfortunately, most of these resources are located in remote tribal areas, disrupting the lives of indigenous people. Tribals, who had lived in harmony with their land for generations, found themselves displaced, losing their livelihoods, and forced into exploitative labor for wealthy outsiders. The displacement shattered their community-based cooperative living, forcing many to migrate to urban areas where they faced further exploitation.

Tribal lands were often illegally taken with the complicity of corrupt land record bureaucrats, leaving tribals powerless. Moneylenders further worsened their situation by offering loans during crises, only to entrap them in deeper debt later. During British colonial rule, tribal areas were officially classified as "excluded," and since independence, they have been unofficially neglected by successive governments. The colonial interest in tribal areas was primarily focused on extracting mineral and natural resources, a trend that has continued under the Indian government. Forest officials, who were the face of the government before 1947, remain in control of tribal lands even today. Whenever tribals resisted the British, it was to protect their land and livelihoods—today, they are fighting the same battle against modern forms of exploitation.

SOCIAL IMPACT OF PRE AND POST-COLONIAL POLICIES ON TRIBES

The pre- and post-colonial states reshaped the social life and relationships of tribal communities through various policies, including the Government of India Act, constitutional reforms, and other legislative measures. These policies, particularly the British system of centralized administration, had significant social impacts on tribal communities, leading to the disruption of their age-old connection with land and forests. The first major impact of colonial rule was the isolation and segregation of tribes, which exposed them to exploitation by non-tribal groups such as moneylenders and contractors. This isolation served the British rulers by allowing them to exploit natural resources, while much of the general population remained unaware or unconcerned about the development (or lack thereof) in tribal areas. Unlike traditional Indian society, the British administrative system operated largely outside the caste system and introduced new ways of governing.

Under British rule, tribal communities were, for the first time, systematically separated from the rest of society. Colonial administrators implemented policies of segregation, isolating tribes from the broader population. These colonial policies were based on views of tribal people as culturally backward, though some argue that the "backwardness" of tribal communities resulted from their subjugation by British authorities. The colonial encounter introduced new structures and institutions into tribal life, reshaping social groupings in ways that were previously unfamiliar to these communities.

TRIBAL STRUGGLES

Throughout colonial history, tribal communities repeatedly rose in rebellion. The first significant uprising took place in Bihar in 1772, followed by numerous other revolts across regions such as Andhra Pradesh, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Assam, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland. These revolts were often responses to oppressive policies, exploitation, and encroachments on tribal land and rights.

TRIBAL STRUGGLES AFTER INDEPENDENCE

The post-independence tribal struggles can be categorized into three main types:

STRUGGLES DUE TO EXTERNAL EXPLOITATION: These movements arose in response to continued exploitation by non-tribal groups, such as moneylenders, landlords, and traders, who took advantage of tribal communities.

STRUGGLES DUE TO ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION: Many tribal communities fought against the economic marginalization and poverty they faced, as their traditional ways of life were disrupted, and they struggled to access resources and opportunities.

SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS: Some tribal groups sought greater autonomy or even secession, driven by the desire to preserve their distinct identity and culture in the face of pressures from both external and internal forces.

Each of these struggles reflects the broader challenges faced by tribal communities as they navigated the complex legacies of colonialism and post-colonial development policies.