
UNIT 32 TRIBAL SOCIETY AND COLONIAL ECONOMY

Structure

- 32.1 Introduction
- 32.2 Defining the Pre-Colonial Tribal Economy
- 32.3 Nature and Patterns of Colonial Domination in Tribal India
- 32.4 Tribal Economies in State Owned Agricultural and Forest Lands
- 32.5 The Colonial Impact and Tribal Response
 - 32.5.1 From Producers to Labourers
 - 32.5.2 Modes of Protest and Identity Formation
- 32.6 Summary
- 32.7 Exercises
- 32.8 Suggested Readings

32.1 INTRODUCTION

Marshall Sahlins, the famous American anthropologist, once called the tribal society, which he said was characterised by hunting and gathering, as “the original affluent society” or the society of plenty. By this he meant that the people practising this form of subsistence could live a prosperous lifestyle from the bounty of nature and accumulate wealth in the form of gifts, grains and livestock to build and expand their economies and societies. This image has also been replicated in Indian historiography, which has often used the trope of happy, prosperous, stable and harmonious tribal society in pre-colonial India in its work. In this broad historiographical context, the study of the encounter of the tribal society with the colonial economy is riddled with examples of devastation and destitution of tribal people with the advent of the British. Generally speaking, there has also been a tendency to regard colonialism as both, an economic and ecological watershed in the history of tribal economies. While this is true at a very general level, historians differ on the nature of the colonial impact.

In this Unit we discuss the nature and different dimensions of the colonial impact on the tribal economy. Though the term ‘tribal’ is a highly contested one, in this Unit it is used to refer to people who were dependent, for a large measure, on the forest economy, for their subsistence from the early 19th century onwards. This means that even if they possessed land and were engaged in cultivation, a large part of their seasonal income was from forests either in terms of the sale of non-timber forest produce, or labour for the forest department. Many of these tribal people lived inside or on the fringes of the forest and their dependence on forests is also a result of a long term historical process which we consider in this Unit.

32.2 DEFINING THE PRE-COLONIAL TRIBAL ECONOMY

It has often been assumed that tribal people and their societies lived in insulated and secluded enclaves before the advent of the British in India. This means that their economies and culture was relatively untouched by outside markets and

therefore were relatively closed, egalitarian and prosperous communities. These economies were free of exploitation because they had no private property and need rather than the profit motive necessitated their relationships of exchange. In one sense the tribal economy was characterised as being quite the opposite of peasant agriculture under the colonial rule where the peasants held individual titles to land, depended mostly on settled cultivation for their livelihoods and also sold a good part of their produce in the commercial market. But the historical evidence from many of the areas show that such a notion of the tribal economy in the anthropological writings of the 1930s was steeped in ecological romanticism.

In pre-colonial central and northern India one of the main factors that had an impact on both identity and subsistence was the military conflict between ruling elite in both the Maratha and Mughal periods. The chieftain societies of different tribes like the Gonds or the Khakkars or Jats also participated in these conflicts. At the same time the tribals who were peasants and or gatherers in the forests were forced to support their own chieftains and therefore formed bands in forests and formed an important part of the chieftains mercenary army. In this context it is important to remember that the term “tribes” has been used very loosely for communities which existed in a “pre-class society”. The definition of tribes as “a pre-class society was implied in the work of D.D. Kosambi *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* who stated that band and hunting gathering societies were characterised by relations that were determined by birth and marriage and not necessarily economic activity. However Kosambi was also quick to point out that these relations were open-ended and changed according the situation. In keeping with this definition many communities that were later described as peasants by Britishers were termed tribes by the accounts of the medieval period. Chetan Singh’s early article (1988) on the role of tribal chieftains in Mughal administration clearly identified warrior and ruling classes of indigenous kingdoms as superior tribal linkages. Amongst these were the Jats, the Khakhars, Baluchis and Afghans. In this vein, the chief feature of their society was not only their blood and kinship line of descent but also their pastoral and non-sedentary occupational characteristics. In a later article (1995) Singh is however more categorical about the mention of hunters and gatherers as primitive people. For example he writes of their references in Abul Fazl’s *Akbarnama* where tribal people were described as ‘men who go naked living in the wilds, and subsist by their bows and arrows and the game they kill’. He also argues that the medieval texts show that in the case of tribals like the Gonds ‘that people of India despise them and regard them outside the pale of their realm and religion’. Such an identification of tribals as outside the realm of the sedentary cultivation was contingent upon the development of a system of land administration which was an important characteristic of the Mughal 16th and 17th centuries and British regimes of the 19th century. Before that the British perceptions of tribes were conditioned by their own contingencies. For example the Anglo-Maratha conflicts of the 18th century led to descriptions of the Gond chieftains as the ‘lords of the rugged hills’ and their subjects as people who were prone to anarchic behaviour and ‘habitual depredations’. Some of these depredations were described as ‘ravages of lawless tribes’ who assisted the errant and ‘chaotic’ rulers. We see similar perceptions of the tribes on the northeast frontiers of the British Rule. Writing about the eastern Naga tribes in the early 19th century Captain Michelle (1826) said that the Nagas carried on the most profitable trade in slaves and suppressed all *ryots* in their

neighbourhood. The greed of gain caused endless feuds between villages and tribes. Similarly K.S Singh's account of the Jharkhand tribes also shows the wide ranging changes within the tribal society and economy in the pre-colonial period. There was a spate of migrations and cultural influences in the early medieval period and this resulted in several conflicts between the tribal and non-tribal people in the region. Similar trends were also noticed in Orissa where the migrations by caste Hindu communities led to an increase in their conflict with tribal people. However, in both these areas it is also mentioned in studies of pre-colonial tribal polities that the tribals enjoyed a special place within the larger structure of governance.

On the economic front, tribal polities were, open-ended in that they had relationships with the larger political economy. Perhaps the most striking example of this is from Jharkhand where *zamindars* tied up with traders from Bengal for sale of lac and silk cocoons, one of the main forest produces of the time. There were state-owned forests which were the property of the *zamindars* and where the tribals gave free labour in return for their rights to forests. K.S. Singh's account of the Chhotanagpur Raj shows that the role of the tribal *zamindars* and rajas in ordering and structuring the economy was an important one. Even while the tribal aristocracy gave the local residents the rights to use the forest for their needs, the commercial appropriation of forestlands continued and strengthened the hold of the traders over non-timber forest produce.

In this context the examples that I give below show how land grants and rights and the nature of forest cover influenced forest rights and use patterns in the late pre-colonial and early colonial period. In *zamindari* and *jagirdari* tracts sub-feudation formed the basis of relative autonomy of control over forest and land resources by local institutions like tribal *panchayats* or headmen. However there were emerging relations of dependence between the local traders and tribal gatherers of forest produce. The value chains that emerged out of Hunter's descriptions (*Statistical Account of Bengal*, volume xvi-xvii of forest for Singhbhum, Manbhum and Hazaribagh districts) show that these were of three kinds. First, there was the use of the non-timber forest produce for household purposes. The jungles of the Chhotanagpur plateau were dominated by the sal, asan, palas, mhowa and amla trees, of which sal was the most prominent specie. The main produce in mid 19th century was recorded as lac, silk, bee wax, dhaura or sal resin, leaves and roots. Of these flowers, leaves and roots were also used to supplement the diet of marginal and small cultivators. They also proved to be the sole food that people had in times of famine. Apart from this mhowa was used for making toddy and for ritualistic purposes. Both commercially and culturally important trees and produce were often owned by the *zamindar* and the most prominent amongst these was the mhowa tree. Mhowa flowers were used by tribal people to make their liquor and also in marriage and other ceremonies. The *zamindar* collected rent for collection of mhowa seeds and flowers from these trees even if they stood on the lands of the tribal farmers. In Hazaribagh 2 or 3 small mhowa trees came for a rupee where as in Manbhum one large tree cost the same amount of rent. The nature of rent in Manbhum depended on the kind of trees and ranged from 4 *annas* to 2 or 3 rupees per tree. The saved crop could also vary much in price and fetched from 2 to 8 maunds of mhowa per rupee, but the exchange with the mahajans was mostly in kind. They usually gave 3-4 *ser* of rice and some salt for one maund of mhowa. The *mahajani* system was also dominant in the trading

of lac and silk cocoons, and the profits in this trading were quite high even though the propagation of their cocoons required a high degree of knowledge and competence. The tussar silk cocoon of Hazaribagh, Manbhum and Lohardaga was reared on the asan tree and its eggs were collected from the jungle and hatched either in the growers house or in specially erected huts in the jungle. The system of taxes on the silk propagators differed from region to region. In Manbhum every silk cocoon rearer paid Rs. 2 or 3 to the landlord. It is estimated that the landlord collected 300 pounds a year from such rent and the annual estimated produce was about 750 maunds from 1000 acres of land. In Lohardaga, the silk growers paid three types of taxes. In Hazaribagh on the other hand the silk growers paid 6-8 *annas* to the *zamindar* and the area on which silk was reared was not more than 30 square miles with not more than 5 to 6 asan trees in an acre. This system of rent ensured that the tribals became dependent of traders for advance payments so that they could pay their rents. In Hazaribagh the middlemen supported the silk growers who were mostly Santhals, Kurmis or Goalas while they were watching the cocoons in the forest. Consequently the growers were obliged to sell their cocoons to these middlemen at abysmally low rates. The value addition to the cocoons was mostly at the level of small towns and urban cities. There was hardly any export of silk cloth from the region and most of the weavers sold their cloth in urban areas or in local *haats* (periodic markets) through the *mahajans*. (Tirthankar Roy, 1999)

As in the case of forests, the domination of tribal aristocracy over the peasants continued even in the case of agriculture. For example in the Ahom kingdoms of Assam the Raja considered plough cultivation as the path to progress and facilitated the immigration of Tai-Ahoms who used the plough as opposed to the *jhum* cultivation (shifting cultivation; an age old traditional practice based on 'slash and burn' method of cultivation) of the Chutiya and Kachari tribes. But the structure of taxation was different, instead of monetary taxes the tribals gave slave labour to their rulers. Much of this labour was used to cultivate 'good land' and *kheda* operation (literally pens or stockades; an enclosure constructed to capture wild elephants for domestication) for elephant capture. These tribals did not plough their lands, instead they had developed an indigenous bunding technology, and used hoe to cultivate local coarse rice. But the system of land management and cultivation was such that it required the maintenance of community assets. (Amalendu Guha, 1987) But not all tribals practised *jhum* and some like the Jaintia practised a combination of *jhum* and plough cultivation depending on whether they lived on marginal areas or not. Though there are many examples of such land revenue extraction from Northeast India, the forms of tribal landholdings varied from one region to the other. An example of this can be seen in the constitution of agricultural co-operatives and guilds in Cachar where tribals and non-tribals co-operated with each other in production processes and the land was under the control of these guilds. The rest of the land, not under these guilds belonged to the king and the state and was given out as land grants to the tribal and non-tribal aristocracy. (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1987)

In the eastern region of Orissa the situation was slightly different where the ex-tribal Chieftains and Rajas of areas like Bonai and Keonjhar had brought caste Hindu cultivators to settle on better lands. The immigrants were taxed more heavily than the tribal people because tribals were considered the original inhabitants of the region. (L.K. Mahapatra, 1987) The situation was similar in

the territories of the Bhonsale Raja in Nagpur State where the Gonds were not tenants or people with land grants like the Brahmins and other castes. They were people who cultivated land at the pleasure of their chieftain as is reflected in the piece of iron given to him every year. Access to land and forest was thus, a result of a privilege granted in return for assistance whenever the ruler required it. Serving in the Gond Rajah's army or providing labour as farm or domestic servants were forms of this assistance. (Archana Prasad, 1999) In the neighbouring areas of the Kondmals, the Konds lived in the highlands while the Oriyas lived in the plains. But the Oriya Rajas left the Konds to their own devices and Kond institutions and resource use patterns co-existed with Oriya ones. (F.G. Bailey, 1960)

What is clear from the examples that I have related above is the fact that the tribal economy was not *closed* nor was it *isolated* from the rest of the pre-colonial political economy in almost all regions of the country. The idea that it was prosperous and egalitarian is also not true, rather the tribal economies of the pre-colonial era were deeply differentiated and depended on the expropriation of the labour of poor tribals for their labour. This differentiation was a result of waves of immigration and consolidation of fiefdoms from the late ancient and early medieval period onwards. The agro-pastoral systems that emerged were subjected to wide-ranging changes where tribal people were continuously marginalised into lands with low productivity. The impact of this process was however conditioned by a certain amount of autonomy for local institutions as well as a mobility between different eco-zones. These two crucial factors allowed the tribal people survive the turmoil of the late pre-colonial period. This autonomy and mobility was constrained in the colonial period.

32.3 NATURE AND PATTERNS OF COLONIAL DOMINATION IN TRIBAL INDIA

Given the vast expanse of the Indian subcontinent, the penetration and impact of colonialism variegated in nature. The first area to face British annexation was undivided Bengal and this was followed by Madras, Punjab, Assam and the Central Provinces. Different land tenures were introduced in these areas, and these tenure systems also had a differential impact on rights to forests and other common lands. For most part the British government declared most common resources and lands to be under the exclusive ownership of the state especially with the coming of the Indian Forest Act 1865. Similarly the late 19th century saw the enactment of the Private Forests Acts and Rules in several states where forests lay in *zamindari* estates. In these the nature of forest rights granted to tribal people was different and its implication for the integration of tribal economies into the colonial system was different from one where the government had direct control over land and natural resources. These differences led to diverse types of impacts on and protests from tribal people. They also had a variegated impact on the identity politics of the regions. In this Section we consider some of the processes and impacts from different regions of the country.

Permanent Settlement and the Tribal Economy

Many of the tribals of Eastern and Central India resided in the princely and zamindari estates in the period preceding the annexation of these areas by the British. The first permanent settlement of *zaminidaris* in tribal areas was done

in 1793 after the annexation of Bengal. Of the permanent settlement areas, Midnapur, Santhal Parganas and Chhotanagpur plateau had the largest tribal populations. Apart from this there were the areas of Orissa where a bulk of the *zamindaris* and princely states were settled after annexation in 1803. Most of these *zamindaris* were under forests that were slated for land reclamation in the early 19th century after the establishment of the Company Raj. (K. Sivaramakrishnan, 1999) Ranchi, Manbhum and Singhbhum experiencing vigorous expansion in the *zamindari* areas where as Hazaribagh and Palamu had reached a stagnation point. It is significant to note that the only British territories lay in the districts of Hazaribagh and Palamu and most of the forest and mineral wealth of these regions was in private hands. (P.P. Mohapatra, 1990) Two types of trends could be noted within the *zamindari* systems of these areas. On the one hand there were the landlord villages where the *zamindar* enjoyed all rights over wastelands and jungles, and on the other hand there were the *khutkutti* villages, or villages where agricultural lands were held jointly by the founders of the villages. These founders paid nominal tributes to the *zamindars* and they also enjoyed exclusive rights over jungles and wastelands. There was also another system of rights over jungles called *Korkar* where ordinary rent paying tenants also had some customary usufruct rights in forests and the exclusive rights to reclaim wastelands. Thus the forests, on which a major portion of the tribal subsistence was dependent by the early 19th century, were in private hands with 79% of the village commons being under private control in undivided Bengal. Similar trends were also found in other areas of Permanent Settlements like Orissa. Here 66,000 square miles was permanently settled and 5000 square miles was directly under British control. Here tribals were largely concentrated in the States of Jeypore, Bonai, and Keonjhar. Some of the only major tribal areas under British control were the Kondmals and Sambalpur after the 1830s. But unlike Jharkhand most of these areas were under a single Oriya or tribal Raja who did not follow a system of sub-feudation. Rather they gave land grants to a number of Kshatriya and Brahmin people and the tribals were mostly landless labours in these princely states. With the coming of the British these states were reduced to status of *zamindaris* that owed a tribute or had to pay rent to the British. The settlement procedures were prescribed by the Britishers and created a land market in the tribal *zamindaris*. There was thus the emergence of a rich peasant class of Bengalis who exploited the tribal people for labour. (Biswamoy Pati, 1993) Similar patterns were also found in the tribal *zamindaris* and princely states of Bastar, Central Provinces and Western India. (Nandini Sundar, 1997, Sumit Guha, 1999)

Land settlements were only one mode of resource control in tribal *zamindaris*, the second was management of forests and nonarable land. Tribal *zamindaris* were mostly situated on foothills or highlands of thickly forested areas. While it is true that a large portion of this area was demarcated for cultivation before the mid-19th century, most of the jungles were privately controlled in most of these regions. This meant that even while the British government prescribed the rules by which forests were to be worked, the primary benefit from these forests accrued to the *zamindars*. In some cases the value of these forests was quite high and the produce such as honey, silk, lac, and timber had the potential of yielding good revenue. The exploitation and trade in forest resources increased rapidly especially after the coming of the Railways. In Chhotanagpur for example Hunter records that trade of sal timber was controlled by the local

mahajans who sold them to the forest department for a large profit. Officials often noted that the Government derived virtually no benefit from the forest sector, the major portion of which was appropriated by the *mahajan* who only paid a small royalty to the *zamindar* for the use of his land.

But it was in the case of non-timber forest produce that the tribals were most exploited. In Manbhum middlemen paid Santhals, Bhumijis, Kharias, Paharias and other lower caste people advances to rear cocoons. These cocoons were sold at the price of 213 cocoons to a rupee and were then exported to Bengal. In 1871 the silk exports were estimated at 10,000 pounds. In Lohardaga district the cocoons were sold to the traders for Rs. 5 to 7 per maund and exported to Mirzapur, Benaras, and Patna. In Hazaribagh the middlemen support the silk growers who are mostly Santhals, Kurmis or Goalas while they were watching the cocoons in the forest. Consequently the growers were obliged to sell their cocoons to these middlemen at the rate of Rs. 5 or 6 for 1680 cocoons. The *baniyas* in turn sold these cocoons to the *mahajans* for Rs 5 for 1330 cocoons. Then these cocoons were exported to Burdwan or Gaya at the price of Rs. 15 per 1000, if the cocoons were sold to the Tanti *baniyas* then the rate was Rs. 5 for 80 cocoons. The Tanti *baniyas* are basically weavers who take out the thread from the cocoons and weave them into small pieces of silk that they sold to the *mahajans* at Rs. 8 and 8 *annas*. The value addition to the cocoons was mostly at the level of small towns and urban cities. There was hardly any export of silk cloth from the region and most of the weavers sold their cloth in urban areas or in local *haats* through the *mahajans*. (Tirthankar Roy, 1999) In the case of lac the system was a little different as the lac was not only collected from Jharkhand but also brought from the Central Provinces to Ranchi (till the late 19th century) by the *mahajans*. It was then processed in the Ranchi Lac Factory before stick lac was exported out of the region. But whatever the variations in the system of exchange and value chains, the *mahajani* system occupied a central position in the tribal areas of colonial Bihar and Orissa. Further it was not only confined to the non-timber forest produce trade, but was also evident in agriculture and other spheres of life. The sharp contradictions and differentiation between the local tribals and outsiders underlined the class contradictions in the permanent settlement regions. (Prabhu Mohapatra, 1990 K.S. Singh, 1985) This conflict took the form of various uprisings that have also been well documented in the past by several scholars. (K.S. Singh, 1985, Susan Devalle, 1992)

Apart from the growing impoverishment of tribal people there was one other feature of the colonial *zamindari* economy vis-à-vis its relationship with the Empire. The British often used the forests as a site of exercising their power and control. In forestry too, attempts were made to acquire private forests and enact a Private Forest Bill but these attempts failed quite badly. At best the *zamindari* forests could be administered under Section 38 of the Indian Forest Act. (B.B. Sinha, 1979) In Central Provinces too, Rules were framed for controlling private forests and Forest mahals were constituted for doing this. All private forests were to ban shifting cultivation and carry out felling in accordance with the Indian Forest Act. In Bengal too, the 1890s saw the direct control of the forest tracts in the permanent settlement areas where the British forest department started working the forests instead of giving them on contract. The process of reservation to be followed was the same as that of government forest tracts and shifting cultivation was to be banned. By the turn of the century, the British Forest Department had also imposed its writ over princely states

like Bastar. (K. Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, Nandini Sundar, 1997) These measures cut off the only source of subsistence for the poor tribal people, many of whom had migrated from government forests into the zamindari areas because the zamindars allowed them to do shifting cultivation. Thus by the 20th century the difference between Government owned lands and the permanent settlement areas declined considerably and the impact of this on tribal life and subsistence was disastrous.

32.4 TRIBAL ECONOMIES IN STATE OWNED AGRICULTURAL AND FOREST LANDS

Perhaps there is no better example than the Central Provinces for describing the sorts of changes that affected the tribal areas on agricultural and forest lands that were directly controlled by the British Government. The annexation of the State of Nagpur in 1854 saw direct intervention in the agrarian system by the colonial regime. This meant that the principals behind both settlements and forest rights were guided by concerns of revenue maximisation and administrative convenience. The debate on the settlement question in the 1830s reviewed the permanent settlement experience of Bengal and Orissa and decided that Munro's *ryotwari* settlements were more appropriate. The thirty-year settlement was thus seen as a good substitute for Permanent Settlement. It would induce a feeling of security amongst proprietors without giving them a permanent control over their holdings. Thus individual land rights were given to cultivators whose revenue was assessed every 3 years so that the government would be able to get the maximum revenue for itself. The rights of local households over grazing and forests lands were also defined by the land settlements that initially based themselves on Maratha land records. This naturally meant that most tribal people with the exception of Gonds hardly got any land or forest rights since their rights were never recorded in the late pre-colonial times. Coupled with this, the state declared itself the owner of all forests under the Indian Forest Act 1865 and made a stringent classification of forestlands under the Indian Forest Act 1878.

In this context there were broadly three processes of colonial expansion that impacted on the tribal people. The first was the process of reclamation of lands for cultivation that led to severe land alienation amongst the tribal people of the Central Provinces and Kondmals of Orissa. However patterns differed in both these areas. In the Central Provinces tribal people were pushed into more and more marginal lands. This had a direct impact on the status of the aboriginal tenants in the districts like Chanda, Mandla and Bhandara where 80% of the Gond tenants were classed as peasants with some form of debt or the other. One third were categorised as very poor where as only 20 per cent of the Gond peasants were free from debts. The Baigas had no land at all and faced indebtedness and hunger. The settlements of the 1920s had shown that the average size of tribal holdings was declining more and more. This made the tribals more and more dependent on labour, as they could not pursue any other occupations because they were 'educationally and politically backward'. (W.V. Grigson, 1944) By the first quarter of the 20th century the government was forced to enact the Central Provinces Tenancy Act to prevent the alienation of tribal lands. In the Kondmals the situation was different as shortages in land led to migration of Konds in order to search for labour to meet their daily

needs. Many of them went of to work in mines, tea gardens and other places. (Bailey, 1960)

The second major factor influencing the patterns of tribal livelihood was the complete ban on shifting cultivation in government forests. It is well known that the poorest tribal people depended on different forms of shifting cultivation for a large part of their nutritional needs. But with the government take over of forests and the ban over this form of cultivation the tribals were once again forced to depend on labour for their livelihood. In some areas like the Central Provinces, they migrated to *zamindari* areas where they were allowed to practise this cultivation form till the late 19th century. (Archana Prasad, 1998) However it is important to remember that this ban was dictated by the strategic needs of the colonial Empire. Thus in Assam the shifting cultivators in the border areas were not disturbed. However in the inland area there were tribals who provided important labour opportunities to the forest department, the *taungya* system was introduced where tribals were allowed to practise *jhum* in a limited way. But this modified the *jhum* cycle irreparably and led to the further pauperisation of tribal people. (Bela Malik, 2002) At a different level the labour shortages due to migration also led to the colonists giving some limited rights for shifting cultivation in Central India. (Archana Prasad, 1998)

The third major process affecting tribal economies was the penetration of industrial capitalism in forested areas. Here the focus was not only on felling of timber but more importantly on the non-timber forest produce which formed an important supplementary part of tribal income. The rise in the world demand for minor forest produce led to the influx of European capital into forested areas and changed the very nature of production relations. The case studies of lac and tan show that the supply of raw materials to the artisans got curtailed because tribals started selling forest produce to the foreign firms. This was especially the case in the case of lac and dyes in Central India. The collection of lac sticks and flowers for dyeing was an important seasonal occupation where tribals had established links with artisans. The interference of the managing agencies in these sectors not only weakened this link but also facilitated the incorporation of local production processes in a colonial division of labour. Scientific experiments were carried out to either test the social and technical validity of local knowledge and techniques (as in the case of iron) or to justify the colonial domination of markets (as in the case of dyes). This was accompanied by the lack of initiative to invest in the upgradation of local techniques. The incorporation of local methods of extraction of minor forest produce was conditioned by the logic of colonial industrial capitalism. Tribal and artisan communities were now providing cheap labour and raw materials to the European industry. (Archana Prasad, 2002) The process of channelling this labour was systematised through the creation of forest villages in the late 19th century. These developments laid the basis for the underdevelopment of the productive forces in the tribal economies.

32.5 THE COLONIAL IMPACT AND TRIBAL RESPONSE

By the 1940s it was sufficiently clear that tribals in most parts of the country had lost their access and control over all productive resources [land and forests] and village-based infrastructure that could support their survival. The growing

landlessness of tribal people coupled with their lack of access to forest resources led to the complete breakdown of the tribal production system and the incorporation of the tribal economy into the larger colonial and capitalist economy. This incorporation was mainly in terms of different forms of labour that naturally incorporated the local knowledge and techniques in harnessing both land and forest resources. The second major impact of the colonial interventions was on identity formation and the nature of tribal polity. In this Section we consider both these processes.

32.5.1 From Producers to Labourers

The changing forms of labour employment and the swelling of the tribal labour force was something that was common to both permanent settlement and government owned areas. However the forms of labour varied from region to region. In the *zamindari* areas of Chhotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Orissa migration became a way of life. The loss of land coupled with the lack of income or exploitation induced migration to mining areas as well as tea gardens in Assam. In upper Assam, labour was procured through an indentured system for the tea gardens whereby labour was recruited from Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Bihar and eastern United Provinces often by deceptive and coercive methods involving contractors. Where available without the system, it was later drawn into the higher-paying petroleum and coal operations. (Bela Malik, 2002, Prabhu Prasad Mohapatra, 1985)

In other areas where such migration did not exist, tribals worked in the forest department and on the fields of caste-Hindu peasants. However the seasonal nature of on farm labour ensured that most of the tribals were forced to work primarily for the forest department in order to earn their livelihood. For example in the Central Provinces the formation of forest villages in the late 19th century were aimed at providing a continuous flow of labour to the forest department. The first forest village regulations were issued in 1890. Under these laws forest villages could be established within the limits of any 'reserved' forest with the prior consent of the Conservator. The District Commissioner and the Divisional Forest Officer (D.F.O) would decide their location. Forest villages were to be designed solely for the permanent supply of labour and were not to be made with the intention of extension of cultivation. Lastly forest villages were to be made up of those communities that were 'habituated to the extraction of forest produce'. In areas where there were managing agencies for the extraction of non-timber forest produce the tribals were employed as labourers to produce lac and silk by cheap and efficient methods. In most cases local techniques for such propagation were integrated into these colonial systems of extraction. (Archana Prasad, 1998)

Similar processes were also seen in Assam where the *taungya* system was in force. Under this system, the tribals were forced to plant seedlings of teak on forest lands where *jhum* was done previously. The tribals would be allowed to sow their *jhum* crops between the rows of trees in order to meet their food needs. Tribals were employed in other labour operations. Reserves and experimental plantations needed extensive labour for clearing, sawing, transportation, weeding, fire protection and regeneration. This was partly supplied by seasonal immigration of the tribals (Nagas, Miris, Khamptis, Garos, and others) who came down in winter between the months of December and

March, a relatively slack period for *jhum* or shifting cultivation. In Assam, sawyers came from either the Surma valley or from Nepal in the dry season. The supply of the latter was stalled during the second world war with an increase in military recruitment of 'Gorkhas' and a diversion of sawyers to other parts of the country. Much of this work would be *begar* or forced labour. (Bela Malik, 2002)

The conditions of work of tribal people, especially on forestlands were inhuman. In an enquiry into the condition of forest labourers in Central Provinces Wylie, the Governor of Bombay, questioned the scale of wages paid to labour for felling and carting and demanded an early report on the subject. He also spoke of the problem of piece-work when he said that tribals were made to labour on roads till they were physically in a most unsatisfactory shape. Thus he concluded that the conditions under which they worked affected their health adversely. Lastly, the Baigas were exploited by the forest department, as the department extracted 'illegal and forced labour' during harvest and sowing time. The forest department made the labourers work more than 8 hours a day without paying them extra money. According to Wylie this was equivalent to the practice of *begar*. The department forcefully extracted supplies for visiting forest officials in the forest reserves. (Archana Prasad, 2002) The situation in Assam was similar where Garos were forced to perform *begar* in road building and live in forest villages. (Bela Malik, 2002) Thus we find that almost throughout the country tribals were converted from producers to providers of cheap labour and raw materials as a result of colonial interventions.

32.5.2 Modes of Protest and Identity Formation

It is not as if the tribal people of the country were mute spectators to colonial interventions. The earliest tribal revolts can be traced to mid 19th century with the Kol rebellion. Thereafter the *zamindari* areas of Chhotanagpur faced several other rebellions amongst which was Birsa Munda's rebellion against the *dikus* or outsiders in the region. In response to this movement the British were forced to enact the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act in 1885. (K.S. Singh, 1985) Several princely states also saw tribal movements in response to adverse changes in land and forest management. Prominent amongst these was the Maria rebellion in Bastar in 1876 and 1910 which was meant to be against police repression and forest laws. Here too, the slogan was 'Bastar for Bastaris' against outsiders. (Nandini Sundar, 1997) In all these cases there was a perception that the Rajas had begun to deprive the tribal people of their customary rights especially after the advent of the British. It is because of this that tribal elites led the revolts against the Rajas.

These revolts had a tenuous relationship with the Congress nationalists and often flouted the norms and values espoused by the dominant tribal elite. One such revolt was the Forest Satyagraha of the 1930s in the Central Provinces where the Gonds flouted the forest laws in more than a symbolic way. They also turned violent and so the Congress leadership was forced to disown the movement. (David Baker, 1984) Another movement with tenuous relationship with Congress Nationalism was the Tana Bhagat Movement of the Oraons in the 1930s that played an important part in altering the tribal identity in the Chhotanagpur region. The movement not only impacted upon the process of identity formation of the Oraons but also led to a process of larger differentiation

amongst tribals in the Chhotanagpur agrarian society. (Sangeeta Dasgupta, 1999) Such assertion of tribal identity, religion and symbolism sometimes led to movements for separate states from the late 1930s onwards. Tribal leaderships argued that they would not ensure the balanced development of their area if tribal areas were not given the status of separate tribal states. Prominent amongst these movements was the one led by the Adibasi Sabha for a separate Santhal State as well as the movements for independence in Nagaland and some other parts of the Northeast.

Whereas these organised tribal movements reflected processes of underdevelopment and unequal exchange, regions with no organised tribal movements also faced another form of resistance. For example the Baiga of the Central Provinces started migrating from state owned areas to *zamindari* areas once their shifting cultivation was banned. They thus forced the government to form the Baiga Chak in which the government conceded to them some livelihood rights. However this was only possible because the Baigas presented themselves as shifting cultivators with ancient rights and customs that did not allow them to plough land. In reality such a representation was in fact just a way of negotiating with the British Government. (Archana Prasad, 1998) The Garos refused to put in the requisite number of days, usually as a part of the settlement, in lieu of 'privileges and concessions' in the forests, after being issued a permit. In 1899, some *raiya*s of Goalpara refused to render labour in protest against forced labour. (Bela Malik, 2002) Such forms of every-day protests led to the crystallisation and assertion of tribal identities in a plurality of ways. But whether organised, or unorganised, the tribal movements and forms of protest had one thing in common: they reflected the growing unequal exchange between the tribal economies and the wider regional and national political economy, and the consequent underdevelopments of these regions. It is this factor that made colonial interventions 'a watershed' in the life and development of tribal people.

32.6 SUMMARY

Studies on pre-colonial tribal societies often romanticize the past. These societies are referred to as relatively 'closed and isolated' but egalitarian. This Unit shows the problems with such ideas. It shows that tribal societies were not closed and isolated structures. They were part of a wider economic and political network. Colonial interventions created a drastic imbalance within the existing tribal structures. Permanent settlement led to the penetration of rich Bengali peasants into the tribal areas who exploited the tribals to their advantage. The *mahajani* system produced further contradictions. The Indian Forest Act of 1865, restricted tribal access to forests. All this led to clashes, conflicts and even armed uprisings – Kol, Birsa Munda, Maria, etc. The growing demands of forest produce across borders encouraged foreign capital to make inroads into tribal areas. Over the long term, these changes altered the existing production relations and resulted in loss of tribal control over productive resources to a large extent.

32.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What was the nature and pattern of tribal economy in the pre-colonial period?
- 2) Pre-colonial economy was 'closed and isolated'. Comment
- 3) Analyze the impact of colonial interventions on tribal economy.

- 4) Examine the nature of tribal protests and conflicts during the colonial period.
- 5) What was the implication of the transformation of the tribals from producers to labourers?

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