The Condition of Tribal Population and Peasantry in Colonial Era

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Abstract: The subaltern groups, especially tribes and peasants, resisted against the British rule from its very inception. They resented the extension of British control and the intrusion of the colonial administration on their indigenous socio-economic structure. Moreover, both of these groups objected the penetration of moneylenders, traders and revenue collectors who were the primary instruments of the British authority. It can be easily noticed that tribal and peasantry movements were fundamentally directed to preserve their identity or traditional values. These movements were mostly violent, isolated and frequent. As per a historical document there were about seventy tribal and peasantry movements from 1778 to 1947. Tribal movements can be broadly divided into two parts i.e., movements of the frontier tribes and movements of the non-frontier tribes depending upon the particular geographical area of their residence. Movement of frontier tribes was mostly revivalist and tended to be political and secular in nature, while the non-frontier tribes revolted usually against the outsiders and the British administration.

Keywords: East India Company, Exploitation, Famine, Landless labour, Moneylender, Tenancy rights

Objectives of the Study: The paper focuses on the condition of tribal and peasantry population during British rule in India. While making a comparison in the condition of peasantry in pre-colonial period and colonial period, this study also interprets the course and reasons behind the critical economic structure of villages from the mid of 18th century.

Methodology: An elaborative research methodology was used to investigate and interpret the impact of British rule on tribal and peasantry population in India. The researcher has relied both on primary sources as well as secondary sources for collection of data. Primary data has been gathered from archival records; whereas secondary data is based on analysis and discussions.

I. Introduction

The foreign character and self-motivated interests of British rule hurt the pride of Indians and made them to rise in revolts to expel the foreigners from their lands. The establishment of colonial rule badly affected the tribal people throughout the country. As they lived outside the boundary of the mainstream population, the tribals lived in their own world being governed by indigenous traditions and customs. The colonial government extended their authority to the lands of the tribals, moreover, they were subjected to various extortions. The tribals resented the entry of the colonial administration into their land. The tribes recognized their lands not only a source of livelihood, but a spiritual source given to them by their ancestors. They were being alienated from their land due to distress.

Similar to the condition of tribal population, the disintegration and degeneration of the village communities in India started with the advent of British in India. The introduction of new land laws and consequent infiltration of urban exploitative elements, the opening of trade and breakdown of the village self-sufficiency, and the centralization of revenue were the chief characteristics of villages after the mid of eighteenth century (Chaudhuri, 2008). During the British rule the revenue rate were high and in the land settlements that were made between in the second half of 18th century, lands were habitually sold by the English Company to the new intermediaries because the old revenue farmers failed to meet out the demand of land revenue. This transformation of land brought into existence a new class of Zamindars (Patel, 1952). This class treated land more as a channel for investment for their rent rather than as a source of agricultural production. Furthermore, the agrarian structure was supplemented by the novel experiments as and when the English Company expanded her control in India. With the initiation of British rule, the new land tenures, new land ownership concepts, tenancy changes and heavier state demand for land revenue triggered of far-reaching changes in rural economy and social relationship, particularly in the villages. Early British administrators of the East India Company considered India as a vast estate and acted on the principle that the company was entitled to the entire economic rent. Moreover, the impact of other administrative measures like railways, law and order machinery and judiciary was also felt in the remote
villages of India. Though, the railways served to integrate India and brought the national consciousness, however, they actively served as the agent of colonialism to drain off the valuable resources from rural regions of India. A major impact of these British policies was the expression of intense poverty and frequent famines. These again found their most dire reflections in rural India. The tragedy also found manifestations in the stagnation and deterioration of agriculture and the transformation of India into an agricultural colony of Britain.

The tribal population was among one 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 indigenous social and economic systems. These systems were traditional in nature and satisfied the needs of the tribal society. 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 their respective chief. But it was not a legal right; it was a moral requirement. 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 (Mamoria, 1957; Bhownik, 1971). After the annexation of tribal territories, the British rule introduced policies which aimed at surviving the colonial interests. These policies were detrimental to the interests of the tribal segment. 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 fatal for the tribals. They created a host of exploiting classes as landlords, contractors, traders, money-lenders, and government officials in the tribal areas (Enthoven, 1920). These oppressors did not belong to the tribal communities. They were considered outsiders (dikus) by the tribals. It is worth mentioning that the tribal movements were anti-colonial in nature because they were directed against the colonial administration and the exploiting classes (dikus). The tribals revolted under the leadership of their respective regional chiefs or leaders. Their movements against the encroachments of forest and oppression of Indian exploiters often got linked or merged with the national movement. The tribal movements in India were mostly confined to regions. They could not assume the form of an all India movement (Mahapatra, 1970; Vidyarthi, 1981). When tribals were unable to pay their loan or the interest thereon, money-lenders and landlords usurped their lands. The tribals thus became tenants on their own land and sometimes even treated as bonded labourers. It is ironical to mention that the British administrative mechanism assisted the money-lenders (Desai, 1984). As we know, that the ownership of land was made transferable, the money-lenders found it suitable to transfer the land of the peasants. The poor and illiterate peasants could not have money and courage to fight a long lasting legal battle against the money-lenders. The shrewd money-lenders took advantage of the ignorance and poverty of the tribals. The police and the revenue officers never helped them. On the contrary, they also used the tribals for personal and government work without any payment. The courts were not only ignorant of the tribal agrarian system and customs but also were unaware of the plight of the tribals.

The tribals were also victims of a host of middlemen who operated between the British and the tribals. Among the outsiders, there were merchants and moneylenders who explored the tribals in different ways. The stories and novels of Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi give us a glimpse of the nature of tribal exploitation by these parasites. Before the advent of British rule India was having a thick forest cover that was mostly inhabited by the tribals who in their own way had an association of harmonious sustenance with nature. But, with the increase of the British commercial interests the green cover of the forests was bared. The tribals who in their own way had an association of harmonious sustenance with nature became victims of the British colonialism. The British introduced new legal systems which were not in the interest of the tribals. The British polices disturbed the traditional tribal systems. The tribal land system was marked by the absence of the landlords. The British administrators changed the land system and established the hitherto unknown class of zamindars (landlords) in the tribal areas who reduced the tribes to the position of tenants. Moreover, the British rule introduced a number of petty government official in the tribal areas. This new class consisted of the landlords, traders, money-lenders and government officials who were not natives of the tribal areas, nor did they belong to the tribal communities. The tribals termed this class as dikus or outsiders (Elwin, 1968). It is mention worthy that this class served as a primary instrument of the British administration in the process of exploitation and oppression of the tribal population. The landlords extracted exorbitant amount of rent from the tribals, evicted them from their land and extracted begar (forcible labour). In case of defiance, the tribes were physically assaulted by the zamindars. They were deprived of their belongings. Similarly, the money-lenders exploited the tribals by charging exorbitant amount of interest from them. During 18th and 19th century, through a well planned manner, the self-sufficient tribal economy was converted into market economy. Following the introduction of market economy, a class of money-lenders 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. Many a time the tribals were forced to sell out their belongings and children and wives to repay 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 merciless procedure of exploitation.

The tribal and peasantry revolts prove that the tribal societies have clear vision of their interest and their enemies. Some features of the peasant and tribal protest movements demonstrate a certain level of political and social consciousness among them. In many instances local issues might have triggered off the rebellion (Hutton, 1951). But, in the course of the development of the movement, its objective was broadened. Immediate context of a movement may be the oppression of local landlords but once the movement started, it ended up as protest against the British Raj. During the British rule the isolated tribal communities were connected with the outside world through the introduction of means of communication and transportation. The customary system of justice was replaced by the new legal system which was not suitable to the tribals. The tribals could not afford to utilize the new legal system, as they were not educated, moreover they did not have enough money to afford the lawyers (Arvind, 1982; Charlesworth, 1982).

II. Discussion

Until the establishment of the British hegemony in the tribal areas, the main means of production and subsistence of the tribals were land and forests. The tribal community enjoyed customary rights to use the minor forest products like firewood, flowers, fruits, honey, housing material, edible nuts, medical herbs etc. These forest based products were used as food, constructing houses and shifting cultivation. It could be said that the forests provided the basis of life to the tribes and provided them with basic items which the tribals required for survival (Furer-Heimendorf, 1955). In this reference, Kumar Suresh Singh narrates that, “They (tribal communities) can, therefore, subsist on conditions in which members of more civilized race could not exist. When the crop fails, jungle fruits and vegetables of all kinds are valuable reserve. With the help of these they succeed in teething over the period of stress which could play havoc.” However, the forest policy of the British rule curtailed the tribal rights to use the forest produce. The British Indian government announced its first forest policy by a resolution on October 19, 1894. The policy emphasized state control over forests and the need to exploit forests to augment state revenue. All the management strategies, principles of scientific management and creation of institutional framework in the form of a forest department to carry out these objectives were clearly geared towards a single goal i.e. the augmentation of revenue generated by the British Empire. None of the issues relating the people residing in the forest, their livelihood concerns, conservation and protection of forests and wildlife was taken into consideration. According to Gadgil and Guha, “People were, by and large, disenfranchised from accessing their traditional forests and no alternative was provided to them.”

The development of the communication system i.e. telegraph, roadways and railway services and the introduction of the common administrative system ruined the natural economy of the forests in a brutal manner. These developments affected the tribes all over the country. In terms of economy, railways inaugurated a new industrial age, broke down the static character of Indian economy, made the population mobile and revolutionized trade and commerce. However, the main objective of East India Company behind the introduction of Railways in India was the exploitation of natural resources and raw material to meet out the demands of Industrial Revolution in England. Ramachandara Guha and Madhav Gadgil show how the British used forests for commercial exploitation. Trees were cut down for timber. Forestland was used for tea, rubber and coffee plantations. Train lines and roads were built in forest areas. Routes from forest to sea coasts were built to transport goods (Bose, 1967). Guha in his article ‘The Making of the 1878 Forest Act’ narrates that, “The early years of the expansion of the railway network, 1853 onwards, led to tremendous deforestation in peninsular India owing to the railways’ requirements of fuel wood and construction timber. Huge quantities of durable timber were also needed for use as sleepers across the newly laid tracks.” It is ironical that with the progress of railway structure the green belts, including the local tribal dwellers, were cleared with pre-planned strategy.

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. In addition to the devastation caused to the tribal communities, the famines in the latter half of the 19th century further worsened the condition of the tribals (Chaudhuri, 2008). The continuous increase in the prices of the essential commodities made their conditions unbearable.

Forests in India during the pre-British period were owned and managed by communities living in and around the forests and by people dependent on them for their sustenance and livelihood. However, after the establishment of British rule, the needs and greed of the Empire dictated the management of forests. The Forest Charter of 1855 was the first attempt by the British Indian government in the direction to capture forest and its production. It made teak timber state property, and its trade was strictly regulated (Guha, 1992). The Charter of 1855 was followed by the Indian Forest Act, 1865, which was amended in 1878 and then again in 1927. The 1865 Act empowered the government to appropriate any land covered with green trees. The Act of 1865 was superseded by the Indian Forest Act of 1878 which was designed to facilitate strict state control over forest resources and was
distinctly annexationist in nature. This Act sought to do away with all privileges and rights that were not explicitly granted by the state. Through a single piece of legislation, a centuries-old system of rights and privileges for forest-inhabiting and forest-dependent tribal communities were terminated ((Wilkinson, 1971; Publication Division, 1973). The Indian Forest Act of 1878 radically changed the nature of common property and made it state property. The rights of people over forest lands and produce were later regarded as concessions. This Act also provided for the classification of forests as village forests, apparently to meet the needs of people residing in villages so that they could be kept away from commercially valuable reserved and protected forests.

III. Conclusion

Under the regime of East India Company and later on of Crown in India, the colonial rule left behind several everlasting imprint in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of Indians. Due to the process of colonialization, agriculture, trade, and industry of India were ruined badly and India became a poor country as at had never been Throughout the 18th and 19th century, various ill practices and policies as land alienation, usurpation, forced labour, minimum wages and land grabbing compelled many tribes like Munda, Santhals, Kol, Bhils, Warli, etc. to agitate against the British rule. While this transformation was taking place, Indians did not kept quiet as passive spectators but the subaltern groups of peasants and tribals expressed their resentment through popular resistance, movements or civil disturbances mostly which were localized, sporadic, isolated and unorganized. These popular resistance movements reflect a certain kind of currents of political and social consciousness which influenced them to fight against the authority of the British rule to regain their identity and interests that existed prior to the British annexation of India. Religious belief, ethnic ties and traditions played a positive role in mobilizing the tribal communities and strengthening their solidarity. Very often their notions of past inspired them to recover their lost time. Past basically meant to the rebels to get relief from exploitation and oppression. However, the rebels did not have a future plan beyond the restoration of the old order. Tribal movements were not only agrarian but also forest-based as most of the movements aimed to capture the forest land the forest produce to carry out the livelihood of the tribal population. In spite of their limited objective and narrow vision, the rebels definitely exposed the unpopular character of the colonial rule.

References


