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## Unit 26 TRIBALS

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### 26.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit deals with one of the social and political movements in India, i.e., the movements of the tribals. After going through unit, you will be able to understand:

- The meaning and main features of tribals in India;
- Their socio -economic conditions;
- Their movements in the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods; and
- The reasons and consequences of the tribals movements in India.

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### 26.1 INTRODUCTION

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Tribe is a colonial concept, introduced in the 19th century, by colonial authorities and ethnographers to describe all communities of India. In the latter half of the same century, the concept of tribe was narrowed down to the primitive groups as distinct from castes. It was under the Government of India Act of 1935 and the Constitution of India that the

nomenclature of the Scheduled Tribe fully emerged. The Constitution of India does not define a tribe. The notion of the Scheduled Tribe has two aspects. It is administratively determined *inter alia* by the criteria of backwardness and remoteness – people living in forests and on hills. They are also called *adivasis* – the natives. The tribals like many other social groups have launched social and political movements for the redressal of their grievances.

Most of the regions except the Southern pockets, the North –western region and the islands have witnessed several agitations of the tribals during the colonial and post – colonial periods. During the pre-colonial period tribals rose against the regional power of the Marathas or Rajputs. They resisted against the zamindars and non-tribal administrators. During the colonial period they struggled against the British rule for their autonomy. Birsa Munda revolt in Central India is best known example of this. There were also regio-political movements resisting against the non-tribal cultural authority through religious ideas

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## **26.2 TRIBAL SOCIETY AND TRIBAL ECONOMY**

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However, tribe in India today subsists on a single techno-economy of production. Most of them subsist on a combination of five modes or even more, of subsistence. The primitive technology, namely, hunting, food gathering and shifting and terrace cultivation is confined to the heavy monsoon zone covered by the tropical forests in the north-east, parts of eastern and central regions, the Nilgiris and the Andaman Islands. Pastoral economy which constitutes about 10 per cent of the tribal economy survives in the high altitude of the sub-Himalayan regions, the arid zones of Gujarat and Rajasthan, and in a small pocket in the Nilgiris. More than three quarter of tribal workers are engaged in the primary sector of economy, of which a majority are cultivators followed by agricultural labourers. A large number of them are engaged in livestock, forestry, fishing, hunting etc., and as workers in construction sector, mining and quarrying.

Though barter is reported among tribal communities on a significant scale compared to the non-tribals, almost the entire tribal economy today is in the vortex of market forces.

There has been a marked shift among the tribal communities from the traditional to the

new occupations. For instance, a number of communities practising hunting and gathering has declined as forests have disappeared and wildlife has diminished. Ecological degradation has severely curtailed the related traditional occupations of the tribal communities. However, there is a rise in horticulture terrace cultivation settled cultivation, animal husbandry, sericulture and bee-keeping. The tribes are moving away from their traditional occupations and settling down as peasants and that they have taken up new vocations to augment their income and raise productivity. We also find evidence of diversification in the tribal economy. There is a sharp rise in the number of tribals employed in government and private services, self-employment, etc. Many of the traditional crafts have disappeared and spinning, in particular, has suffered. Related activities such as weaving, dyeing and printing have similarly suffered. Skin and hide work, etc. have undergone changes; stone carving has declined. But the number of tribals employed in mining and masonry has gone up steeply which suggests a new mobility.

The tribals are also craftsmen. Carving and body tattooing consist of the forms of arts and crafts prevailing among the tribal people. Wall painting and drawing have emerged as other major forms of art in recent years. In fact there has been a significant revival of these forms of art on a commercial scale among the Warlis, Rabaris, Rathawas and others. Basketry involves the largest number of tribes, followed by those engaged in weaving, embroidery and pottery.

The impact of development processes, particularly education, has created a new stratum of entrepreneurs/businessmen, teachers, administrators, engineers/doctors and members of defence services among the tribals. Development process has also created division in tribal society. Disparities have increased. With the loss of control over resources and growth of population, demographic growth rate has been higher among tribes than the national average, poverty among the tribals has also increased manifold. Barring a few tribes or a few sections among them, the tribals remain among the most backward and poorest sections of our populations.

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## 26.4 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS OF TRIBALS

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### 26.4.1 pre- colonial period

In the pre-colonial period some of the tribes founded states in the territories extending from the north-east, through middle India to western and southern India. Where they did not found states, they were accommodated within regional political system, retaining a great deal of autonomy and freedom. Elsewhere the tribes were reported to be in disturbed conditions on the eve of the colonial rule. For example, in western India the tribes such as Gonds, Vills and Kolis were reportedly in a disturbed state. The tribals often rose against regional powers such as the Marathas, Rajputs etc. The Mughals had put down the Kolis and the Marathas had dealt with the Bhils and Gonds, with a heavy hand. All this radically changed during the colonial period that witnessed the first major assault on tribal autonomy and tribal's control over their resources such as land, forest, minerals, etc. Colonialism also witnessed the dismantling of pre colonial political structures built up by the tribals or those that accommodated them. Therefore, tribals rebelled more often and organised movements and protests on a larger scale than any other community during the colonial period.

#### The First Phase (1795-1860)

The rise and establishment of the British rule saw the beginning of the first phase (1795-1860) of the tribal uprisings which may be described as primary resistance movements. The Santhal insurrection (1855-6) represented a transitional phase marked by the agrarian resistance and revivalism.

In the North-East the sub-phases of tribal rebellions could be similarly demarcated. The Garos and Hajongs who submitted to the British rule to escape the tyranny of their zamindars, came under the influence of the Pagal Panthi. Their chief, Tipu who became the leader of the oppressed peasantry, founded a kingdom and was arrested. The Khasis were engaged in acts of depredations in the plains they raided from 1787 to 1825. The Singphos, Mishmis, Lushais, Khamptis and Daflas raided plains and killed people. The Khasis opposed the construction of the road, and the confederation of Khasi chiefs resisted the British attempt at the occupation of their country, led by Tirot Singh. The British sent out expeditions to punish the Lusahis, Mishmis etc. In middle India, this phase ended with the revolt of Maniram Dewan and Saranga Raja of Assam in 1857.

## The Second Phase (1860-1920)

The second phase (1860-1920) coincided with the onset of the intensive period of colonialism, which saw a much deeper penetration of merchant capital, a higher incidence of rent, etc., into tribal and peasant economies. It intensified the exploitation of the tribes. As a result of this, there were not only a larger number of movements, represented by such evocative native terms as *mulkui larai*, *fituri*, *meli*, *ulgulan* and *bhumakal*, involving many tribes but also a far more complex type of movement, which represented a curious mix of agrarian, religious and political issues. The Bhakti movement with its tenets of monotheism, vegetarianism, cleanliness, abstention from liquor, etc., was introduced by mendicants (gossains) artisans and peasants moving into tribal areas. Christianity also arrived and under its impact a new tribal middle classes emerged, which was educated, conscious and self-respecting. Both Christianity and Bhakti movement contributed in this phase to the rise of millenarian movements. The tribal movements demonstrated, in varying degrees, tribal resistance against the assaults on their system and their attempt to prop up its mouldering edifices. They were followed by the socio-religious or revitalisation movements, viz, the Kherwar movement among the Santals (1871-80), the *Sardar* revivalistic movement among the Mundas and Oraons (1881-90), the Tana *bhagat* and Haribaba movements in Chotanagpur, the *bhagat* movement in Madhya Pradesh and Bhil revivalism, which were expressive of the tribals urge to create a new order. These two lines of the movement, through the length and breadth of the sub-continent, revealed striking similarities, a basic unity of response to almost the same complex of challenging forces.

The movement led by Birsa Munda (1874-1901) is the best known of the socio-political movements of this phase because the movement sought to establish Munda raj and independence. In its socio-religious aspects, it was like any other bhagat movement, with the difference that it was also influenced by Christianity, and it used both Hindu and Christian idioms to create the Munda ideology and world view. The rebels attacked police stations and officials, churches and missionaries. Though there was an undercurrent of hostility against the dikus (outsiders), there was no overt attack on them except in a couple of controversial cases. The uprising was quelled, but its lessons were acknowledged in the passing of the Chotanagpur tenancy act. It sought to protect the Munda land system,



as early as 1889 to preserve the Khasi way of life. Through its platform the non-Christian Khasis have tried to strengthen the ancient system of clan relationship, which was disturbed by the large-scale conversion of the Khasis to Christianity. The second, the Zelianrong movement, started as a religio-cultural movement under Jadunang. It assumed a political overtone and became the only movement to have established linkages with the national freedom struggle. Under Gaidinliu it remained strongly nationalistic, promoted tribal solidarity and demanded creation of a separate administrative unit for the Zelianrong people to be formed out of the territories inhabited by the constituent tribes in the contiguous regions of Manipur, Assam and Nagaland, to which these states did not agree.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

**Note: D) Use the space given below for your answer.**

**11) Check your answer with the given at the end of the unit.**

1) What is the Seng Khasi?

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2) Identify the main trends of the tribal movements in India during 1920-1947.

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### 26.4.2 post-colonial period

The post-colonial period witnessed intensification of the exploitation of resources of the land of the tribals and their marginalisation, immiseration or pauperisation, despite progress in education and employment, representation in politics and share in power, and affluence of a section of tribal middle class. Therefore, this period witnessed the rise of a larger number of movements centered on the issues of identity, equality, empowerment, self-rule, etc. Tribal movements may broadly be classified into:

- (a) Political movements for autonomy, independence, state formation, and self rule .





The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha emerged as a major political force in the industrial and mining belt of Chotanagpur and in state politics after the 1980 general elections. It sought to broad base the separatist movement by including with its ambit the peasant and working classes. The Jharkhand is described by its ideologues as an internal colony which is being exploited by outsiders. Even though the region accounts for 28 percent of minerals it avails itself of only 15 per cent of the state's budget for development. The development process itself is exploitative of the local inhabitants and outsiders have moved in to seize all opportunities of employment.

Through many vicissitudes that affected Jharkhand movement, the groundswell of support for a separate state continued and even intensified, bringing within its sweep major political parties. They started by setting up the regional structures in the 1980s, The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared in 1980 that Chhotanagpur was a culturally distinct area. This was translated into an autonomous political authority in the early 1990s. In 1988, Bhartiya Janata Party committed itself to the formation of Vananchal State in terms of regional backwardness. Thus the two important players who were for long opposed to Jharkhand reversed their roles. All Left parties barring the CPI(M) supported the demand for a separate state in 1980s while highlighting land and forest issues, nationality, class and ethnic question, generally ignored by major parties. Thus while on the one side, the Jharkhand State was steadily growing and this was translated into electoral gains for the pro-state parties particularly the BJP in the 1990s.

The Committee on Jharkhand Matters recommended setting up of an autonomous authority. The Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council (JAAC) came into existence in 1993, but it fell short of the expectations of the people who demanded nothing short of a full state. In the two general elections held in 1995 and 1996 the all India parties advocating a separate state swept the polls Jharkhand state became a reality on 15 November 2000, substantially fulfilling the objective of a Jharkhand state set by the Jharkhand Party in 1950 and dream of a tribal raj held out by Birsa Munda, about one hundred year ago.

### Political Movements in the North-East

Tribal movements in the North-East stand in a category by themselves because of the region's unique geopolitical situation and historical background. Political processes in the North-Eastern hills picked up on the eve of transfer of power when a considerable



the beginning of the modern phase of the Naga movement. It gave a sense of political unity to the Naga tribes and it embodied the concept of Naga nationhood.

In 1946, the British Government proposed a scheme to carve out a Trust Territory comprising the Naga Hills, the then NEFA area and a part of Burma, as a 'Crown Colony' under control from London. The educated Nagas in the NNC quickly opposed this idea of British colonisation, like the Indian National Congress, and declared that the British must quit Naga hills when they quit India.

The objectives of the NNC have developed through many phases from autonomy to independence. Under the in the 9-point agreement reached between the NNC and the Government of India — represented by the late Sir Akbar Hyderi, the then Governor of Assam on 27-29 June 1947, there were provisions for protection from land alienation, creation of administrative autonomy and a special responsibility of the Government of India for their implementation. The Naga movement from 1947 to 1954 in the Naga Hills remained peaceful and constitutional. Towards the end of 1949, the Naga National Council changed its goals favouring Independence outside India Union.

In 1954, the Naga announced the formation of the Hongkin Government that is the 'People's Sovereign Republic of Free Nagaland'. Violence broke out in 1954 and there were many incidents involving the Indian army and rebels. In July 1960, a 16-point agreement was reached between Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and a Naga delegation. On 1 August 1960, Prime Minister Nehru announced in Parliament the decision of the Government to make 'Nagaland' the 16th state of the Indian Union. By this time a new group of 'overground' Naga leaders had emerged in Nagaland, who formed the Nagaland Nationalist Organisation (NNO). The NNO was formed mainly by those leaders who had been instrumental in bringing about statehood for Nagaland. In the same way, there emerged the Democratic Party of Nagaland which was formed by those who differed from the NNO leadership and harboured sympathy for the secessionist underground group. However, the militant section of the Naga movement remained underground for more than a decade between 1954 and 1964. Till 1968, several rounds of talks were held between the underground leaders. Another landmark was the signing of the Shillong Accord, on 11 November 1975 under the terms of which the underground Naga accepted the Indian Constitution, the deposited their arms and government of India in turn released Naga political prisoners and promised their rehabilitation. However, while there has been no resumption of insurgency and more and more underground have come over ground, renouncing violence and Nagaland has generally remained an oasis of peace and stability in the troubled North-East, the Accord has been repudiated by Phizo



The tribals are asking not only for restoration of the land that they lost by invoking the provision of the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Area Land Transfer Regulations, 1959, which come into force in 1963, but also the transfer of ownership and delivery of possession in regard to the land allotted to them. Of late, they have been organised by CPI (ML) of the People's War Group (PWG). In February 1981 there was an unusual spurt of forced harvesting on lands taken away from them by non-tribals, raiding of houses of moneylenders and decamping with mortgaged valuables. The traditional system of communication was revived to organise the tribals. Signals were exchanged by beating the drum. The Gond *darbar* held on 6 February 1981 at Keslapur declared that the problems of the tribals had come to a boiling point. The Gonds also prevented the demarcation of land for afforestation. They had earlier reacted strongly to the scheduling of the Lumbadars, a community of traders and moneylenders, as a tribe in 1977, because the Lumbadars always exploited the tribals and their status as a tribe helped them to legitimize their illegal possession of the Gonds' land. On 20 April 1981 a conference was planned by CPI(ML) at Indervalli. The meeting was banned and the tribals were persuaded not to assemble there. However, they took out a procession which came into conflict with a police force. About 15 tribals lost their lives.

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## **26.5 CHARACTERISTICS AND CONSEQUENCES OF TRIBAL MOVEMENTS**

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The leadership of the tribal movements has mainly emerged from themselves. While the leadership of the first phase emerged from the upper crust of tribal society, that of the second rose from the lowest rung of it. The Santal brothers were landless - Birsa Munda was a raiyat or a parja (crop-sharer) and Govind Giri was a hali. The leadership of the third phase and post-colonial periods was provided by the members of the upcoming tribal middle class, both in middle India and in the North-East. They were educated people which included priests, catechists, teachers, public servants, rural leaders and professionals who spoke largely in secular idioms. The leadership of the social reform movement was provided by the outsiders such as the Gandhian workers, of the Parja Mandal agitation by outsiders like Motilal Tejawat and of some tribal uprisings such as the Nagesia by even "Baniyas".



did intervene to uphold status quo rather than promote change. This ambivalence was typical of the colonial system.

### Check your Progress Exercise 2

**Note:** I) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check Your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

1) What were the reasons for the decline of the Jharkhand Party in the 1960s?

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2) What was the “Crown Colony” ?

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3) What was the Shillong Accord?

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4) What have been the main goals of the tribal movements in India?

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### 26.6 LET US SUM UP

The tribal movements are now being characterised as identity-based movements, of which various other issues relating to autonomy, land , forest, language and scripts are only ramifications. It is identity that is under stress. Identity stands at the centre-stage. This change in perception has now been made possible by people's own understanding of the situation, their perception of growing threat to their identity, the ongoing environmental and indigenous people's movements, and so on. The tribal movements now are being placed within the context of power relations, the scramble for power, the





- i) Involvement of the tribals in the process of development.
  - ii) Rivalry between the advanced Christian tribals and backward non-Christian tribals arising out of competition on education, employment and control on the resources for development.
  - iii) Shift in the support of the non-Christian tribals from Jharkhand to the Congress and Jana Sangha.
- 2) It was a proposed “Trust Territory” suggested by the British government comprising the Naga Hills, the then NEFA area and a part of Burma, known as “Crown Colony”. It was supposed to be under the control from London. But it was opposed by the Nagas and the Indian National Congress.
- 3) It was an accord signed between the underground Nagas and the Government of India on November 11, 1975. Under the terms of this accord the Nagas accepted the Constitution of India, deposited their arms. The government of India released Naga political prisoners and promised their rehabilitation.
- 4) The main goals of the tribal movements included: restoration of the pre-colonial polity, service tenure, land, right to forest, expulsion of outsiders, social reform, end of taxation, etc.