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**Evolution of Social
Structures in India
Through the Ages**

Block

8

SOCIAL QUESTIONS UNDER COLONIALISM

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Expert Committee

Dr. Nayanjot Lahiri
Delhi University
Delhi

Prof. M G S Narayanan
Formerly Professor of History
Calicut University, Calicut

Prof. Dilbagh Singh
Professor of History
At C H S, J N U
New Delhi

Prof. Yogendra Singh
Formerly Professor at Centre for
Study of Social Systems, J N U, New Delhi

Prof. Satish Saberwal
Formerly Professor of History
At C H S, J N U, New Delhi

Prof. A R Khan
Programme Coordinator
IGNOU
New Delhi

Programme Coordinator

Prof. A.R. Khan

Course Coordinator

Ajay Mahurkar

Block Editor

Dr. Shri Krishan

Block Preparation Team

Unit No.	Resource Person
28 & 30	Dr. Shri Krishan M D University Rohtak, Rewari Regional Centre, Rewari.
29	Dr. Shobhna Warriar, Hansraj College, University of Delhi, Delhi.
31	Dr. Amrit Basra, College of Arts and Commerce, University of Delhi, Delhi.
32	Dr. Archana Prasad, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, Teen Murti Bhavan, New Delhi.

Material Production

Mr. Jitender Sethi
Mr. S.S. Venkatachalam
Mr. Manjit Singh

Secretarial Assistance

Mr. Mahesh Kumar
Mr. Sunil Patwal

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Much emphasis has been placed on colonialism as an agency of socio-historical change in India. Scholars have argued how much of India's 'tradition' was recast and reinvented under the influence of colonial social policies. In order to place this social change in a proper context, it is important to study the interplay of cultural and administrative practices. The initiatives of colonial state by themselves cannot sum up the complexity of interaction that took place between Indian social structure and colonial polity and contestation between them in various fields. As the project of colonization unfolded in the Indian sub-continent, critical changes took place in social relationships-not only in class terms but were refracted through a countless set of social and cultural relationships including those of caste and community as well as of gender. These relationships were not only inherited from the pre-colonial past but were in constant process of renegotiation and reformulation under the colonial rule. At one level, the colonial policy makers reaffirmed their faith in non-interventionist stance, although the waves of free trade, utilitarianism and evangelicalism did have different degrees of impact on the social milieu of India. In some areas, the change was devastating in nature and scale especially in dealing with the tribal and forest-dependent communities. Large-scale commercial exploitation of Indian forest resources disrupted life style of tribal communities and the network of colonial officialdom, private trading interests and Indian usurers subdued them. In certain other fields, the change was more finely tuned as was the case with gender-relations. We had earlier investigated some aspects of social history of caste and class under colonialism. In the present block, we will focus our attention on specific forms of social discrimination, colonial forest policies, categorization of certain tribes as 'criminals' and gender-relations under colonialism.

Unit 28 entitled "Colonial Forest Policies and Criminal Tribes", narrates how the colonial state privileged sedentary agriculture because it was much easier to tax as well as control settled communities over the wandering pastoral and tribal communities subsisting on shifting cultivation. It also describes how the colonial state established its overall control over the forest resources of India and destroyed the existing customary rights of indigenous communities and their collective entitlement to common property resources, thereby, threatening their livelihood. In the end, the story of stigmatization of certain communities as 'criminal' has also been examined.

Unit 29 analyzes the construction of gender under colonial rule and how it shaped the lives of women in public space and private domain. Besides investigating the construction of patriarchal ideology and domestication of women, the unit also highlights the resistance offered by the women actors.

Unit 30 deals with the problem of social discrimination. It is explained that while professing formal equality, the colonial state upheld and reinforced the principle of social hierarchy, which resulted in various forms of social discrimination under colonialism based on race, caste and gender. As rulers, the British attributed superior qualities to their race and devalued indigenous populations in every conceivable way and this contributed to the first strand of discrimination. This unit also describes caste and gender based social inequity and distinction that found expression under the impact of colonial regime.

Unit 31 deals with issues of popular protests and social structures. This unit will give you an account of the historiographical trends on this theme and broadly familiarise you with the issues involved.

Unit 32 discusses the various aspects of colonial ethnography in dealing with the tribal communities and compares it with the nationalist discourse on the issue. Mainly, two tendencies have been identified about the perception of tribes. One argued for the isolation of tribes in order to preserve their uniqueness, culture and heritage while the other stressed the assimilation of tribal communities in the mainstream of Indian social life. Of course, in between them there were various degrees of opinions and the exigencies of colonial rule also played their role in these perceptions.



UNIT 28 COLONIAL FOREST POLICIES AND CRIMINAL TRIBES

Structure

- 28.0 Introduction
- 28.1 Pre-colonial Legacy
- 28.2 The Forest Acts and Ecological Warfare
- 28.3 The Imperial Forest Department and Forest Acts
- 28.4 Impact of colonial Forest Policy on Indigenous Communities
- 28.5 Pacifying the Internal Frontiers
- 28.6 The Criminal Tribes Acts and Branding of Indigenous Communities
- 28.7 Law vs. Custom Debate
- 28.8 Summary
- 28.9 Glossary
- 28.10 Exercises

28.0 INTRODUCTION

The early Company rule in India tried to make use of the indigenous communities on the margins of the sedentary and settled agriculture in its programme of conquest and pacification. This was a tactic inherited from the practice of making use of fluid political arrangements by the pre-colonial polities like the Marathas. The recognition of the Bhil chiefs as rajas in return for a fixed tribute, establishment of a special Bhil Corps (1823) and a special police force of the Mewatis were part of this approach. The colonial State recognized the importance of forest and wasteland in the settlement of rural society. The disappearance of forest-cover in early 19th century was mostly due to cutting of forests for military or security reasons. Another reason was extension of cultivation under pressure so as to increase the revenue-resource base of the Raj. The colonial state favoured sedentary agriculture. Its main motive was to settle and discipline nomadic and pastoral communities and to wean or coerce tribal people from their traditional slash-and-burn agriculture or hunting-gathering life style. The systematic ecological warfare of the late 19th century, however, was chiefly a product of commercial needs and requirements. Although, indigenous elements in the form of merchant-cum-usurers were associated with the process, the institutional and ideological framework was specifically colonial. This institutional arrangement consisted of the Forest Acts and bureaucracy as well as the Criminal Tribes Acts and the settlements. We will trace the convergence of environmental, legal and social history in the next sub-sections of this Unit.

28.1 PRE-COLONIAL LEGACY

Alfred Crosby (1986) gave a notion of 'ecological imperialism.' According to the notion, a complex set of weeds, animals and diseases brought by the biological expansion and migrations from Europe destroyed the flora, fauna and human societies or the indigenous ecosystems of the New World. Basing themselves on this notion, Gadgil and Guha (1992) projected colonialism in India as an ecological watershed. According to them, although the Europeans could not create neo-Europes in India by decimating and devastating indigenous population and their natural resource-base but they did intervene and radically altered existing food producing systems and their ecological basis. Three basic elements of this unprecedented intervention in the ecological and social fabric of Indian society by colonialism, according to them, are:

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- (a) A shift from subsistence-oriented resource gathering and food-production to commercial production;
- (b) Destruction of cohesive local communities and their institutions and emergence of individualism in their place; and
- (c) Breakdown of a system of restraints on traditional resource-use due to development of markets as the focal points for organizing access to resources.

Richard H Grove (1998) has criticized this line of thinking as a belief in pre-colonial golden age of ecological balance and harmony.

According to him, exclusivist forms of state forest controls developed in pre-colonial states in South Asia, which saw rapid state-sponsored de-forestation. The control of state over forest-resources was gradually increasing in India since about 800 A.D. It was reinforced in Mughal period and received further impetus during the ascendancy of successor states. The Maratha state tried to acquire control over forests of the Western Ghats and to set-up plantations, both for shipbuilding and revenue. The states of Cochin and Travancore also exercised similar monopoly rights over forests. The Amirs of Sind adopted a policy of afforestation and forest protection during 1740-1840. This was meant to encourage development of their hunting reserves or *sikargahs*. However, the state control in pre-colonial times was limited to the extraction of certain plant and animal species or to the maintenance of hunting reserves. Sometimes state asserted control over certain specific products. For instance, Tipu Sultan asserted right of state over sandalwood, a valuable tree. Forest management and control was also crucial for military reasons in some cases especially for the defense of forts. Sometimes agrarian empires in the pre-colonial times cleared woodlands to augment land revenue resources in pre-colonial times. Although commercial and strategic compulsions initiated the process of forest clearance in pre-colonial periods, there were no sharp conflicts over control of forest-resources like the one that surfaced in the colonial period. In the pre-colonial period, even if there was no perfect ecological harmony, arable land was in abundance, state control was limited and a hierarchy of user-rights rather than an absolute notion of property in arable and forestland was prevalent.

28.2 THE FOREST ACTS AND ECOLOGICAL WARFARE

Large-scale commercial logging began in the 19th century. The demands of European entrepreneurs and the colonial state were much more extensive than the demands of earlier rulers. The contractors hewed many teak forests during 1800-1830 on the Western Ghats for the Bombay marine. Palmer & Company, a managing house based in Hyderabad, similarly logged in the Berars. The expansion of Coffee plantation in South after 1840 and of Tea plantation in Assam and the Bengal Hills further accelerated the process. By around 1860, commercial demands for timber were growing due to demand from shipbuilding, iron smelting and other industries. As a result of this Oak forests in Britain started vanishing. Therefore, there was great demand for Indian teak as it was the most durable of shipbuilding timbers. Construction of ships in Surat and on the Malabar Coast and export of teak-timber to meet the demands of the Royal Navy greatly stimulated the process of deforestation and denudation. The revenue orientation of colonial land policy also worked towards deforestation. Forests were seen as an obstacle to expansion of settled agriculture. Under the pressures of heavy land-revenue assessments especially on better soils, peasant cultivators moved into hills or onto poorer waste soils and cleared forests. The British, drawing on their experience of Ireland and Scotland took ecological warfare to new heights. There was a large-scale expansion of cultivable land due to 'clearings' of forests in Northern India after 1860. This led to a sharp decline in the fortunes of the extensive nomadic and pastoral economy of the plains.

The expansion of railways after 1850s was another main cause of commercial logging. European and indigenous private contractors made huge gains in the process of utilizing woods for commerce. Before the opening of Raniganj coalmines, railways used wood as fuel. The railways were using fuel wood in North Western Province even in 1880s. H.Cleghorn, in his work, *The Forests and Gardens of South India* (1860) described the impact of the railways especially in Melghat and North Arcot Hills. The pace of deforestation was correlated with the expansion of railways. The railways expanded from 1349 Kms in 1860 to 51,658 Kms in 1910. The demand for railway sleepers grew proportionately. Only three Indian timbers- teak, sal and deodar- were more suitable as sleepers. Sal and teak forests were available near railway lines in the Peninsular India and were worked in early years. However, subsequently deodar forests in the sub-Himalayan region of Kumaon and Garhwal were also utilized.

28.3 THE IMPERIAL FOREST DEPARTMENT AND FOREST ACTS

The policy of non-intervention and laissez faire gradually gave way to legitimate State intervention. The Scottish Surgeons like Alexander Gibson and Hugh Cleghorn, in the service of the East India Company, pointed the connection between denudation and droughts after 1837. Protection of forests was now seen as essential for maintaining water supplies and safeguarding agricultural prosperity. Some scholars see conservation, as a justification for the strategic and commercial interests of Empire while Richard Grove believes that a wider concern with agrarian prosperity and social stability was primarily responsible for this shift in the attitudes of the colonial officials. The role played by strategic and commercial needs of the Empire cannot be denied as the colonial administrators indicted traders and private capital in their accounts but the real brunt of state regulation and control was felt by small indigenous forest users like tribes practicing shifting cultivation. In particular, Kumri or shifting cultivation in Western Ghats, was held to be responsible for deforestation. Shifting cultivation was banned in Coorg in 1848 and restrictions were imposed on it in Belgaum in 1856. In 1847, Bombay Forest Department was established. By 1865, an Imperial Forest Department, with a formal bureaucratic all-India structure had been formed. A special executive post of forest officer was created and government's control over larger tracts of woodlands was established. This paved the way for exclusion of private capital as well as rural forest-users and shifting-cultivators from the forests.

Dietrich Brandis, a German botanist, was appointed the first Inspector- General of Forests. The Forest Act of 1865 initiated the process of establishing a legal mechanism to curtail the previously open access enjoyed by the rural communities. The colonial state, prior to Forest Act of 1865, recognized the customary rights of common property resources in forests. The Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878 asserted state monopoly over forest resources. The Forest Act of 1865 was passed to facilitate state's possession of those forests that were required for railway supplies. The pre-existing customary rights of rural people were left untouched. However, the powers of regulation and control were given to the forest officers. Prior to 1878, forest reserves area was limited and there were only 14,000 square miles of reserved forest for the whole of India. However, forest officers were asserting their powers even on non-zamindari private lands. In March 1868, teak, sal and shisham were declared protected species in the Central Province even if they grew on non-zamindari private lands.

The status of forests and woodlands as a common property resource became a matter of legal debate among colonial forest administrators. Sharp and conflicting viewpoints emerged in a conference of forest officers in 1874 that was called to examine the defects of the 1865 Act and suggest a new piece of legislation. The

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debate on the issue was framed within a specific discourse of property. This discourse celebrated proprietorship and as a result customary common property rights in pastures and woodlands, which were a negation of such notion of private property, were denied.

Three distinct strands of thinking manifested within the colonial bureaucracy on the question of customary common property rights. The first section, called 'annexationist' by Gadgil and Guha, wished for a total state control over all forest areas. They argued that all land, those were not cultivated by peasants belonged to the state. They further claimed that the so-called norms of community and access to forests were dependent on the sweet will of the rulers. They cited Tipu Sultan's edict banning the cutting of sandal wood trees. They asserted that only those rights of use, which were explicitly granted by the state, were to be accommodated and conceded. Baden-Powell and the then Secretary of the Agricultural Department, A.O.Hume took this position that state monopoly of forest and wasteland was an undisputed feature of 'Oriental' sovereignty and the colonial state by its 'right of conquest' inherited this monopoly right. The second prominent position mainly held by forest officials of Madras government, denied the legitimacy of any state intervention in the customary rights of use exercised by the rural communities. Intermediate position, represented by the Inspector-General of Forests, Dietrich Brandis and some other officials, held the view that the state had undisputable right in certain cases but favoured retention of customary rights of villagers to freely graze their cattle, cut wood, etc., subject to some restriction by the state. The passing of Indian Forest Act (1878) clearly resolved the question in favour of an 'annexationists' position. The imperatives of colonial economy, conquered subjects, commercial and strategic interests of Empire overshadowed and destroyed the customary rights of use of the rural communities.

The forests were classified into three categories as reserve forests, protected forests and village forests under the Forests Act (1878). The reserved forest consisted of compact and valuable areas, which would lend themselves to sustained exploitation. A complete state control extinguished private rights, transferred them somewhere else or in exceptional cases, allowed their limited exercise. The second category of protected forests was also under state control where rights of state and other users were recorded. However, state's control was strictly maintained by outlining detailed provisions for the reservation of particular tree species as and when they became commercially valuable, and for closing the forest whenever required to grazing and fuel-wood collection. Subsequently, with the rising commercial demand, many protected forests were converted into reserved forests. The Act also created a class of village forests but this option was hardly exercised over large parts of the sub-continent. The Act of 1878 also enlarged the scope of punitive sanction available to the forest administration, closely regulating the extraction and transit of forest produce and prescribing a detailed set of penalties for transgression of the Act. 'Protection' was meant to increase timber-productivity, which could be achieved only by eliminating trees and species that were not important commercially. The forest department made a distinction between 'superior' and 'inferior' species for this purpose. To manage such multi-species forests, cutting the 'inferior' varieties and planting 'superior' species in the 'blanks' increased proportion of 'superior' trees. Exclusion of livestock and prevention of fire were two main planks of the 'scientific management' by which forest officials manipulated cycles of renewal to selectively assist timber trees. It was only at the turn of the century that experience demonstrated that such strict exclusion of rural forest users did not increase timber productivity. It was found that grazing and fires did not necessarily affect timber trees. The forest officials towards the end of the 19th century adopted a flexible approach within overall framework of control.

Another important aspect of forest administration was that it generated surplus revenue consistently in the period 1870-1925. In other words, the administrative machinery was more than self-financed. This was made possible by the rising demands of the urban centres for fuel-wood, furniture, and building timber material and supply facilitated

by improved transport. In the 20th century, a variety of industrial uses of the forest produce such as resin, turpentine, essential oils and tanning material also increased the commercial value of the forests. The strategic value of India's forests was also realized in the World Wars when they supplied huge quantities of timber and bamboos to the timber branch of munition board.

28.4 IMPACT OF COLONIAL FOREST POLICY ON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The colonial Forest Acts had a number of ruinous consequences for many nomadic and pastoral communities and for people surviving on hunting gathering of forest produce and based on shifting cultivation. The Acts enforced an unnatural separation between agriculture and forests. Many of the customary rights exercised by rural and tribal people were abolished while the use of forests was determined according to the commercial priorities of the Empire. Grazing and shifting cultivation was banned. Such changes in the use of forests had very harmful effects on the daily life of the villagers. The pattern of local use and control gave way to state control.

State reservation of forests affected the ecology as certain plant species like Oak and Terminalia were replaced by commercially useful species of teak, pine and deodar. The former types were quite useful for indigenous communities as fuel, fodder, manure, and small timber while the latter served the commercial interests of the colonial state. The colonial administration disapproved shifting cultivation or Jhum and forced many tribal communities to adopt sedentary agriculture as the colonial officials believed that revenue generating potential of settled agriculture was more. For instance, frenetic attempts were made in 1860s to wean away the Baigas of Mandla, Balaghat and Bilaspur area of the Central Provinces from shifting cultivation. The discrediting of the traditional subsistence mode of livelihood of the rural and tribal people also meant devaluation of traditional conservation methods or indigenous wisdom about the forests and their ecology. The Forest Act of 1878 excluded a range of activities of indigenous hunters especially of the underprivileged groups belonging to low caste and tribal communities. At the same time, the colonial bureaucracy institutionalized hunting or *shikar* as an organized 'sport' for maintaining the physical fitness and leadership qualities of white *sahibs*. It became not only a form of amusement but also affirmed their status as racially distinct elite. Even the selection of wild carnivorous animal species to be eliminated was culturally informed as such errant and dangerous species were compared to human outlaws.

The impact of colonial forest policy, on the indigenous social groups, however, was not uniform. For instance, private forests of malguzars and zamindars constituted about 20% total land area in the Central Province and there was a triangular contest between the colonial state, revenue right holders and their tenants over forest use rights. Colonial state's redefinition of property rights brought large tracts of cultivable waste under the control of Forest Department and became a key factor in the colonization of the land. The control and power of colonial bureaucracy also strengthened agrestic serfdom and practice of *begar* (unpaid free labour) in many areas inhabited by tribal communities. Associated with increasing penetration of market forces was intrusion of indigenous capital (merchant-cum-usurer) into forest areas. The settlers from plains entered areas inhabited by tribal groups secured by proprietary rights and forms of debt-recovery alien to such indigenous communities. As a result of all these social and economic changes, conflicts and confrontations over forest and pasture lands, over the exercise of customary rights by local social groups became frequent. A variety of forms of resistance including migration, defiance of forest laws, legal assertion of their rights to open *fituris* or rebellion were adopted by the indigenous communities to articulate their grievances against the partnership of colonial state and money-lender-traders.

28.5 PACIFYING THE INTERNAL FRONTIERS

The colonial state paid special attention to the mechanism of social control and pacification of internal frontiers. Control and distribution of forest and cultivable waste and extension of arable was part of their policy to contain the 'unruly elements' such as Pindaris (erstwhile irregular cavalry soldiers in the service of the Maratha polity) and other nomadic groups. Forests were seen in the eyes of colonial officials as the abode of robbers, lawless squatters. They drew up on their experience of break-up of common tenurial systems of Ireland and the Scottish highlands to push back forest frontier and achieve political stability by wiping out unstable concentration of power on the fringes of settled agriculture. They discontinued with the earlier practice of not assessing forest and cultivable waste and promoted sedentary agriculture. The colonial authorities attempted to settle and discipline groups such as the Gujars, Bhattis, Rangar Rajputs and Meos, who moved around with their cattle, extracting 'protection rent' as they moved. From the very beginning, the colonial state used surveillance and mechanism of social control and defined certain social groups as beyond the bound of civility. This criterion was applied to entire castes and communities. W.H.Sleeman's *The Ramaseeana or the Vocabulary of Thug Literature*, exemplified this process of depicting certain groups as barbaric. In 1835, a special Thagi and Dacoity Department was set up to investigate and punish gang robberies and murders. Subsequently, a large number of people, groups, communities and tribes were stigmatized as 'the criminal tribes'. The legal language of the colonial officials was used against a wide variety of marginal groups who did not conform to pattern of settled agriculture and wage labour, especially nomadic, pastoral communities and forest -dwelling tribes.

28.6 THE CRIMINAL TRIBES ACTS AND BRANDING OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

A wide variety of ideological elements converged in the making of 'criminal tribe' ideology. The Brahmin subordinates of British officials were always apprehensive of nomadic and wandering groups outside the institution of caste. The British tradition also associated forests with crimes and outlaws. The hereditary-based theory of crimes that was popularized in Europe by Cesare Lombroso perceived the criminal man as a separate species with specific hereditary and anatomical features. This belief in the professional and hereditary character of crime was commonly prevailing among the colonial administrators of 19th century. The Criminal Tribes Act (1871) provided for registration of all or any member of such tribes who were notified as 'criminal tribes.' The registered members had to report themselves to the local police authority at fixed interval of time and notify their place of residence or any intended change of residence. Any contraventions of these legal provisions invited severe punitive measures.

The construction of entire caste and communities by the British officials as 'criminal' was part of a larger discourse in which caste and community determined the occupational as well as social and moral profile of all its members. The 'criminal tribes' were branded simultaneously as typical and deviant. The Criminal Tribes Act (1871) listed over 150 tribes as 'criminal.' Most of these belonged to marginalized social groups outside settled domesticity. The colonial state defined these groups as criminal by reference to their caste identity and a legal characterization that rendered crime as an in-born trait of such selected communities. Such communities could not lay any claims to the protection and impartiality of law. Their criminality was represented as an inheritance and a profession, inextricably linked to their forefathers.

Even before the passing of Criminal Tribes Act (1871), colonial authorities adopted similar modes of surveillance. A Superintendent of Thugi and Dacoity Department referred to a 'predatory tribe' of Bawarias especially in the lower Doab region. Kanjars and Sansis were also treated in the same manner. Attempts were made by police and judicial authorities to register all Sansis, Harnis and Bawarias. Thanedars or head-constables were required to take security from village headmen where these tribes resided and were to be held responsible for reporting on their movements. Gradually attributes generally given to the Thugs such as cruelty and violence were also ascribed to such groups. The authorities at district administration level, especially Magistrates, in Punjab and North Western Provinces maintained that the provisions of Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure were inadequate to suppress their criminal activities. Therefore, they emphasized special surveillance measures to deal with this peculiar and hereditary nature of their criminality. They were to be treated like wild dangerous animals- to be watched, tamed and hunted up. The chief mechanism of control was to start from the maintenance of their record and by maintaining a check on their mobility.

The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 instituted a special set of laws, rules and procedures for dealing with the 'criminal classes'. The members of these classes and tribes were denied a right to appeal in an ordinary court of law. The Act was similar to the Habitual Criminal Act passed in England in the late 19th Century to exercise discipline and control over the criminal sections of the working class in order to construct moral subjects. Subsequently, a distinction was made between honest, industrious section of the working class and vagrant, criminal, dangerous elements and a need for institutional segregation of the later was stressed in the period 1860-75 in England. The legal enactment put restrictions on the movement of the members of 'criminal tribes' and provision of a regular attendance gave powers to the village patels and local police officials. They used such provisions to harass and exact forced labour from the members of such communities. Even when the repressive strategy was supplemented by a strategy of reclamation or reform, officials highlighted the failure of re-settling such tribes in terms of stereotype attitudes. It was claimed that the members of these communities were unwilling to accept hard moral life of domesticity. This attitude tended to reinforce the stereotype of innate criminality of such tribes. The Amended Criminal Tribes Act (1908) provided for settling of convicted members of tribes in special settlements, to mould and reform them by enforcing work habits under the control of special settlement officers. These settlements acted as sanctified prisons providing captive labour at miserable wages and harsh working conditions to a number of factories, state forests and public works departments. The basic assumption of colonial sociology was that hereditary circumscribed communities that moved from place to place and shifted their identities committed most of the crimes. Such assumptions and enactments of the colonial state were in accord with the values of indigenous landed magnates and their notion of social order.

28.7 LAW VS. CUSTOM DEBATE

The British ruled over India by their 'right of conquest'. The colonial state used law as the most important source of constituting its legitimacy. The appropriation of revenue, forest and natural resources was not arbitrary, unjustified exaction as was the case under 'oriental' pre-colonial despotic rule but as a legal right of the state. The colonial state itself was projected as a firm and impartial law-providing authority that respected 'universal principles of jurisprudence'. Law making, however, was an ideological enterprise and as an alien power, the colonial state could not completely ignore the existing legal norms and customs based on rank, status and gender. The colonial rule monopolized legitimate violence and used it as a sole prerogative of the state in its pacification drive. It, however, also used rhetoric of reconciliation with "laws and customs of people". For instance, if the indigenous penology punished

crimes according to the caste status of a criminal, the colonial state also recognized caste hierarchy. Concessions were made to 'rank and respectability and to the patriarchal authority of husband over wife and of master over servant. The high caste and rank people were exempted from religious oath in the courts of the Company. The colonial state exhibited ambivalence towards the principle of equality before law. It stemmed from negotiation of the colonial state with the existing customs. Many of the customary practices were re-ordered by the colonial state to suit its law and civil authority. The colonial state exercised its discretion in selectively retaining such customs and practices. For instance, in case of 'criminal tribe' this offence was traced and deduced from membership of a 'criminal community', but the powerful land-owning elites who were also often knit into indigenous systems of power and patronage with these same communities, were not made target of such special laws.

Veena Oldenburg (2002) has shown how the codification of 'custom' as adjudicable law in the Punjab countryside led to an erasure of women's voices and customs. According to her, in the pre-colonial customs, women had been co-parceners in the agricultural produce with their male counterparts as they engaged in sowing, weeding, harvesting, threshing and other agricultural works. However, colonial legal arrangements privileged male tillers of the soil and made them sole proprietors of the lands and its produce. In the pre-colonial society, the transmitted customary practices were negotiated and contested by men and women. These fluid customs were converted into written, fixed, judiciable and enforceable corpus of law. They were elicited only from men and customary law and its colonial legal rendition was only a high caste male reading of the principles of clan, caste, tribal organization and societal norms.

28.8 SUMMARY

In this unit we have seen how the forest policies of the colonial state and branding of certain communities by it marginalized nomadic and pastoralist people and devalued their mode of living. The colonial policies were driven by the commercial needs and requirements. They harmed the existing customary practices and rights of common people in the common property resources especially in woodlands and pastures. The colonial state also stigmatized certain communities as criminal by birth in order to maintain a rigid social-control over the mobile elements of the society. Law was an important tool of the colonial authorities for subjugating people and resources of the indigenous society in a legitimate manner. The colonial state, however, could not completely ignore the existing customs, legal norms and power arrangements within the indigenous society. It selectively used and retained practices relating to social rank, status and gender, thus privileging the upper caste male practices. In the process, it marginalized the lower caste people, the nomadic and pastoral communities outside settled agrarian economy and women. The mechanism of social control reinforced the grand alliance of alien colonial authority and indigenous powerful upper castes and classes.

28.9 GLOSSARY

'Annexationist' Forest Policy	:	A strand in thinking of colonial officials that favoured total control of state over forests and wanted to abolish existing customary rights of the indigenous communities.
'Criminal Tribes'	:	Branding of certain communities as 'criminals' by birth.
Common Property Resources	:	Resources that are managed and used by community collectively.

Customary Rights	:	Certain rights sanctioned by popular customs of the people.	Colonial Forest Policies and Criminal Tribes
Ecological Imperialism	:	A set of weeds, animals and diseases brought by the biological expansion and migrations from Europe destroyed the indigenous ecosystems of the colonies.	
Ecological Warfare	:	The process of destruction of ecosystems due to intrusion of commercial interests.	
Kumri/ Zhum/ Slash-and-burn Agriculture Shifting Cultivation	:	Shifting cultivation practiced by tribal communities.	
Pacification Drive	:	Attempt to disarm and control people.	

28.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Describe the various positions taken by the British officials in formulating forest policy.
- 2) What was the impact of colonial forest policy on the indigenous communities?
- 3) List the main provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act(1871).

UNIT 29 GENDER/WOMEN UNDER COLONIALISM

Structure

- 29.0 Introduction
- 29.1 The Historical Perspective on Woman Emerging in the Nineteenth Century
- 29.2 The Impetus of Social Change and Reform Centering on Women in the 19th Century
- 29.3 The Changing Role of Women in the Modern Period
- 29.4 The Normative Order and the Changes that Movements Brought to Women in the Political Space
- 29.5 The Class Differentiation of Women and their Consequent Public Spaces or Lack of Public Presence
- 29.6 Summary
- 29.7 Glossary
- 29.8 Exercises

29.0 INTRODUCTION

The nature of women's question in the colonial period was quite complex. The women were subject to a traditional order, which reigned them in as regards their social and public positions. It was the campaign of the social reformers in the 19th century, which brought their conditions centre stage. Western ideas and legislations by the colonial authorities under pressure from the reformers sought to create conditions, which were conducive to emancipation. In this unit, we will be taking you through the story of some major developments in which women themselves played an active role in changing their lot.

29.1 THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN EMERGING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The historical developments regarding woman was and continues to grip the human intellect even today. There have been many ways of looking at the woman question: from the Conservative to liberal Feminist, Marxist to Socialist Feminist and now the Post modernist and the Deconstructionist schools of analysis. Today a large number of works relating to women and work, middle class women, women and nationalism have become possible. These studies range from being very general to extremely specialised monographs focussing on women. This is because of the initiatives of the feminist movement, the International Decade of women and academic projects focussing on the status of women in India. Today the scholars working on women range from those who are parts of women in history or women and history or history of women perspectives.

In the 19th century when the woman's question came to play an important part of public discourse the issue of great importance was women's suffrage and equality in the western world. In the case of India that these questions came up during the course of our integration into the colonial society and culture as well as that a number of demands centering on woman became part of the anti-colonial movement has its relevance for shaping the nature of questions raised on the woman question aping of western values by Indian woman and its dangers, the essentialising of the golden era that India too had when there were women who too had a share in the fields of

knowledge and were themselves achievers to be glorified as ideals. These ideas would in their own way contribute to the debate around woman in colonial India in such a way that the problems of woman in Indian society got lost in the maze of culture, ideology, hegemony and assertion of the male idiom of politics of representation, identity politics of national culture and the national liberation movement that assumed centre stage till 1947. Issues such as social reform and women which had found conducive environment under the anti-colonial movement lost steam completely in the post colonial period until these issues were raised by women's groups in contemporary India.

The context of the range of works on the conditions of women in our society from very early on as in the writings of Altekar et al was to look at how hindu culture provided or limited the roles assigned for women from the ancient times. There are the examples of the Gayatri and Maithrayees who challenged the sages and were in their own right capable and knowledgeable human beings. The dominant option that prevails is that women were at some point in history subordinated to their acceptance of domesticity and reproduction and nurture role in our society. "A mother is more revered than a thousand fathers". Though a large section of women toiled alongside men in the fields, the mines and in the 20th century in the factories, it is the former image of women that has larger presence. It is the middle class women and their issues that found greater focus in the process of the anti-colonial movement and even today as it is their voice that can be rendered more easily on account of their social standing and educational background. The range of issues that came up in this situation was therefore demands such as women's education, women's representation in various bodies, property rights and so on. The visual representations were of the subordinated purdah clad and voiceless woman folk of the country who were waiting to be emancipated and liberated from the drudgery of domesticity, reproduction, sexual inferiority and subalternity. Here we can place the writings of women, men both Indian and from the European world who have written heart rending and at times sensational picturisation of the condition of women in India as for example the work of Katherine Mayo in the text "Mother India". Such characteristics of the dismal defensive responses from Indian intelligentsia as well as radical and reformative experiments that particularly in the 19th century created a whole range of debate on modernity, westernisation, progress and development among the Indian intellectuals.

29.3 THE IMPETUS OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND REFORM CENTERING ON WOMEN IN THE 19TH CENTURY

It was in the nineteenth century when the Indian subcontinent was teeming with ideas of significant importance on reform and change that the woman question assumed centre stage. This was to some extent related to the nature of questions that were taken up in the 19th century. These were influenced by the colonial ideology and political concerns that were voiced during these times. Campaigns such as for example that the condition of the women in a country is representative of the conditions and civilisation of the area transformed the mindset of the educated literati of Indians who saw in the amelioration of the conditions of the ideas such as Western impact and Indian response schema has been put out as the characterising the social reform agenda in the 19th century or for that matter transforming society. To Desai, this resulted in measures that were conducive for the emancipation of women and attempts to elevate their status that were initiated by social reformers. Was this a period of Renaissance? This was another rendition of the 19th century where scholars such as Sushoban Sarkar see in the reform initiatives the rebirth of vitality into colonial Bengal. All this engagement with the woman question related major reform legislation very helpful for women: Anti-Sati bill of Bentinck, Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and Educational Institutions for girls. The reform movements produced variety in its

regional focus on one or many of the issues that generally invited the concern of the 19th century mind.

In Western India part of the reform was on education of women and a range of social practices such as child marriage, widow re-marriage and the freedom of woman too to not consent to a marriage. Thus we have the images of Pandita Ramabhai, Ramabai Ranade and Tarabhai Shinde who worked on these issues on whom a number of scholarly works are available. That Ramabai Ranade was the child wife of a very important social reformer in Maharashtra M. G. Ranade made it possible to raise these issues in the nationalist campaigns. That the questions relating to woman such as the age of marriage as well as educational opportunities became the sites of reform for the Indian Social Conference under the leadership of Ranade. Interestingly it was on the issue of Age of Consent Bill that there came up a debate within Indian Nationalist dividing them: Tilak, totally against appealing to an alien government to make any such legislation to remedy an Indian social evil and the likes of Ranade etc. favouring it. Pandita Ramabai for example taking a particularly critical stance on the Rukmabai episode which was the case of a woman who did not want to give conjugal rights to her husband who was illiterate, sick and from whom she wanted to be free. It is at this time Malabari sought to work on getting the Age of Consent raised as well as divorce possible for women. Both these issues raised hell among many Hindu Nationalists as it was deemed as going against the grain of hindu beliefs and customs for women and as attempts to ape the western values for Indian women which was too much to accept.

The other area where the position of women was the site of reform was Bengal in the early 19th century. There has been a major debate on the implications of these efforts of social reform. To some historians the reform agenda was part of the process of modernisation of the traditional society. To others, reform was a tool in the hands of the colonised to regain their identity and to rejuvenate Indian culture. To some others it was through reform that the nationalist discourse constructed woman in an essentialist sensibility. And thus it was through reclaiming the space for woman, albeit based on essentialist notions, within the social fabric that the male colonial subject helped form a hegemonic national culture. This to some historians is the basic weakness of the social reform agenda of the 19th century. It remain embedded in the politics of power and representation that only situated the condition of the woman and through it sought to create the nationalist basis of mobilisation but did not resolve the woman question in any way. For example, the entire age of consent debate though technically concerned with the issue of the mature age at which the state wanted to ensure marriage took place, became the battleground for Indian nationalists as an attack on the right of the colonised to decide matters for themselves. Nonetheless, significant important issues that came to the fore and even were legislated upon was the Anti Sati Act of Bentinck, 1829, the widow remarriage Act of 1856. It is through these issues concerning the position of women within Indian society that the first visible mobilisation of Indians through associations took place. The demand for womens' education too gained aground as it was argued that it was of utmost need for the happiness, welfare and civilisation. The fact that there were texts such as Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's paribarik prabandha that are essays concerned with characterisation of the family.

Partha Chatterjee raises interesting questions: Was the field of education the site of challenge from the inroads of western ideas for the Indian reformers. And hence became a thrust area of great effort for the social and cultural space in colonial India was one where the colonial state put out the civilising mission of the colonised worshipping four million gods and prey to a variety of social evils by way of modernising them and liberating the 'barbarian' minds through western education. The nationalist agenda around the woman question put out its cultural defence that at its initial phase manifested as reform of woman's condition and at a later stage became a revival of earlier traditions neither of which resolved the woman's question. To Partha Chatterjee

then the nationalist paradigm made its own selection “to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project” And thus reform was both emancipation and self emancipation of woman and the image of the new woman who was fixed between the confluence of modern bourgeois values of order, cleanliness etc. as well as culturally specific spiritual and faithful qualities of traditional moorings. Role models of women were inscribed by the social and religious regulatory family and kinship practices. And thus the nationalist project of emancipation was incomplete because of its limited endeavour and aspirations that never really undid the social normative order: of the relations between gender in society and only touched its surface somewhat in its mobilisation strategies in the course of the anti-colonial movement.

In taking these arguments further in the context of the characterisation of the role of woman in Bengal, Tanika Sarkar points out that the good woman in Bengal was a good wife. The political vocabulary of Hindu nationalism was woman’s chastity. To quote her, “The chaste body of the Hindu woman was thus made to carry the unusual weight since she had maintained this difference in the face of foreign rule:. As opposed to the Hindu man who she argues had been colonised and assaulted by the western power knowledge. However she points out there also was the space that was traditionally available to women to read the scriptures that found the way out for the aspirations and expectations of women in traditional society to work through critically. For example in the life of Rashsundari Devi a Vaishnavite landlord wife whose biography *Aman Jiban* she evaluates, she elaborates this argument of feminine autonomy. Rashsundari’s biography is of the life of an ordinary Hindu woman in 19th Bengal which very carefully centres itself on her concerns and herself who was married off early. Although Rashsundari suffered the long winding years of caged existence as a wife and mother, she found refuge in reading the religious texts that probably had a liberating effect on her otherwise drab existence. It is only when Rashsundari becomes a middle age woman that we get a sense of fulfillment and peace in her when she puts out the idea of my sansar at the point when she is a mother-in-law, a grandmother and is beyond that stage of life where she was controlled. What thus comes across is the image of a woman who while fully rendering the familial responsibilities as in the various stages of life too at the same time through traditional idioms of reading religious literature and devotion expressed herself identity in such difficult times too.

In Southern India too under the leadership of Veerasalingam and later in the Madras Presidency legislature two issues around women became very crucial in the debates, one the anti nautch movement and the marriage bill which became the Sarada Act. In Kerala the Marumakkathayam was done away with by way of legislation in 1896 and in it’s place after a long standing debate within Kerala society, the integration of Kerala into the patriarchal rights concept came into being in the early twentieth century. With the work of Anne Besant and Margaret Cousins the question of women’s rights to representation and suffrage became an issue that engaged the minds and petitions of emergent women’s groups in colonial South India. It was in colonial Tamilnadu that the movement of Periyar, that the anticaste movement also took up the question of the role of women in society as its centrepiece as articulating its ideas of a new society which has its tensions in theory and practice for woman as has been shown in the writings of S. Anandhi.

Educating women was an important area of focus of the reformers. The Woods despatch of 1854 and the move to focus on mass education of the Indians included the women as an important component to be targeted. Thus came the Bethune schools, the Theosophical Society endeavours as well as a range of reform initiative schools such as under the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj etc. But then came up the issue of the nature of education and it is here the different approach to woman may be seen and their socially assigned role primarily as middle class mothers come to light as most of the initiative for educating girls initially was towards needle work, homeware and such other matters apart from the ability to read. Thus this was at some

level the duplicating of the colonial state endeavour to generate consent for colonialism through educating the women who would then inculcate similar values to their children.

29.3 THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MODERN PERIOD

It is with the policies of the state as well as through popular pressure through reformist organisations, cultural politics as also nationalist mobilisation that a number of measures relating to woman's condition got taken up. These had far reaching consequences on the nature of the family and position of woman within societies. The impact on women was by no means a unilinear, progressive one. Instead today there is recognition that some of the earlier liberatarians measures too had embedded within them the privileging of the dominant notions of woman's role in society as well as was building new images of women that did not undo the conservative social fabric. The reformist measures to educate women remained an elite enterprise that even today remains unrealised for a substantial section of women in society. Reform for women in the 19th century was also varied depending on the community, region and class that we are talking about and hence it is necessary to keep this in mind while making any general assessment for women and reform in modern India. For an upper caste woman the matter of education and widow remarriage was significant while for the lower caste woman in the early twentieth century just the right to cover her breasts and to be able to go to the temple of worship or learning would mean a qualitative difference in their acquisition of rights and empowerment.

In the context of Kerala to state a case the Madras High Court decree of 1869 called the sambandham not marriage but a state of concubinage. Thus by a single legal decision that declared the practice of sambandham as null and void as far as the legality of such custom as signifying marriage. This provoked a major debate in colonial Malabar as to the legitimacy and the viability of such social custom as being a primitive practice that as Sir Sankaran Nair put out was a great legal impediment to progress. In the course of the next fifty years first the Malabar Marriage Act 1896 and then the Marumakkathayam Act of 1933 contributed to the disintegration of the earlier practice of taravad and in its place brought into being the patriarchal, patrilineal family as the norm where earlier matriliney had been the accepted practice. Thus some of the legislation that was undertaken during this period had far reaching consequences on the nature of the family. These acts in Malabar created the patrilineal family where earlier the woman was the key determinant of lineage.

29.4 THE NORMATIVE ORDER AND THE CHANGES THAT MOVEMENTS BROUGHT TO WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL SPACE

The political experiences of women had by the early twentieth century facilitated the emergence of institutional mechanisms. Thus organisations of women came up in the twentieth century that then became the sites of public policy making and intellectual discussions. Major women's organisation that came up are the WIA, Women's Indian Association, the National Council of Women in India, NCWI and the All India Women's Conference, AIWC. All of this was middle class in its orientation except for a few as for example the work of Maniben Kara who became part of the M N Roy Group and took up the cause of the woman workers. Most women's organisations concentrated on politics, religion, education and philanthropy and thus were successful in bringing feminism and nationalism closer in the anti colonial movement and were part of the nationalist political horizon within which they remained. Thus a number of successful

women such as Muthulakhshmin Reddy, Shaffi Tyabji, Sarojini Naidu, Amrit Kaur to name a few luminaries did good work. Most of these women came from well heeled families and it is that rendered possible the space for them to emerge as well as laid the limits of their program for women too. Most of the time the women's question was subordinated to the larger interest of the freedom movement and thus Margaret Cousins for example exhorted, "Work first for political liberty...".

The demands of the women for political representation in the twenties and thirties brought to the fore the opposition to these reforms within the nationalists. The reform minded women did not stop at piecemeal legislation, they were aspiring by now for economic independence and comprehensive legislation for social and economic change. Even Gandhi who wanted to improve the status of women appealed to these women to live in the villages to realise that law was not relevant in the manner in which they were demanding for a sizeable number of rural women. Nehru endorsed women's public life but privileged agrarian reform over family law reform such as of property law and was against any collaboration on this matter with the colonial state. The Muslim league had no opposition to reforms so long as it was confined to Hindu Law. Thus the question of reform of family laws found no support from the mainstream political personalities and it remained a feeble though consistent demand of the women's organisations as necessary to change social relations in the family that still remains incomplete. Franchise compromise and the Rau's Committee's report did not reflect the mood of the women who gradually became one of the minority groups in the political firmament of vote bank politics of the twentieth century.

With the widening of the mass base of the national liberation movement under Gandhiji, we witness the greater representation of women in numbers in the public space. Gandhiji's ideal of women's passivity and self imposed suffering as celebrations of strength was limiting with the widening of the mass base of the national liberation movement under Gandhiji, we witness the greater representation of women in numbers in the public space. Gandhiji's ideal of women's passivity and self imposed suffering as celebrations of strength was strengthened by the impetus the Civil Disobedience movement got from the involvement of women. Women were now part of the mass politics and were picketers at foreign cloth shops, at liquor shops, at mill gates and in front of nationalist processions as barricades. We have the evidence of firebrand radical women such as Latika Ghosh, Sarojini Naidu as also patient self sacrificing women such as Ambujathammal a staunch Gandhian activist in Madras and Satyavati Devi in Delhi all of them in their own way imbued nationalist politics with a gender sensibility. At the same time it must also be noted that though women became part of the nationalist rhetoric and the subject matter of reform in this period it did not in any way lead to a fundamental transformation of women's roles within society or for that matter provide a fertile ground for the shaping of the identity of woman different from that prescribed by the norms laid out in contemporary society. Most of the efforts of the reformers were at the level of work that remained at the tip of the iceberg. There were centuries of ideologically ingrained values that appeared to be common sense, common custom and popular practice that could not easily be shorn off from the people's sensibilities.

The anti-colonial movement centre staged the woman question whose partial resolution was part of the enterprise of the nationalist question. But post the nationalist movement paradigm, with the attainment of freedom the reformative endeavour on the condition of the Indian woman and her social position has remained incomplete. The civil rights and the citizenship of woman integrally and equally as any other group in the mainstream social fabric has not happened in the Indian subcontinent as yet.

29.5 THE CLASS DIFFERENTIATION OF WOMEN AND THEIR CONSEQUENT PUBLIC SPACES OR LACK OF PUBLIC PRESENCE

It was during the colonial period that the modern factory as a form of workplace took shape. This has far reaching consequences for the nature of work relations for women. As unlike the open field in these factories women and men were cooped up with not enough light, space or ventilation. Thus the questions that came up with the women going to work in the factories was one such debate in late 19th century India. To the conservatives this would create women with loose morals as also made the safety of women very difficult to ensure. At the same time it was impossible to prevent the employment of women as these were the new sectors where women secured work easily. In fact, in the initial period of industrialization, women were invited to become part of the workforce as there were ample jobs available for men, women and children. Not to forget, women were sought after for they made economic and social sense for the employer: cheap labour, amenable to arduous labour. And it is in the factory system that we see legislation particularly for women bearing in mind their primary role as a mother and as a secondary wage earner taking shape. The emergent work relations and policies towards women workers in colonial India has been well brought out in the writings of Radha Kumar for Bombay, Samita Sen for Bengal and Janaki Nair for Mysore. We thus have evidence of how state policies impacted traditional society and vice-versa and at times how the bourgeois visions of the colonial state created its poor image in colonial India for the women engaged in industrial work. These in turn created the new work culture for women and men in the factory system.

Hence came the question of how to make the workplace safer for women and such attempts by labour reformers as well as government. That the factory and its environs were restrictive in many ways may be seen in a folk song from Ambasamudram where workers described the ethos of the mill as follows: “In the distance the dorai is coming, keep three feet off or he will beat you for three days...”⁵ It may well have been the case that the power of the dorai at the mill was so all encompassing then just as we now are witness to the torture of domestic helps within urban environments even in contemporary India. For the woman, the workplace was constraining more than in just physical terms. The constant fear of advances from the “all powerful maistri” is an oft-repeated complaint from women workers to every authority for possible redressal. The Royal Commission on Labour recorded this as universal phenomena all over India. We have ample instances of this being a major problem for women at the workplace. In Madurai and Coimbatore, there were many attempts to seek redressal from the management through the maistri’s suspension and the appointment of a female maistri in departments where women worked in large numbers.

In India, the Factory Act of 1881 marked the beginning of the colonial government’s endeavours to influence labour regulations and industrial management by British laws and practices.⁸ This act defined what a factory unit was, as also the measures that were binding on an industrialist to operate a factory. It sought to prevent the overworking of children but little effort was made in the interest of women workers. The Indian Medical Department advised the inclusion of women also as a section to be protected from overwork, night work and long hours.⁹ Acts that incorporated the recommendation followed in due course. The fact that India was a colony of the then most industrialized nation had great consequence not only for the course of industrialisation that took place but also the pattern of legislation. The next Act of consequence for women workers was the Act of 1922, whereby the government excluded women and children from all heavy work. Act II of 1922 also made provision for complete prohibition of night work for women workers.¹⁹

The issue of wages is a disputed arena for the simple reason that the grounds for payment were by no means rational. To the worker, there was always the scope to demand more, while for the entrepreneur there was always the urge to keep it to the minimum. As regards the payment of wages to women, the rationale operative was the secondary nature of women's work. Well grounded in the patriarchal family structure was the enunciation of the male wage as primary and later the concept of the living/fair wage as accommodating the upkeep of the male labourer's entire family. This, we see, was the determining factor for the low wages of women. A male doffer earned more than did a woman doffer. That cannot be explained as being the result of lower skill, as we shall discuss later in this section. In this, regional variation is also marked as in Madras the wages were higher than in Madurai, which, however, rated better than Coimbatore in terms of the wages paid.

Thus around the issue of wage, sexual harassment by the maistri or a petty official at the mill, for better conditions at the workplace the women were actively involved in protests and strikes. Though this as well as their involvement in nationalist mobilization especially during major movements such as the civil disobedience and Quit India the women from the working classes also got integrated into the public space of protest and strike politics.

There is also work that bring out the early involvement of women from the peasant group being actively associated with the local level politics as well as Kisan Sabha questions. The writings of Kapil Kumar represent the visibility of women in protest politics for example in the movements spearheaded by Swami Sahajanand. Women's involvement in mass politics during the anti colonial movement is evidence of their integration into the political questions of their times. Captain Lakshmi in the INA, Godavari Parulekar in working with the Warli tribe, the women working for the Telengana movement and the variety of women involved in the communist party activities in the course of the twentieth century carved out a niche for themselves in the male bastion that was politics.

29.6 SUMMARY

In this unit, we familiarised you with the story of women in India coming into their own in a landscape which was dominated by the colonial impact and the nationalist movement. That the women's question became a part of both reform movements and the movement for independence. But in this process, we cannot undermine the agency of women themselves who played an active role in fashioning a space for themselves. We also gave you an idea about how there was a difference between the conditions of women in the working class and the women belonging to the middle class. Some of the questions they addressed were different. However, a patriarchy buttressed by the colonial rule itself was an overarching framework within which women struggled to come into their own.

29.7 GLOSSARY

- Essentialising** : Here it is meant the phenomenon of looking at a period or a movement by pegging it to one basic feature.
- Feminism** : The movement of women often led by women around the issue of the reform of their condition or aspiring for their revolutionary change.

29.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the issues taken up by the social reform movement which impacted the women's question?
- 2) Discuss the aspects of the movements that brought women into political space.
- 3) What were the issues women faced at the modern factory in the colonial period.



UNIT 30 SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION

Structure

- 30.0 Introduction
- 30.1 Notions of Racial Superiority
- 30.2 Colonial Sociology and the Study of Subordinated others
- 30.3 Continuity and Change in Discriminatory Practices Based on Caste
- 30.4 Certain Socio-Economic Aspects of Servitude
- 30.5 Gender Discrimination
- 30.6 Clothes and Customs as Marker of Social Discrimination
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- 30.8 Summary
- 30.9 Glossary
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30.0 INTRODUCTION

Historians of Modern India have keenly debated about the kind of social change brought about under the colonial rule. There is no doubt about qualitative changes in the nature of administration and economy initiated by the intervention of British administrators. However, British administrators also borrowed the notions of rank, status and hierarchy from the indigenous cultural and religious traditions. The early colonial rule may have been a period of military conquest and economic plunder but it was not one of clumsy and ham-fisted social intervention by rulers imbued with a sense of racial superiority. Early British orientalist did not regard Indian culture and traditions as inferior. There was, however, a definite bias towards studying the more elite and exclusivist traditions of upper caste Hindus and respectable Muslim classes rather than the more flexible and all-encompassing religious and cultural traditions of lower orders of society. This was reflected in privileging of knowledge of Brahmanical texts and pronouncements of *ulema* or Muslim religious leaders rather than the uncodified cultural traditions of subordinated social groups. The principles of caste-hierarchy and ritual distinction helped in settlement of countryside by providing ideological support to British scholars and administrators, who, making use of a neo-Brahmanical interpretations of Indian society set about the task of rank-ordering indigenous social groups in various regions. The colonial sociology involved multiple changes in the social structure of colonial India. The social relations affected in the process of consolidation of colonial rule ranged from familial domain to that of community, from personal relationship to larger linkages in public spheres. One could argue that notions of status, hierarchies both indigenous and those imported from metropolis permeated these intricate and many-sided relationships. Even when a formal equality was professed between kinship and caste groups under the colonial regime, two broad categories of privileged and deprived existing side by side were a norm.

The present unit proposes to explore the nature of social discrimination and its diverse forms in different parts of India. The interface between colonial state and society on the one hand and relationships among Indians on the other hand provided the context within which social discrimination was practised. Social discrimination and backwardness existed in India even before the advent of British rule. But the formation and development of colonial state heralded the process of major social and administrative changes, which remoulded many of the pre-existing social hierarchies. We wish to explore how the new colonial milieu influenced various forms of social discrimination along race, caste, class and gender. In other words, we hope to pinpoint the structural basis of institutionalised discrimination.

30.1 NOTIONS OF RACIAL SUPERIORITY

The British colonial rulers came to India imbued with the spirit of liberal humanism. This liberalism defined white European men as the maker of history, the creators of empires, the founders of modern nations, the conquerors of backward people and masters of sciences and technology. Naturally, they placed the people who did not make progress or lagged behind in time at the lower ladder of development. The colonial subjects were simply written out of history, out of modernity and into a timeless primitiveness-Eden-like, simple and permanently fixed. The colonial rulers used the domestic ideology of gender to demonstrate backwardness of India and its inhabitants. The European white men were strong, active, and intellectually fertile with a sense of self-control and discipline while the colonial Indian subjects were effeminate, fearful, passive and sentimental. In other words, British imperial experience brought into prominence the 'masculine' virtues of the master race and devalued 'feminized' colonial subjects. The British sahibs maintained their privileges and segregation not merely in ideological realm but in various fields. The British in India maintained their segregated and dominant position in India. They not only built their bungalows separately but even their shopping malls, recreational clubs were also distinct. The relationship with Indians was established for the purpose of governance. The British as administrators, military personnel's and even as civilians demanded regulated behaviour from Indians. It was presumed that in hierarchical society, Indians were bound to adhere to their customs and they had no rights to appropriate symbols of ruling class.

The urban morphology exhibited this clearly. The Europeans lived in large segregated sprawling houses with surrounding lawns and separately even from indigenous elite and mercantile groups. Despite the notions of rule of law and equality before law, the British community in India opposed Ilbert Bill, which sought to empower Indian magistrates in the countryside to try British subjects. The Indians were denied every opportunity to join the privileged Indian Civil Service, which was dominated by the graduates from elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The white sahibs were to be carried around in palanquins in the early phase of colonial rule. The post was accessible to them even before sorting out of post. The Post Office Act (1854) charged double postal rates from indigenous newspapers to that charged on the imported English newspapers. While the liberal traditions wished to recreate India as the mirror image of British society, in actual practice India was governed with an iron hand and Utilitarians also declared that India was not capable of governing itself. In order to establish their control over the forest resources of India, the British forest bureaucracy discouraged slash and burn cultivation practised by many indigenous tribal groups and penalized small scale hunting by such social groups, which used to be a major source of proteins in their diets. But, organized hunting was cultivated as a sport among the members of civil and military colonial bureaucracy to demonstrate their racial distinctiveness.

In the 1830s F.J.Shore, a judge in upper India resented that 'natives of rank' visited the rooms of Englishmen with their shoes on. He was adhering to the practise where in British had noticed that only rich Indians generally wore shoes and their helpers and subordinate went barefoot. The complaint of F.J.Shore rested on the notion that British were the superiors in India. He attributed the behaviour of Indians to 'the bad manners of the natives of Calcutta' belonging to 'an inferior order'. Shore also regretted that it was the carelessness of Europeans and their unfamiliarity with 'eastern etiquette', which had resulted in usage of practice. In their public pronouncements and patronized newspapers, British often ridiculed Indians. For instance Tribune, which was started by Dayal Singh Majithia in 1881, exposed the misdeeds of administrators in Punjab. In a series of articles, the paper exposed the deputy commissioner, C.A.Roe of Multan in handling the issue of cow- slaughter. The

Tribune noted that decisions of C.A.Roe had resulted in communal riots in 1881. It was strongly refuted by the Civil and Military Gazette. In one of its article, it dubbed Multanis as liars. It accused them of exaggerating and fabricating actual incidents.

The rulers also believed in public display of their power. The colonial rulers made use of the many ceremonial trappings of pre-colonial sovereignty for this purpose. The imperial durbar in 1911 was specifically organized to display their racial superiority. In that year, King George V & his queen came to India and King George was formally crowned as the King Emperor of India. To celebrate the occasion, the Government of India decided to hold the imperial Durbar in which the leading Princess by offering homage would express their respect to the imperial majesties. Before the actual ceremony, rehearsal was also held to explain the proper form of offering homage to King Emperor and his consort by the Princess. However Gaekwad of Baroda could not attend the rehearsal. On his behalf, his brother took notes. On the day of the imperial Durbar, the Gaekwad also offered his homage. He came wearing a plain knee-length jacket, red turban and white European trousers. He also carried an English style walking stick. In offering his obeisance, Gaekwad however neglected the Princess and while retracing several steps, he turned back and walked down the steps swinging his stick. It was this behaviour which was dubbed by the Times reporter as seditious. Very soon English newspapers in India and England started heated discussion on the behaviour of Gaekwad. In analysing this episode Bernard S. Cohn has pointed out that use of a walking stick had evoked strong reaction among the British because they regarded it as marker of white sahib's identity.

30.2 COLONIAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF SUBORDINATED OTHERS

An understanding of process of social discrimination requires some background of pre-colonial hierarchy and rank ordering of society as well as transformations initiated by the colonial state. In the historiography of modern India, works on colonialism such as those of Thomas Metcalf, Nicholas Dirks and Partha Chatterji have explored its institutional and ideological basis. Bernard S. Cohn in particular has shown that colonial rule was also a cultural construct. The very process of acquiring information about Indians was connected with strengthening and legitimisation of colonial rule in India. The process started after the annexation of Bengal in eighteenth century. The interests of British administrators in knowledge of Indian law, culture and religion were intertwined with requirements of running the colonial dispensation. Colonialism reconstructed cultural forms and social institutions like caste to create a line of difference and demarcation between themselves as European modern and the colonized Indian traditional subjects. In such production and identification of Indian traditions, caste-hierarchy was recast as the spiritual essence of India that mediated and regulated the private domain. Caste-ridden Indian society was depicted as different from the European civil society because this institution was opposed to the basic premises of individualism. The operation of this pre-colonial source of identification and sense of loyalty could easily be used to justify the rule of modern colonial administrators. So, according to Dirks, it was the colonial rule of India that organized the 'social difference and deference' solely in terms of caste. Caste hierarchy and ritual ranks in their various manifestations and forms were not unchangeable in the pre-colonial times. There were also non-caste affiliations and social identities such as kinship networks linked by matrimonial alliances, commercial activities and state service and patronage in pre-colonial times. However, caste was also a typical marker of identity and a powerful social metaphor that designated higher and lower orders. The penal system of Peshwas, for instance, punished culprits according to caste status. Caste, therefore, was not merely a fabrication of British rulers designed to demean and subjugate Indians. It, however, did definitely helped colonial rulers in justifying their rule to 'civilise' and 'improve' the 'fallen people'. The evangelicals condemned the

‘Brahmanical tyranny’ and the colonial state also used the principles of caste-hierarchy as a kind of bulwark against anarchy and as an upholder of social order. Till 1860s, tenets of social policy centred on abolition of Sati and Female infanticide and this was connected with ‘civilizing mission’ of the rulers. Their notion of patriarchy made them conclude that they alone were capable of maintaining a rational social order based on the idea of material and moral progress in India. As India became the direct colony of Britain in 1858, rulers stressed racial superiority in the public domain. Viewed from this perspective, social discrimination can be described as those policies of British rule, which denied equality and respect to Indians. Social discrimination was also inherent in the assumptions of rulers revolving around customs and behavioural pattern of Indians. However it also remains a fact that upper castes and dominant groups in India endorsed some of these practices. Social discrimination was, in this sense, rooted in exploitation, denial of identity to subordinate groups. It was also rooted in practice of segregation and imposition of subordination on exploited and oppressed groups.

30.3 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES BASED ON CASTE

In this section, we deal with the changing face of caste during nineteenth century. The colonial rule was consolidated and it acquired powers of intimidation and observation that influenced the Indian subjects. It was in these conditions that caste became the measure of the new ranking order. Thus, the tribal social groups like Bhils, Kolis and Ramoshis became dependent labourers while the privileged landowning and trading castes Hindus were treated as high, pure and superior. With their notions of private property and privileging of settled agriculturists, the Britishers gave tangible force to distinctions between ways of life that had not previously been analytically ranked, compared and standardized. It was not merely the census, which enumerated Indians, and fixed caste identities, there were also several policies adopted by British administrators, which dubbed some tribal and caste groups as criminal. Stewart N. Gordon’s study of the Bhils highlights this change in their life. During the Mughal period, Bhils residing in isolated tract in northeast Maharashtra had moved into the Khandesh valley. During the rule of Marathas they started collecting levies from passing caravans. In order to protect travellers, some Bhils leaders were granted the right to collect duties from travellers. Gradually they started working as watchmen. Many of them settled on the plains and became peasant cultivators. When the British controlled central India in 1818, they formulated policies, which perpetrated stereotypes against Bhils and their ways of food production. While land was given to Zamindars, Bhils residing in hills were without permanent sources of income. They were seen as criminal. The very fact that they lived in hills generated fear among British. John Malcolm dubbed them as outlaws and ‘enemies of order and peace’. They were seen as those who cherished their predatory rights. This led British to dub them as ‘criminal tribe’. John Briggs, commissioner of Khandesh harped on this rigid identity for Bhils. Subsequently, under the policy of Elphinstone, who was the governor of Bombay, Bhils were gradually settled in plains but it remained a fact that those residing in hills remained segregated and many of them became the victims of agrarian bondage as agricultural labourers for the landowning Hindu castes.

During the nineteenth century, colonial administrators classified the subcontinent’s ‘castes’, ‘tribes’ and races in terms of importance and desirable quality defined as per the ‘modern science’ and discovered tenets of ‘Hindu religious faith’. These classificatory schemes served the needs of British administration, which wished to represent itself as protector of the ‘sanctity of contract and private property’, and settled agriculturists against the ravages of Pindari-bands and other so called predators.

The thrifty husbandman, the pious man of trade and the chaste 'clean-caste' wife became ideal inhabitants of India and those primitive tribes, pastoralists and low-caste untouchables who shared little in the domain of modern progress were placed at a lower ladder in the newly constructed taxonomy for social groups. In the pre-colonial periods, birth and moral attributes did play a role in determining a person's caste status but there was also considerable openness and fluidity. Now, in the middle of colonial rule, Brahmanical standards of piousness, purity and refinement of manners were applied more vigorously to the caste-hierarchy. This finely tuned difference created rigorous barriers between those of 'clean' caste, and those stigmatised as innately degraded, unclean and polluting. Defined as the fixed attributes of birth and rank, jati and varna ideals were used to coerce and dominate, especially as rural elites tried to maintain authority over tenants and dependent labourers. But while new disabilities were, thus, imposed on lower castes and tribal social groups, the volatile and unpredictable colonial milieu also simultaneously offered new opportunities and new set of material and ideological resources which could be utilized by the less disadvantaged to move up and demand better entitlement to the resources. In the formal sense, the colonial rule professed equality between its subjects. But this did not mean an end to social discrimination. The insistence on contract, enforceable by law and new courts, meant that those with better resources could consolidate their position by manipulating the new colonial institutional framework.

The local rural magnates in different parts of the country tried to claim a right to demand servitude and deference from landless labourers or subordinated *kamins* and other *balutedars*(clients) as well as from the marginal tribal cultivators. Much of this was done with extra-economic coercion using strict norms of hierarchy and pollution-barrier. In large parts of Madras Presidency the greater part of agricultural labourers, belonging to lower castes, had been reduced to near servitude. Large parts of Tamil country as well as Malabar and Kanara region witnessed growth of this type of agrarian bondage. In some districts, the conditions of untouchable Pallans or Paraiyans were really terrible. In this part, The British legal and judicial system reinforced the traditional caste institution and social distinctions, giving a fresh lease of life to the power, privileges and authority of upper castes. The Brahman landlords, who did not engage themselves in any kind of manual unclean, ritually polluting labour processes utilized the services of either tenant-cultivators or employed bonded labourers in their fields. This type of agrarian servitude was also quite common among the Cherumans of Malabar where they were treated like slaves and could be sold, mortgaged and rented out. There were groups outside the agricultural sector in the countryside who provided various kinds of services to the upper castes and classes. The Bhangi 'scavengers' of north India, the Vannan washermen of Malabar, the Chamar leather-workers of north India and the Shannars or toddy- tappers of Tamilnad. Various social disabilities were imposed on such people who performed indispensable defiling tasks for the purity-conscious upper caste Hindus. They were forbidden entry into temples. They could not make use of public wells. They were also denied use of certain types of clothes, ornaments and other paraphernalia of upper caste people, to walk freely in certain quarters and localities. A Nadar of Tamilnad could not approach a Brahman within twenty-four paces. Their women were not allowed to cover their breasts. There were also much larger group of dependent rural labourers such as Chamars in the Gangetic plain, the Mahars in the western India and Paraiyan, Pala, Mala, Holeyia and Cheruma in the south who were depicted as permanently unclean and impure by virtue of the defiling labour which they performed, not as free wage labour but as providers of compulsory labour services to local rural magnates or proprietors. However, much of this ritually defined subordination of these lower social orders was the creation of colonial economic penetration because until well into nineteenth century, settled agriculture had not completely overshadowed the pastoral and tribal ways of life and production systems. Expansion of cultivation in less fertile tracts involving dry crops required few labourers apart from the immediate kin of peasant family. There were, of course, caste-specific conventions and norms of

pollution-removal acts and services that provided the model the working of village *baluta* system in the western India and *jajmani* relationships elsewhere in the pre-colonial scheme of things. This also had created a separate category of village menial servants known as *kamins*, *praja* and *ayagars* in different regional contexts. The relationship of these social groups with their patrons was not always harmonious and it is doubtful whether their share in the material and ritual assets of the indigenous society were so well protected as sometimes depicted. The famine records of nineteenth century demonstrate that they were, in fact, first to perish in large numbers in case of calamity. Yet, in more recent colonial times, these lowly placed *kamins* and group of dependent labourers, accustomed to limited entitlements, found that their lot was worse off as their former patrons abandoned the existing webs of rights and services, leaving former dependents to fend for themselves in a presumably casteless labour market.

Sometime it is believed that untouchability and rigid concepts of pollution were basically a reflection of traditional rural India and the colonial milieu created new avenues of opportunities in the form of urban industrial workplaces and modern western education. There is no doubt that social transformation linked to colonialism brought many non-elite migrants into colonial coastal towns and industrial and new administrative centres. Moving to cities, leather workers tended to be employed as low-paid labourers in tanning and shoe-making factories. Doms or the traditional north Indian funerary specialists took up the jobs as mortuary attendants at dissecting rooms of the colonial hospitals. In cotton mills also mill hands were generally from social groups that had been identified as 'impure' or unclean. In the rural settings, these groups faced conditions of servitude and bondage and paradoxically, when they moved to urban as unskilled labourers, the Bhangi, the Mahar and the Chamar also encountered caste norms. The nature of casual labour in the factories, shipyards and tanneries tended to increase the power of pollution barrier and social life in such workplaces also reinforced their lowly, impure and untouchable status. Thus, we find a close correlation between caste norms and ritually governed entitlement to resources. Moreover, while most of these social norms and practices predate colonial rule, the latter in fact, entailed certain changes in the position of subordinate social groups in different parts of the country.

30.4 CERTAIN SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF SERVITUDE

Most of the agricultural labourers in south Gujarat belonged to the tribal groups like Dubla, Naika and Dhodia communities. Many among them worked as *halis* or bonded labourers. *Halis* were like permanent estate servants of their masters known as *dhaniamas*. They would become bonded labourer in perpetuity for a trifling sum of money. They were like unpaid labourers who did all type of manual *begar* for the local rural magnates. M.B. Desai estimated that in Surat district about one fifth of tribal labourers were *halis*. The upper caste women of landowning castes like Anavils, Rajputs and Patidars could not work in the fields due to social taboo associated with manual labour. Such groups, therefore, employed bonded labour on a large scale. The caste divisions in south Gujarat had got crystallized into two major categories: the kaliparaj and the ujaliparaj. The ujaliparaj comprised the higher castes such as Brahman, Bania and Rajputs whereas the kaliparaj included the lower castes such as Dublas, Dheds, Dhodias and Naikas. The distinction was clearly visible in the various aspects of their social life including food habits, literacy and religious beliefs. More importantly, however, it was a matter of entitlement to various material and productive assets and resources especially agricultural land and expanding networks of markets that were created by the colonial economy and differential access to it for various sections of rural society. Similar class cleavages were also discernible in the other parts of western and southern India where untouchable lower castes, tribal groups and marginal

tenant-cultivators suffered from insidious social discrimination. *Hali* system of keeping bonded labour in south Gujarat was permeated by notion of patronage and was based on use of labour-services of subordinate families in perpetuity by the dominant landlords of that locality. According to Jan Breman, Hali was the term used for a farm servant who along with his family was in the permanent employment of a landlord, a *dhaniamo*. Such form of labour employment was everlasting and was transferred from one generation of farm servants to next generation. The practice had its genesis in incurring of debt by an agriculture labour for marriage or any other social ceremony. The debt was obtained from a master who was willing to employ him. Over the period of time, as debt increased, enduring oppression of farm servant also became fixed and preset, as the *hali* would never be in a position to repay his debt. According to Jan Breman, established service relationship could end only if another master was willing to take over the *hali*. The *Hali* system governed the social relationships between Dublas and Anavil Brahmins, who were not priest as in the traditional social hierarchy. Many of them had become landlords even before the Mughal period. Being of the highest castes, they did not participate and contribute in the defiling manual labour that was so vital for agricultural production. Employing *halis* belonging to Dublas caste facilitated their dodging of such menial tasks, which would degrade their position in the caste-hierarchy. *Hali* apart from working as farm servant often performed other duties assigned by his master. His wife also served as maid in the house of the master undertaking all domestic drudgery. His children also served the master especially in tasks involving animal husbandry.

The continuation of *Hali* system was the result of not merely the exploitative power of landlords. It was rooted in the established social relationship based on patronage and the so-called affection, generosity and intercession of their semi-feudal masters and a 'permanent security of livelihood' for the *halis* could be assured. Thus, their servitude was mixed up with a sense of gratitude. Alongside, *Hali* system guaranteed dominant status of anavil Brahmins. During nineteenth century, many of them were involved in sugar plantation. As their income increased, many of them married their daughters into the families of Desais. The employment of *halis* provided them with continuous supply of agricultural labour.

The conditions of lower social orders in other parts of the country were no better. The Chandels in Bengal, the Doms in Bihar and Bhuniyas in south Bihar also reveal that similar scrupulous discriminatory processes of prejudice and inequity were at work. The Namsudras of Bengal, earlier known as Chandels were relegated to the position of Antyaja, for whom even service castes such as barbers, washermen and sometimes lowly placed scavengers refused to perform services. The Bhuniyas provided labour services to the high caste *Maliks* as bonded labourers and they were incorporated as *kamias* in the social hierarchy. The changes associated with colonialism, thus, represented a real shift in both the language and the lived reality of rural social life. The landowning local magnates who had earlier defined their respectable status predominantly in terms of protected landed rights and privileged military service in some parts of the country, now buttressed demands for labour services by imposing grand codes of ritual servility onto an increasing assortment of landless farm servants and former tribal share-croppers who had not previously been bracketed with 'untouchables'. The colonial policy-makers helped such social engineering by inventing customary obligations for those defined low in caste terms. The protection provided to their landed rights by the colonial regime further encouraged such elites to demand *begar* and *vethi* from disadvantaged social groups.

30.5 GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Several studies have explored gender relation in colonial India. The position of women within households was marked by subordination at a general level. The institution of

Patriarchy and the legal machinery in public sphere further reinforced this subordination. Radhika Singha, Tanika Sarkar and Kumkum Sangari have highlighted these aspects in their works. Urvashi Butalia has pointed out particularly how communal riots violated bodies of women. The print media especially newspapers during colonial rule clearly indicates that women were essentially seen as marker of honour of community and nation. They were not regarded as independent individuals capable of actualising their innate potential. In a male dominated social arrangement, any attempt by them to marry out of caste or with males of different religion evoked widespread resentment. Seen from the perspective of women, social discrimination was practised both at the familial and public levels. The denial of an independent identity amounted to subjection of women. Here it is also important to point out that social religious reform movement focused mainly on the plight of upper caste women. The fate of women and men belonging to lower stratum of society remained neglected. Here women suffered from several discriminatory practices, which were, imposed in the name of customs by the appropriation of upper castes norms and values. Even the stress on the education of women enabled them to become better wives, mothers and managers of their affluent households. The social reformers evoked the vision of an ideal social world, which was at variance from the actual world in which they lived. Therefore, their moral world was conservative and hierarchical, a framework comprising of high and lowly, each in their place. In this male vision, women were placed at the margins of public space. They had to be subordinated even within the realm of domesticity. In some cases, it was the fear of Christian conversion that led to creation of institutional and organizational networks to spread female education. Women had no genuine say over theologies, educational curricula and administrative structures in such institutions.

Sometimes, when the reformers tried to reclaim 'golden age of equality', a time when women were educated and could participate equally in rituals with men; in such discourses also they stressed the traditional and venerated ideal of *pativarta* and the social role of women were still moulded by high caste, middle class patriarchal values. In the religious and social discourses, women were relegated to the margins of sacred space. More importantly, their sexuality, their forms of entertainments and their habits were to be controlled in the name of traditions and customs of lineage. In order to recover a lost past, reformers paint a picture of contemporary moral and cultural degeneration and a homogenized image of traditional women. For the nationalist intelligentsia, securing image of domesticity through a moral and physical rigorous confinement to maintain the fidelity and chastity of women became a new rationale for the subordination of women. The Victorian colonial image of women also equally emphasized the authority of a new reformed ideological community in enforcing these notions of proprieties and contributed to fortification of women subordination in domestic and public space.

30.6 CLOTHES AND CUSTOMS AS MARKER OF SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION

In any society, clothes worn by people of different age, gender and class background act as marker of specific identity. Such identity is reflected not merely in familial space but also in public domain. In colonial India, wearing of specific clothes was connected with maintenance of social distinction. In many parts of India, low castes and tribals were not allowed to wear clothes used by higher castes. It severely restricted the mobility of women belonging to lower castes and tribals. They were subjected to numerous exploitative practices, which were justified in the name of prevailing customs.

In the state of Travancore, low caste shanars who identified themselves as Nadars were engaged in menial and other informal and casual jobs. They were palm tree tappers, carters and agricultural labourers. Many of them were tenants of Nair

landlords. In social hierarchy, they were placed below Nairs who were the landowners and performed military service in the state. Social norms in society were enforced by the state by pointing out specific code of respect and avoidance behaviour. Thus a low caste person while approaching a Brahmin had to speak from a specific distance. In case of Nadars, they were required to stand at the distance of thirty-six paces from the Nambudri Brahmin. Nadars were also not allowed to wear shoes, golden ornaments and carry umbrellas. Their women were not allowed to cover the upper parts of their bodies. All castes below the rank of Nair could wear single cloth of rough texture, covering their bodies from waist up to the knee.

The situation changed when missionaries in Travancore started spreading Christianity. They were concerned about clothes worn by Nadar women. Under the influence of Christianity, many Nadar women started wearing long clothes. Many of them opted for Nair style breast cloth. It evoked strong reaction from Nair community. During 1820s many Nadar women wearing such clothes were attacked and were beaten up in the markets. There was widespread social tension in 1859. The Maharaja of Travancore responded to social tension by issuing a proclamation on 26 July 1859. Under this proclamation all communities were allowed to dress in coarse cloth. They were also allowed to cover their bosoms. However the proclamation also directed Nadar women not to wear breast clothes identical to that worn by Nair women. Thus even the Maharaja of Travancore believed in maintaining social distinction. However Nadar women defied this directive. In his assessment, Hardgrave has concluded that response of Nadars was connected with their attempt to enhance their social status. R.N.Jesudas however has linked this issue with a wider class struggle in the state of Travancore.

30.7 RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION

The social history of colonial India is replete with instances of discrimination of untouchables and other low castes in the name of religion and established social norms. The Brahmanical domination and ritual purity of upper castes was maintained in villages and urban areas in numerous ways. Even when reformers sought to break caste restrictions, it did not work. For instance, during 1920s Shuddhi movement by the Arya Samaj sought to remove caste divisions. For this purpose, purification ceremonies were held and inter-caste dining was encouraged. However, Swami Shardhanand noted that though upper caste leaders participated in such ceremonies but they did not participate in inter caste-dining ceremonies.

In many parts of India, untouchables were not allowed to enter temples and other sacred places. In villages they were allowed to live only on the outskirts of village residential area. They were not allowed to fetch water from village wells. Under colonial rule, even when traditional ties broke down in the wake of growing economic penetration of colonial economy, it was seen that there were virtually no avenues for low castes to ensure make use of expanding opportunities as they had no entitlements to land and other non-material resources. In Madras, Punjab and Maharashtra, some individuals and small sections among lower castes had tried to improve their conditions but by and large they did not have access to education. Even when they had appropriate skills, in factories they could be employed only in tasks considered to be polluting. For instances in Jullundhur, Kanpur, many were employed in tanneries and shoe-making factories but upper castes maintained distance from them.

There was growing realisation among exploited people that they were discriminated against by dominant and powerful castes due to their lowly ritual status. Non-Brahmin movements such as that of satyasodhaks under Jyotiba Phule in western India and activities of other reformers and leaders like B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi sharpened such consciousness. The above-mentioned trends can be exemplified by

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analysing the position of Mahars in Maharashtra. In villages, Mahars were employed as watch men, wall menders, messengers, servants of village headmen and government officials. They were also engaged in the task of removing cattle carcasses. The families of Mahars performed these duties from one generation to another. They were not allowed to question their subordinate position. In the mid-nineteenth century, a Mahar boy from Dharwar sought admission in a government school. He was not granted admission. For the redressal of his grievances, the 'untouchables' of Dharwar appealed to the Education Department of Bombay province. In 1857, they also petitioned to the government of India at Calcutta. However, his petition was dismissed on the ground that there was strong opposition from higher castes. In 1890, Gopal Baba Walangkar, and some the retired army soldiers from Ratnagri submitted a petition to the 'Shankaracharya and other Hindu leaders'. In their petition they listed the disadvantages suffered by the 'untouchables'. They also pointed out that the 'untouchables' did not have access to schools. They were denied stay in dhamshalas and were not allowed to participate in trade.

Krishnaji Keshav Damle vividly described the social stigma attached to 'untouchability' in the nineteenth century in his poem:

The First question of the Untouchables Boy
The children of untouchables
Poor, gay, playing on the road side—
A Brahmin came from far
To the simple, kind what should he say:
' O you brats of Mahars, move away
Be gone! What are you playing at, you lout?
Run and give way to the Brahmin!
The boy fled— who would dare stay!
One amongst them did;
The wicked Brahmin brandished his club and shouted,
"Ass! Thy shadow must not fell on me,
Get thee gone, or else this "sweet present"!"
The kid too slunk homes words,
Musing———
"What if my shadow fell on him?
What's so wrong about it?"
At home he asked the question to his mother.
The poor mother said:
"We are low and they are high,
When you see them, you had "better step aside"

In Bengal, though economic position of Namasudras were not identical in all parts of province, but they were subjected to numerous social disabilities. These affirmed the dominant position of Bhadralks. For instance, their own Brahmans performed all the religious and social ceremonies of Namasudras. In social feasts they had to sit separately and were expected to clean their dishes. Their living space was also segregated. The voices of many Namasudra recounted such experiences. Citing his

childhood experiences, a Namasudra pointed out that his mother worked in the houses of Kayastha landlords in Burdwan. He also accompanied his mother. His sister also helped in looking after the children of landlords. Thus though coming from lower caste, they were allowed entry into the house of a higher caste landlord. However, one day he saw the eldest son of the landlord urinating in the house. He also did the same but his act infuriated the landlady. She thrashed him. After words, she bathed ceremonially as she had touched an untouchable.

It was presumed by dominant upper castes in Punjab that they had the right to demand labour from Kamins. The latter worked as scavengers and agricultural labourers. Over the period of time, such exploitation was resented. In 1927, in village Baghiana in Lahore district, Kamins belonging to the Balmiki community refused to continue their traditional work of the flaying of dead animals. Against this decision, landowners offered joint contract to Balmikis at lower rate to do the work. When it was refused, landlords resorted to boycott of Balmikis. The latter were not allowed to use the village tank, thoroughfares and common lands. They were also attacked and were not allowed to lodge complaint at the local police station.

30.8 SUMMARY

On the basis of certain instances, an insight into the processes of social discrimination based on caste, gender and unequal entitlement to resources has been provided. These discriminations were practised under the norms of ritual distinctions and patriarchal ideology. Subordinate social groups also experienced unequal entitlements to land, educational opportunities and other non-material community resources. It was these lived social experiences, which provided the rationale for the resistance against the disadvantaged position inflicted on some social groups by the colonial rule. The institutionalised discrimination was discernible in social relationships in rural India. However, what was considered as natural and inevitable by dominant castes was eventually perceived discriminatory by the lower castes and this opened the terrain for contestation between them.

30.9 GLOSSARY

Hali System	: It denoted relationship between Anavil Brahmin landlords and Dublas farm labourers.
Bhadraloks	: Upper Castes, mainly Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaidyas in Bengal
Kamins	: Untouchables in Punjab who are required to offer begar/forced labour to upper caste landlords.
Mahars	: Untouchable caste in Maharashtra.
Dhaniemo	: Landlord-creditor in South Gujarat.

30.10 EXERCISES

- 1) “British Rulers denied social respect and equality to Indians rulers for upholding the dominant position” Comment.
- 2) How did women of lower caste suffer in Indian society during nineteenth century?
- 3) Describe *Hali* system in South Gujarat
- 4) Recount some of the experiences of untouchables pointing out social discrimination in colonial India.

UNIT 31 POPULAR PROTESTS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Structure

- 31.0 Introduction
- 31.1 Historiographical Trends
- 31.2 Dominant Features of Pre-Colonial Society
- 31.3 Colonial Rule and Ruptures in Society
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- 31.5 Kol Revolt
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- 31.10 Kisan Sabhas and Baba Ramchandra
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31.0 INTRODUCTION

The official documentation deploys terms like Fiture, Hool, Ding , Ulgulan and Vidroha to describe varied uprisings which were dubbed mainly as law and order problems. However recent researches have shown that these terms denoted popular uprisings against colonial exploitation. These were led by peasants and tribals who were not monolithic entities. The differentiation within peasants and tribals indicated that they were parts of existing social structures and during time of protest, they were as much helped by other poor classes.

31.1 HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRENDS

Numerous works exist on the agrarian and social history of precolonial and colonial India. While the imperialist historiography has denied exploitation of India and has taken credit for bringing intellectual awakening in India, the nationalist historiography for a long time has only focused on Indian national movement. The role of congress leadership in mobilising peasants has been highlighted. However this has come under scrutiny.

Within Marxian framework, agrarian society and economy has been analysed within the context of mode of production. In the process social differentiation within peasantry has been also pointed out. However Shahid Amin in his study of 'Peasant Production' in colonial Uttar Pradesh has stressed the need to study process of production. In his assessment, only then the problems of peasants and nature of their subjectivity can be highlighted.

Initially works like those of S.B.Choudhary also focussed on the role of peasantry in studying popular movements. However this lacuna has been removed. Social Anthropologists and Historians have focused on various tribal movements to indicate the nature of social structures that determined popular protests led by tribals. In this regard K.Suresh Singh has produced seminal works on the protest movement led by Birsa Munda.

Ranajit Guha who has studied the popular aspects of peasant insurgency between 1783 and 1900 has provided an analytical framework. He has shown that official documentation was indicative of 'power-discourse'. He points out since most of rebels were illiterates they found their existence in official documentation within colonial perspective so only by deconstructing these documents voices of peasants can be found.

He has argued that, as the rebel was conscious of starting revolt against dominant groups so he was an insurgent. However he found his identity at the level of dominant groups. That's why he possessed negative consciousness. Ranajit Guha's work definitely helps in understanding social ties, intellectual and spiritual beliefs that went into the making of peasant revolts. Though historians have questioned his concept of negation and the categories of dominant and subaltern groups but it remains a fact that he has produced wealth of information on the nature of popular protests.

The role of national movement, Mahatma Gandhi and Communist leadership in mobilizing people and coordinating anti imperialist movements has been highlighted in several works. Gyanendra Pandey and Kapil Kumar have analysed Kisan-Sabha movements in Northern India during 1920s. The autonomy of Kisan leaders like Baba Ramchandra and role of restrictive leaderships of congress in controlling peasant movements has been highlighted. Similarly the role of communist party in 1940s in leading popular protests against colonial and feudal exploitation has been highlighted. Mridula Mukherjee in her study on the Punjab has shown the variegated social structures in rural areas, which provided the milieu for variegated protest movements against colonial regime.

In recent years, there has been stress on the environmental history. Ramchandra Guha and Gadgil have argued that Marxian framework of mode of production does not take into account the exploitation of natural resources. They have focussed on 'modes of resource use' to point out how human beings either used natural resources rationally or exploited them on an unlimited scale. Both have argued there emerged 'ecosystem people', 'omnivores' and 'carnivores'. In 'This Fissured land', both have focused on colonial forestry to point out its role in dislocating 'ecosystem people'. Their work definitely helps in understanding the social economic position of tribal & non-tribal people who were at the subsistence level.

Several historians and anthropologists have done the categorisation of various popular protests. Kathleen Gough has focused on restorative and transformative movements. E.J.Hobbsbawn has deployed the concept of social banditry in studying pre-industrial Europe. He has differentiated between crime and revolt. Gough has also used this category. However Ranajit Guha has argued that while Hobsbawn has dubbed such protest as pre-political in pre-industrial Europe, however under colonial rule, aims and ideological basis of peasants revolts, though in nascent form were political in nature. K.Suresh Singh in his analysis has pointed out the changing nature of various protest movements.

The presence of millenarian trends in popular uprisings has been studied by Stephen Fuchs in his 'Rebellious Prophet' the emergence of messianic leaders who emerged during times of ruptures between traditional and alien cultural norms has been highlighted by him.

31.2 DOMINANT FEATURES OF PRE-COLONIAL SOCIETY

Several researches have shown that pre colonial Indian society was not static. Though village was the basic unit of administration and social ties. India was mainly rural and was constituted by thousands of villages. However these were not 'little republic' as

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colonial administrators dubbed them to show that villages were static and self-dependent, having no linkages with larger 'political set-up'. The land revenue was the main source of income for the state. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, decline and disintegration of Mughal Empire was followed by the emergence of numerous successor states. During this period social structure was shaped by several elements. One of the most important elements was rooted in economic ties within village and between villages and urban centres.

The political turmoil of the later eighteenth century left its mark on the countryside. In the Delhi region, semi-tribal groups like the Gujars and Jats extended their settlements from the upper doab, to the arable 'upland' plain. Their settled village communities depicted hierarchy of traditional rights over land. There were either 'primary' or 'secondary Zamindars'. Mostly there existed joint extended family management and partial ownership constituted the most common tenurial form. In Punjab, primary Zamindars were the cultivators. The bhaichara communities of the Jats owned land collectively. In the upper doab, primary land control rights were held by dominant castes that were elites in the society.

The relationship between groups of dominant peasant castes and service and artisan castes were shaped by the Jajmani system. It centred on the organization of production and distribution around the institution of hereditary occupational castes. The non-agricultural castes were either granted fixed village produce in lieu of their services or small plots of land. The prevalence of caste system did not denote rigid division. M.N.Srinivas has pointed out the process of upward mobility in several parts of India. Though service and occupational castes were free to sell their products within village or even outside, however there was a tendency towards a high degree of specialization. It resulted in close relationship between specific castes and occupations. The dagbar who made leather bags for holding Ghi and Sugar cane juice was socially and occupationally distinct from the Chamar manufacturing shoes, leather ropes and drumhead. The flexibility and mobility was evident in the fact that a very large proportion of the gentry in Bihar, both Hindu and Muslims, cultivated with their own hands. Brahmins were also farmers in the South.

In the tribal regions like Bengal, land hitherto held by tribals was gradually being claimed by dominant castes. While some tribal groups were hunters and gatherers, others were engaged in shifting cultivation. There was dependence on forest and water bodies. In the western ghats of Maharashtra, villages were formed by two castes groups of the Kunbis and Gavlis. The former living in the lower valley practised paddy cultivation. The Gavlis living on the upper hill terrace kept large herds of buffaloes and cattle. There was interdependence between both groups for obtaining necessities of life. In the state of Karnataka, in a village Masur, British Gazetteers noted the existence of thirteen different endogamous groups. Some of them were fishing communities, other were agriculturalists, horticulturalists and entertainers.

There were no direct linkages between caste and class. Within a caste, social differentiation existed on the basis of status and power. Infact the relations of domination and subordination were governed by moral codes. The low castes were required to obey and respect dominant castes. Within the family, patriarchal domination caused the subordination of women. Kinship and sexual status was also marked by difference in speech. In his description of Malabar in the nineteenth century, Logan noted—

'The house itself is called by different names according to the occupant's caste. The house of a Pariah is a cheri, while the agrestic slave—the cheraman-lives in Chala'.

In Gujarat a patidar youth was not allowed to initiate conversation in the company of his elders. In Orissa, a Bauri untouchable was not to speak to a high caste until spoken to. In parts of southern India, a servant would cover his mouth while receiving his master's command. The objects of wear also constituted status symbol. Umbrella

and shoes were markers of high castes. In Gujarat, the so-called impure Mahars were not allowed to tuck up their loin cloths but had to trail it along the ground.

Thus social differentiation was buttressed by customary and cultural norms. The religious groups enjoyed power in tribal regions. There was faith in superstitions and rituals sanctioned by dominant religions. There existed village deities and also symbols of nature. The role of education was limited. It was the religious beliefs, which shaped the ritual practices and belief systems of people.

Within this milieu, several changing processes marked colonial intervention.

31.3 COLONIAL RULE AND RUPTURES IN SOCIETY

It was the East India Company, which had come to India for trade. Taking advantage of local polity, it laid the foundation of colonial rule from Bengal in the eighteenth-century. Irfan Habib has divided colonial rule of British into three distinct phases from monopolistic trading rights, company shifted to the policy of free trade in the early nineteenth century. After 1813, British declared themselves to be the 'Paramount Power' in India. The colonial expansion lasted till 1856. After suppressing the revolt of 1857, British converted India into the direct colony of Britain. In the subsequent years, colonial domination was further entrenched.

From the outset British evolved policies, which were meant to maximize their resources. The ideological basis of British rule rested upon the suppression of subject population. The advent of Christianity from eighteenth century was marked by the establishment of press, church, hospitals and orphanages. Alongside administrative structure was supported by the police and the army.

The established colonial hegemony led to disaffection of different social groups. The Dual System in Bengal (1765-1772) resulted in widespread famine claiming 1/3 of total population. The attempts of British to deprive locally influential Rajas, Zamindars and Military persons also caused tension.

As land was the main source of income for the state so British focused on the land revenue system. For this purpose Cornwallis introduced the Permanent settlement in 1793 in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. During the same period, Monroe introduced the Ryotwari system in Madras. In 1835, William Bentinck introduced the Mahalwari system in North Western Province. It was further extended to Punjab. After annexing Punjab, in 1849, British introduced agrarian changes in the provinces. There was extensive canal colonisation in western Punjab. These agrarian changes not only augmented the resources of state but also gave birth to colonial sociology.

The colonial sociology encouraged land lordism. In canal colonies, supporters of Raj were given land, which led to settlement of Punjabis in western Punjab from central Punjab. Everywhere position of peasantry started declining.

The penetration of market forces and connection with capitalism led to commercialisation of agriculture. However numerous studies have shown that it only led to decline and indebtedness of peasantry. In pre-colonial times also small peasants had to borrow from village's Banias. However in the existing network, peasants could not be evicted from their land. Under colonial rule, big merchants and Zamindars became the moneylenders. They used the legal system to deprive peasants of their land. The situation was worse in tribal regions where outsiders started settling as traders and moneylenders. In several places, tribal population could not understand the implication of established legal and administrative set up. There was hatred for outsiders or dikus as they were called.

The process of deindustrialisation further deprived peasants of their source of income. Numerous village industries declined. The artisans were reduced to the position of labourers. They had to leave their villages in search of work. Their living conditions in industrial belts like Calcutta, Bombay and Kanpur were miserable. In this way, there was decline and disintegration of traditional ties symbolised by the Jajmani System.

As British declared themselves to be the owners of forest wealth, it directly affected the position of tribal communities which were dependent upon forest. It was in 1865 that an Act was passed which declared claims of the state over the forests. It was followed by the enactment of the Indian Forest Act of 1878. Under this Act, control of state over the resources of forests increased. Very limited rights were given to traditional tribal communities. Thus, there was ban on the shifting cultivation. The tribals as per their customs were not allowed to hunt and they were assigned limited space for their animals. The extension of railways network further led to penetration of rich trading classes into the distant areas of India. The development of plantation economy not only led to degradation of environment but the 'rule of records' as formed by the 'British led to the undermining of traditional rights.

Subjected to exploitation, various castes and communities responded in multiple ways. The web of relationships that had existed since pre-colonial times were sustained in several parts of India. Those who had been deprived of power and authority gained support from common people. Thus displaced rulers had the support of local population. Within specific regions, tribal population reacted against exploitation. In several cases intertribal affinities were formed.

The social religious reform movement in nineteenth century also had its bearing on small peasants, low caste groups and tribal population. There was influence of Christianity as well. There was affirmation of faith in specific belief systems. By late nineteenth century, as nationalism was evident in public domain and gradually it gave birth to mass nationalism, there was change also in the popular protest movements. While some retained their autonomy, others joined anti imperialist struggle.

31.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULAR PROTESTS

In his assessment, Ranajit Guha has counted 118-protest movements between 1783-1900. Their number kept on rising in the twentieth century. It is not possible to analyse hundreds of these movements. However by focusing on the structure of protest, dominant characteristics of popular protests in colonial times can be pointed out:

- 1) In the initial years of British rule displaced rulers and military personnels reacted against colonial demands. For instance when Warren Hastings demanded money from Chet Singh, Raja of Banaras and when latter failed to give it, he was arrested. However people of Banaras supported Chet Singh and protested against colonial rule. The Bishenpur revolt of 1789 led by local ruler and supported by local people was also identical in nature. Between 1799-1800 Poligars who were deprived of their military power adopted Gorilla warfare to thwart the authority of British rulers. These were localised protests and rooted in specific causes.
- 2) In all popular protests, economic exploitation as perpetuated by the British rule caused tension. The land revenue policies and Forests laws led to resentment. Alongside exploitation of dominant Indian Zamindars and Moneylenders was also opposed. Thus the revolt of Sanyasis and Fakirs, which resulted from the famine of 1769-70, was directed against British rulers and local Zamindars in Bengal. The revolt of Kols (1831-32) and Bhumij (1832-33) was also rooted in colonial exploitation.

- 3) Many uprisings were restorative in nature. The rebels aimed to restore back pre-existing political structure and social and economic rights. There was protest against the penetration of alien authorities and outsiders. Thus in the revolt of 1857, leadership of traditional rulers was accepted. Alongside small peasants belonging to Jat and Rajputs also rose against alien rule. There were peaceful efforts to restore back what the protestors regarded their rights. Thus in the Pabna uprising of 1873-1883 tenant farmers hoped that the British rule was in favour of restoring back their landed rights.
- 4) In numerous uprisings there was protest against growing indebtedness. Thus the Deccan revolt of 1875 was against Marwaris moneylenders.
- 5) Violence was an integral part of popular protests. It was directed against oppressors.
- 6) Over the period of time, protest movements/uprisings became more organised. The role of charismatic leaders and religion in providing support and strength to rebels also became clear. Thus Titu Mir in rising against the exploitation of zamindars, who were Hindus, effectively used Islam in forging solidarity among his people. The millenarian trends were also evident in the revolt of Santals and Mundas.
- 7) In terms of seeking support it was found that inter-tribal and inter regional linkages were also formed. The revolts were only directed against exploiters. Thus, the Kinship ties, caste and tribal identities were permeated by class-consciousness.
- 8) The role of women was also apparent in the revolts of Santals, Mundas and Mopilahs. They were an integral part of families and communities. They helped their male folks in productive activities and during the time of tension, they also joined them in acts of violence.
- 9) Numerous historians have explored the nexus between popular movements and national movement. The role of Gandhian leadership in converting national movement into mass movement was also evident. During 1920s Kisan Sabhas in U.P and Bihar provided organizational skills to peasants. Similarly, the role of communists in leading peasants' protests against colonial and feudal exploitation became explicit in 1940s.

The above-mentioned features can be analysed in detail by focusing on specific protests in colonial period.

31.5 KOL REVOLT

It erupted in some parts of Bihar in 1831-1832. Kols were agriculturalists. The growing land revenue and indebtedness caused socio-economic tension in the area. It was noted by British official Wilkinson that landlords and contractors had increased land revenue by 35%. There was resentment against the land revenue system as the British introduced it. The tension erupted when in 1831; twelve villages of Sinhari Manki in Sonpur were handed over to outsiders. They were reports about maltreatment being meted out to his sisters. It was also reported that one Munda women had been kidnapped in Singbhum. There was growing recognition that British policies had deprived Kols of their rights over land. It was against this exploitation that Kols of Sonpur, Tamar and Naundgoan were directed to assemble in Tamar. The decision was taken to avenge insult by indulging in acts of loot, killing and burning. They were also extended help by the Mundas. The revolt spread in Chotanagpur, Singbhum and Palamau. Thus the revolt of Kols exhibited the tribal consciousness against exploitation. Their ability to unite their people and to secure help from other tribals residing in their vicinity was indicative of the fact that they were united in their protest against colonial exploiters.

31.6 SANTAL REVOLT

Santal revolt was characterised by class solidarity transcending ethnicity. There was not only well defined programme to resist exploitation but the leadership of Sido and Kanhu was characterized by usage of spiritual codes to organise rebels. Before the outbreak, elaborate preparations were made. Both written and oral messages were used to solicit support. Above all, women also played an important role in the uprisings. The way this revolt started and spread over vast space showed that Santals were determined to combat their exploiters.

Santals lived in Birbhum, Singbhum, Hazari Bagh, Bhagalpur and Munger. They were agriculturalists. However the entrenchment of land lordism, usage of legal machinery by money lenders subjected them to continuous exploitation. As per the contemporary accounts of lawyer Degamber Chakravarty and Chhotre Dasmanj, Santals failed to comprehend the exploitative nature of British administration. Initially they hoped that their grievances would be redressed by the British officials. However when it did not happen, Santals decided to rise in revolt.

In leading Santals against growing exploitation, leadership was provided by Sido and Kanhu. They proclaimed divine sanction to lead the revolt. They issued parwanas containing their messages and directing local population to extend help to them. For it, they sought help from non tribal population like artisans and other service groups like the Dom, the Lohar and the Gwala. The defaulters were explicitly warned that they work loose their lives. Thus Sido and Kanhu exhorted their local populace to take up arms against exploiting money lender and British administrators. Thus one of the parwana sent by Sido and Kanhu read, “the sahib and the white soldiers will fight. Kanoo and Seedoo manjee are not fighting. The thacoor himself will fight———”. They also observed, “The Mahajans have committed a great sin; The Sahibs and the amlah have made everything bad, in this the Sahibs have sinned greatly. Those who tell things to the magistrate and those who investigate cases for him, take 70 to 80 Rupees. with great oppression in this the Sahibs have sinned. On this account the Thacoor has ordered me saying that the country is not the Sahib”.

There were series of meetings in which tribal chiefs and local population outlined preparations for the revolt. It started in 1855 with series of dacoities in Bhagalpur, Birbhum and Bankure where Bengali landlords were attacked and their properties were looted. From the beginning looted goods were equally divided among rebels. There was participation of women in dacoities. There was appropriation of religions rituals practised by upper castes. For instance, Sido and Kanhu offered puja to Goddess Durga. For the performance of Puja, two Brahmins were abducted. It was also decided to march to Calcutta in order to present their grievances before the rulers. However brutal suppression by authorities who resorted to destruction of Santals villages and accumulated loot, led to weakening of the movement. Santals resorted to plundering for the purpose of sustaining themselves. However, eventually the army suppressed the revolt. There were arrests on large scale. Women were also arrested.

31.7 MUNDA UPRISINGS

The scholarly work of K.Suresh Singh on the history of Munda tribe reveals how this tribal community responded to on going exploitation. The penetration of outsiders and colonial administration coupled with missionary activities created a milieu in which Birsa Munda provided the charismatic leadership and led the revolt in 1899-1900. The millenarian trends were evident in this uprising. The support of regional customary ties permeating different tribal groups helped in solidifying support for the Mundas. The leadership of Birsa Munda was successful in uniting exploited against the exploiters.

This tribe resided in the region south of Ranchi. The land holdings were based on tribal lineages or the Khuntkatti land system. This was eroded by merchants and money lenders who penetrated into their area as contractors and landlords. There was recruitment of indentured labour. To redress their grievances, Mundas resorted to peaceful methods. They sought help from missionaries. However there was no change in their position.

The growing resentment resulted in the protest of tribal chiefs-Sardars. They tried to dislodge the alien landlords and also tried to put an end to forced labour. In this, they sought help of a Calcutta based Anglo-Indian lawyer. However they were cheated. It led to the feeling that both Sarkar and the missionaries had done nothing to resolve their problems. They had to seek help from within their community.

It came in the form of Birsa Munda. He was born in 1874. His father was a share cropper. Initially, he received education from the missionaries. He was also influenced by Vaishnava religion. The practitioner of vaishnavas had led a movement in 1893-94 to prevent village waste land being taken over by the forest department. Birsa Munda also came under the influence of Christianity and mixed many of its beliefs in his religious and spiritual formulations. It was in 1895 that he had a vision of a supreme God. He claimed himself to be a prophet having miraculous heading powers. Soon thousands of people flocked to hear the 'new word' proclaiming an immediate deluge. For extending help to the Sardars in their struggle, Birsa was jailed in 1895. After two years, when he was released, Birsa had become more determined to fight against oppression. In 1898-99, a series of night meetings were held in the forest. Birsa exhorted gatherers to kill 'Thakedars, Jagirdars, Rajas, Hakims and Christians'. He promised that 'the guns and the bullets of enemies would turn into water'. There was faith in his miraculous powers.

The uprising began in 1899 on Christmas Eve. The Mundas shot arrows and tried to burn down Churches in Ranchi and Singhbhum. They also targeted the police. However they were defeated at Sail Rakab hill on January 9. There was arrest of Birsa Munda who died in jail. Many hundreds of Mundas were arrested and were punished. Though the Munda uprising failed to redress grievances of local population but the vision of Birsa Munda survived and kept on inspiring the local people.

31.8 MOPLAH UPRISINGS

Between 1836-1919, Moplahs rose 28 times against the exploitation of Jenmis or landlords. There was participation of only 349 Moplahs in these outbreaks. However what distinguished their violent revolt was the permeation of Islam in inducing them to rise against the landlords. Though illiterate Moplahs did not understand the doctrines of Islam correctly but they believed that by killing Jenmis and then by facing death, they would attain martyrdom. In this form of protest, they were symbolically prepared by their wives.

Moplahs lived in Malabar where they were either lease holders – Kanamdars or cultivators- Verumpattandars. They were Muslims and were subjected to the growing authority of Hindu upper caste landlords. These were Namboordi and Nair Jenmis. The British policies further strengthened their hold over Moplahs. They lived in small villages and had very limited resources. It was the mosque, which provided them identity. The number of mosques rose in Malabar from 637 in 1831 to 1058 by 1851. They also came under the influence of Sayyid Alwawi and his son Fadl who were Tangals of Mambram near tirurangadi. It were in Ernad and Walluvanad talukas of South Malabar that revolts started. Many Jenmis were killed. Most of Moplah martyrs were poor peasants. Thus some historians see it as a class struggle, which was permeated by religious ideology.

31.9 PUNJAB DISTURBANCES OF 1907

The process of canal colonisation in western Punjab was rooted in the rule of British paternalism. Large tracts of land were colonised by carefully selecting different caste and status groups. The crown tenants were granted the right to purchase land after completing an initial period of probation. Many big landlords emerged in this region. The existing laws were manipulated. The local lower level bureaucracy extorted money to prevent punishment to the potential defaulters. Subjected to everyday administrative interference, resentment grew in several canal areas.

It exploded in the form of the agrarian agitation of 1907. The discontent of peasants resulted from a series of government measures. The Punjab land colonisation bill was introduced in the Punjab council on October 25, 1906. It sought to alter the conditions on which land was granted to colonists in the canal colonies. In November 1906, the government ordered enhancement in the canal water rates on the Bari Doab canal. It provided water for irrigation in the district of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Lahore. The increased rate was up to 50 percent. The land revenue in the Rawalpindi district was also enhanced. More over the colonization Bill of 1906 sought to legalize the imposition of fines for infringements of the conditions laid down for grant of land. These were to remain outside the purview of courts. The law of primogeniture for inheritance was stressed. There was even bar on the purchasing of the land by the colonists.

Subjected to these restrictions, peasants started their agitation. Not only there was breakdown in rural and urban divide but also peasants cutting across religious differences joined the struggle. The big Zamindars Association took the lead. With the coming of Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai, agitation became wide spread. Numerous public meetings were held to criticise government's measures. Eventually the government had to yield. The viceroy vetoed the colonization Bill. The Punjab government also withdrew the enhancement of water rates. The agitation symbolised radicalization of peasantry and its linkages with nationalism.

31.10 KISAN SABHAS AND BABA RAMCHANDRA

David Hardiman has observed that by the end of nineteenth century, there was emergence of peasant nationalism. By the time mass nationalism had emerged under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, there was widespread influence of Congress in many parts of India. In U.P, numerous Kisan sabhas had emerged. When the Non-Cooperation movement started in 1921. Kisan Sabhas provided the recruitment ground for Satyagrahis. However autonomy of Kisan Sabhas and their participation in anti imperialists struggle was also evident in Southeast Avadh. Here, Baba Ramchandra provided the leadership. His domination over peasants was resented by the Congress leadership, which wanted peasants participation to be non-violent in nature. However peasants rose in widespread agrarian riots in Rae Bareli, Pratapgarh, Fyzabad and Sultanpur between January and March 1921. Not only bazaars were attacked, the houses and crops of Talukdars and property of merchants was also targeted. On January 6, 1921, 10000 peasants attacked Fursatganj bazaar in Rae Bareli and resorted to fixing of prices for grain and cloth. There were also clashes with police. The subversion of colonial authority was evident in setting up of peasants' panchayats to redress their grievances. Thus through Kisan sabhas, peasants were organising themselves. They also responded to mass nationalism. However, they also exhibited consciousness, which was cognitive of exploitation being perpetuated by big landlords and merchants. That's why attempt of Congress to channelise them in peaceful struggle directed only against authorities failed.

31.11 TELENGANA

During 1930s and 1940s peasants had come under the influence of Kisan Sabhas, Congress and Communist ideology. In several states, violent protests were led by feudal exploitation and the control of land by feudal lords was strongly resented. It was in Telengana that the biggest peasant guerrilla war occurred between July 1946 and October 1951. It spread over 16,000 square miles covering 3000 villages. Nearly three million people participated in the struggle.

It was in Telengana that lower caste, tribal peasants and debt slaves were subjected to exploitation of Muslims and high caste deshmukhs and Jagirdars. The state of Hyderabad under Asafjahi Nizams was also indifferent. The influence of communists spread during world war II. They had used the Andhra Mahasabha to spread their influence. They also provided leadership in leading struggle against local issues. There was also massive collection of arms by peasants.

The revolt began when on July 4, 1946, thugs employed by the deshmukh of Viunar in Jangaon taluka of Nalgonda murdered a village militant. The latter was involved in struggle to defend a land of poor washerwoman. Very soon, the movement spread into the district of Warangal and Khammam. From early 1947 small bands were formed. They used guerrilla warfare resulting in disappearance of Vetti and bonded labour. Not only agricultural wages were increased but also in several instances, confiscated land was returned back to previous peasants holders. Even wastelands were redistributed. Sundarayya, a leading figure in the armed struggle had shown in his narrative, how socio-economic equality was sought to be established in the liberated areas. There was wide spread influence of the communist leaders. However strong military action and indifference of better off peasants led to slackening of influence of communist leaders. They were driven out from the settled plains of Nalgonda, Warangal and Khammam. They had to make Nallamallia hills across the Krishna to the south and the Godavari region to the northeast as their base. Chenchu and Koya tribals were organised. However gradually by 1950-51, guerrilla action degenerated into occasional murders. Though the Telengana movement could not benefit tribals but the regime of Hyderabad was destroyed. Andhra Pradesh was formed on linguistic lines and Jagirdari was also abolished.

31.12 SUMMARY

The above-mentioned narrative indicates the popular movements denoted struggle of dispossessed and exploited peasants and tribals. Their social milieu was tied down by co relationship with several other caste groups. The colonial rulers through their administrative set up also subjected them to exploitation. There was penetration of outsiders into their region. Over the period of time, several protests sought redressal of their grievances in peaceful way. They also responded to the call of dispossessed local Rajas in their struggle against colonial rulers. However, over the period of time, there was recognition that both rulers and Indian dominant groups were exploiting them. Most of popular protests remained localized. During the time of revolts, they used existing social ties cutting across ethnicity. There was also influence of religions. In an era of mass nationalism, these protests came to exhibit class consciousness. Autonomous leadership provided the ideological basis and all India based movement led by the congress. The growing influence of communists also became apparent. Thus both leadership and specified goals came to characterise popular uprisings.

31.13 GLOSSARY

Vanis	: Village Mahajans
Thangals	: Priests in malabar
Jenmis	: Landlords of Malabar region
Social Banditry	: a term used by E.J.Hobsbawm, to point out acts of violence in pre industrial Europe by poor people. These were not criminal acts but were result of collective action by poor people to redress their grievances
Deshmukhs	: revenue collector turned landlords.
Restorative Movement	: a term used by Kathleen Gough to study those protest movements of peasants and tribals, which aimed at restoring pre-colonial political set up.
Transformative Movements	: These denoted strong organisational set up and well defined ideological base. Leaders, who after subverting colonial authority aimed at establishing new order in the region often, led these. Such set up was meant to grant rights and privileges to exploited people.
Insurgency	: Acts of violence/protests by peasants
Millenarianism	: Stephan Fuchs studied these movements under this concept, which were marked by the emergence of messianic leaders. They drew inspiration of various religious and promised their followers new world where in they were to enjoy their rights.

31.14 EXERCISES

- 1) Assess the role of British policies in undermining the rights of peasants in nineteenth century India
- 2) Briefly describe the dominant features of popular protests in the nineteenth century
- 3) Describe the role of religion in the Moplah and Munda uprisings.
- 4) Assess the contribution of Ranajit Guha and K. Suresh Singh in the historiography of popular uprisings in colonial India.
- 5) Briefly describe the Telengana struggle of 1946-1951.

UNIT 32 STUDYING TRIBES UNDER COLONIALISM

Structure

- 32.0 Introduction
- 32.1 Perceptions of Tribes Before Colonial Annexation of Territories
- 32.2 Tribes and their Colonial Rulers
- 32.3 Romanticism and Tribal Protection: Colonialism and Anthropology in 20th Century
- 32.4 Tribals and the Nationalists: Anthropology for Nation Building
- 32.5 Summary
- 32.6 Glossary
- 32.7 Exercises

32.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit shows how the different perceptions of tribes and their problems have influenced the anthropological writings of our times. In the main we identify two tendencies in this unit: one which argued for the isolation of tribes in order that their ancient heritage be preserved and the second one that argued for the assimilation of tribal people into the mainstream of Indian life. Between these two ends of the spectrum there were varying degrees of opinion that reflected the status, political stance and historical conjecture at which particular actors stood. But this was only part of the story as perceptions of tribes were also determined by the exigencies of colonial rule. Thus the competing perceptions of tribes, as we know them today, were a result of the transformations of the polity, society and economy in different points in history. It uses selected primary and secondary materials for this purpose.

32.1 PERCEPTIONS OF TRIBES BEFORE COLONIAL ANNEXATION OF TERRITORIES

The first forays of British colonists into North and Central India in the late 18th century got them in touch with several non-agricultural communities. These communities were dependent on both land and forest resources for their survival and often came into conflict with their rulers in order to meet their needs. In his recent work on Khandesh and Central India Sumit Guha shows that early British accounts in the region suggest that the complex interrelationships between pre-colonial regimes of natural resource management, environmental changes and tribal subsistence in the Maratha period. The resultant identity of people as tribals is then governed by the multiple contexts of survival within which these people used to live. Larger patterns of resource use and the impact of other forces on them also determined the political economy of such identities and survival systems.

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 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 were existed in a “pre-class society”. 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 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 Kakkhars, Baluchis and Afghans in this vein, the chief feature of their society not only being their blood and kinship line of descent but also their pastoral and non-sedentary occupational characteristics. In a later article Singh is however more categorical about the mention of hunters and gatherers as primitive people. For example he writes of their references in 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 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 that described 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 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. . There are numerous accounts like this that stress the importance and the situation of the tribes before the annexation of territories and after British domination. In almost all these accounts the tribal problem appears to be one where the British see themselves as people who have a duty towards teaching tribals civilised behaviour and an orderly life. While this expression of the civilising mission did not change after the annexation of territories. Rather it expressed itself in a different form.

32.2 TRIBES AND THEIR COLONIAL RULERS

The advent of colonialism in regions that were earlier under residencies and indigenous chieftancies saw the assertion of British colonial sovereignty in several significant ways some of which have been described by Nandini Sundar in the context of tribal Bastar. However from the point of view of perceptions about tribals themselves perhaps the most important factor that influenced them was the settlement of territories and land rights in the Provinces with significant amount of tribal populations. The permanent settlement in Bengal in the late 18th century and the subsequent ryot settlements in Madras, Central Provinces and United Provinces all betrayed a bias towards a certain notion of the agrarian society which was firmly grounded in the ideas about modernity and progress. Within this perspective an evolutionary way of seeing development also influenced the colonial images of tribal life. For example the *Report of the Ethnological Committee of the Races of Central Provinces* that described its task in the following manner:

"We have confined our analysis entirely to very curious tribes in this country, which are usually called aborigines, their original seat in reality being unknown and which are supposed to be different in languages, custom and physical formation from the greatness of India".

The term 'race' excluded all races and castes that were considered immigrants, i.e., the Hindu cultivators who settled in the valleys and the plains since the ancient times. It only included the tribals who were considered the original inhabitants of the country

and carried special reports on areas like Chanda, Bhandara and others that were considered to be strongholds of tribal population. The notion that tribes were the original and isolated inhabitants of the forests was useful to colonial officials in their endeavour to take over the fertile plains and valleys of different parts of the country. In keeping with this image they were also described as rather timid, shy and well behaved. For example Briggs remarked in his *Lecture on the Wild Tribes* that they were the “best behaved wild tribes” even while they lived in seclusion and acted as the “wild beasts around them”.

The second characteristic of the official images in the early and mid 19th centuries was the notion that these “primitive tribes” were essentially animist forest people who hated the intrusion of outsiders into their life. A good example of this was the description of the Baigas and the Gonds of the “remotest hills” in the Central Provinces who were described as living in harmony with nature. Forsyth’s account of the Maikal hills was reflective of this when he wrote that:

“The real Byga of the hill ranges is still almost in the state of nature. They are very black, with an upright slim, though exceedingly wiry frame showing less of the negretto type of features than any other of these wild tribes.... Destitute of all clothing but a small strip of cloth.... The Byga is the very model of a hill tribe”.

This introduction to the Byga is accompanied by Forsyth’s detailed account of the forest hunt and the pursuit of game. He considered their cultivation practices and hunting as a sign of their seclusion and primitiveness.

Finally, despite such a classification of the Bygas, Forsyth and his colleagues were not unaware of the differentiation within the tribal economy. Tribals were classified according to their level of development and their amalgamation of the Hindu society. Social customs and conventions was a yardstick to assess the ‘scale of civilisation’. On the economic front the scale of civilisation that the report referred to was measured by the yardstick of progress which was manifested in the idea of a peasant. This meant that the colonial ideals about the improvement of the tribal society was centred around their perception of their own role in teaching tribal people how to live a civilised life. This meant that they were to be taught plough cultivation that was more desirable than shifting cultivation and that all those living in the rural areas had to be taught the value of a sedentary peasant society.

It is in this context that the first impressions of bewar (a term for shifting cultivation in the Central Provinces) justified the British need of intervention for the improvement in Baiga lifestyle in consonance with the above-mentioned idea of progress. In colonial terminology the terms bewar and dhaiya were used for the Baiga cultivation. The term bewar was sometimes also used for the field that the Baigas prepare for cultivation. Despite this confusion, in all cases the term *dhaiya* and bewar were used for survival systems that were classed primitive, isolated and highly destructive to forests. For example, Richard Temple just after the formation of the Central Provinces that:

“One great cause of wastage and destruction of the forest is called Dhya cultivation? This Dhya cultivation is practically a substitute for ploughing and a device for saving trouble of that operation. It is resorted to by hill people who are averse to labour and have virtually no agricultural capital”.

Temple classified the dhaiya economy as “primitive” or “backward”. Its traits were laziness and wastefulness. He implied that the tribals of the Central Provinces preferred to do the minimum amount of labour to eke the minimum that they needed. Above all such images also stressed the fact that bewar cultivation was not eco-friendly and brought about the destruction of the forests. All these arguments were used to justify colonial interventions for controlling land and forests in the 19th century.

32.3 ROMANTICISM AND TRIBAL PROTECTION: COLONIALISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN 20TH CENTURY

The late 19th century saw a worsening of living conditions of tribal people in the tribal areas. Most areas like Bihar, Orissa and Central Provinces, land alienation and indebtedness amongst tribal people grew at an alarming rate. At the same time the conditions of tribals in forests also worsened as they were reduced to providing cheap labour to the forest department. All this created conditions of extreme dissatisfaction that also led to much protest by tribal people. Some of the most famous ones were Birsa Munda's movement in 1875, the Gudem Ramapa Uprising and the Santhal Uprising that forced the colonial policies. In other areas like the Mandla district of the Central Provinces Baiga tribal people fled from the forests and the British were forced to negotiate with them so that they remain in their villages and work for the forest department. They were thus forced to create an area where the otherwise banned practice of shifting cultivation would be allowed in some part of the forests. All these protests and negotiations not only resulted in some welfare measures being put into place but also resulted in the crystallisation of the tribal cultural identity which was reflected in anthropological and official texts of the time.

One of the most important debates of the time was the debate about the demarcation of tribal areas into protected zones under the Government of India Act of 1935. The enactment of the provisions showed that the tribals had now become completely dependent on the welfare measures of the state to meet their basic needs. The debate on the measures proposed under the Act also revealed the way in which different people viewed tribal people. One of the most important figures in the debate was W.V. Grigson, an official who was commissioned to enquire into conditions of tribals in the Central Provinces viewed them with the lens of benevolent patriarchal authority. In the *Maria Gonds of Bastar* he wrote that the Marias, a primitive tribe of Bastar, were people who had lived in harmony with forests and thus he said that:

“In most of this area (*penda* area) the forests have been too remote and inaccessible to be exploited, and that, even though some fine timber has been sacrificed much that has gone is over mature. Vast areas of forest have been reserved by the State, and it is not possible to work half these reserves. The Maria does not rage through the forest clearing patches for cultivation at random; he has more or less definite rotations, and a field of two to three years' they may have a twelve or fourteen years' rest, and a dense forest at the end of it. The axe and fire have let the light of civilisation penetrate slowly but surely into the Bison-horn country as nothing would have done for centuries; they alone have prevented the Abujmarh tract from remaining a trackless wilderness”.

This view marked a significant departure from the views of officials in the 19th century. It also showed that the officials were forced to recognise the rights of tribal people in a manner that they were being articulated at that time. Further people like Grigson also reflected upon the role of the British Empire in tribal development when he wrote that,

“Above all there must be an approach to some elements of 'economic democracy' if the aboriginal is to play his due part in the India of the future.... There is no political democracy without economic democracy”.

For Grigson 'economic democracy' denoted ownership of land, freedom from indebtedness and from exploitation of labour at unusually low wages. To achieve 'economic democracy' outside intervention in tribal areas had to be restricted and

government protection ensured. However what is significant about Grigson's perception is the fact that he considered the people in Bastar as similar to that of people in Africa when he wrote that:

"The primitives have more in common with African tribes than they have with people in other parts of India such as the plains of Bengal, the Punjab or Maharashtra.... I don't think that "self governance" outside the village or tribe has ever entered their heads. It is obvious that what is needed is a form of protectorate and this can only be achieved through benevolent autocracy".

The belief that tribals were not able to look after their own interests was largely based on the assumption that they had always lived in a hostile society that had exploited them. The creation of a protectorate would in fact enable forces that had their benefit at heart to protect their interests and also bring about their economic development. This perception was integral to many official anthropologists of the period whose vision was also informed by the European anthropological writings of their times. The most prominent of these anthropologists was Verrier Elwin who worked first in Central India, then Eastern India and finally the NorthEast. The romanticism and the functionalism of his anthropology have had an important impact on the way in which people have looked at tribal people. In the 1940s Elwin wrote in his famous pamphlet, *Aboriginal*, that "*a tribe that dances does not die*". By making such a statement he exemplified the fact that tribal people were distinguished from others by their distinctive cultural identity. For Elwin the 'primitive' was a romantic category which he described in the following way when he wrote that:

"The life of a true aboriginal is simple and happy, enriched by natural pleasures. For all their poverty, their days are spent in the beauty of the hills. A woman carrying a load to the hill-top pauses a moment to see the scene below her. It is the 'sweet forest' the 'forest of joy and sandal' in which they live".

The 'forest of joy' was Elwin's dreamland - a place where people tended the dead, were devoted to the soil, staged a magnificent and colourful tribal festivals, and were infused with the spirit of sharing. For Elwin these were 'things of value in tribal life'. For him the 'primitive' constituted a 'pure' and a 'pristine' state of existence that was morally superior to the civilized world. Elwin's image of the forest dwellers voiced his despair at the tendency towards the destruction of an idyllic society. However this emotion was not expressed in a vacuum and embedded in it the critique of the modern industrial society. Thus he said that:

"Until modern life is itself reformed, until civilisation is itself civilised, until war is vanished from Europe and untouchability from India, there is no point in trying to change the aboriginals".

"Far better let them be for the time being – not forever of course; that would be absurd. Perhaps in twenty, fifty or hundred years a race of men may arise who are qualified to assimilate these fine people in their society without doing them harm. Such men do not exist today".

Elwin assumed that the contact between the tribals and the wider agrarian society would result in the injustice to their cause. In this he also critiqued the British rule for its policies towards the tribals. He opposed the British policy of extending of modern commercial economy into these areas, and wanted a relaxation of forest rules. In this he also received the support of some colonial officials, notable amongst whom was the Governor of Bombay, Mr Wylie who wrote that:

"We are dealing with people whom their admirers describe as the ancient lords of the jungle but whom I personally prefer to consider as forest

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labourers isolated from the normal working of the law of demand and supply and as such at the mercy of the Forest Department who are the sole pervayors of the labour from which, if the inhabitants of the forest villages are to stay there at all, they have got to make a livelihood”.

Sharing such a critique with Elwin also ensured that many colonists like Wylie and Grigson also shared with him the solutions to the problem. Ideally Elwin wanted the forest dwellers to acquire the spirit and benefits of civilisation without a painful transition process. Thus he wrote that:

“I advocate, therefore, for the aboriginals a policy of temporary partial protection, and for their civilized neighbours a policy of immediate reform....It is not enough to uplift them into a social and economic sphere in which they cannot adapt themselves, but to restore to them liberties of their own countryside”.

By advocating this position, Elwin showed how systemic change in forested areas, were organically linked to changes in modern society, which he considered decadent. Such a perception of tribes, their problems and he solutions was to influence the thinking of scholars down the ages. The most prominent of these is Ramachandra Guha, who in a recent biography of Verrier Elwin celebrated the cultural primitivism for which Elwin became really well known:

“Most of all Verrier Elwin must be distinguished from other primitivists in that he actually lived with the persons whose culture he so vigorously celebrated. The narrator of primitivist revelries has the choice, which he generally excersices. ‘to return, at the end his sojourn, to the highly civilized countries he came from’.... Not many who wrote so eloquently of the return to nature,’ he [Elwin] remarked, ‘were prepared however, to take the journey themselves, *at least not without a return ticket*”.

Elwin was living with the tribals and his understanding of their problems was therefore based on their experiences and life rather than the participant observation of an academic anthropologist. But even if this distinguished him from others, his long-term ideas and the policies that he recommended succeeded in supporting the benevolent imperialism of people like Grigson. But it is not only Guha who were influenced by colonial anthropology. Several other actiivists and anthropologists also used the arguments of people like Elwin and Grigson to justify their arguments for the restoration of traditional tribal rights and identities in the current polity.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, tribes were seen as self sufficient and isolated societies that lived in harmony with nature. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a significant body of environmental history concentrates on the history of state forest management and its impact on the rights of local people. In these studies, some historians follow the assumptions of their predecessors by stressing that tribal communities had stable systems of survival. However the notion of stability and harmony is elaborated in terms of the theory of ecological prudence. Authors like Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil argue that pre-colonial societies were well-adjusted caste institutions that regulated resource use where each community occupied a specific ecological niche in society. These ecological niches were closed and self-contained systems of resource use that were regulated by social and cultural codes. And within this system the tribes were given the niche of being either hunter gatherers or shifting cultivators who were well adjusted to their surroundings in all its aspects.

The notion of a community is characterised by the idea of egalitarianism and homogeneity where there is little differentiation in terms of access to resources. It is also marked by the fact that political and ritualistic authorities are the source of resource management as well as the cohesiveness of the community. Kinship is defined as the organising principle of labour and the conceptual and the cultural

aspects of society defined the way in which the community related with other and defined the boundaries of the community. This is reflected in the work of Nandini Sundar and Ajay Skaria who attempt to complicate the picture by hinting at the transformation of community identities in history. While they are right about the transformations in identity, they too refuse to acknowledge the fact that the identities that they themselves were writing about were a result of the underdevelopment of tribal regions. The self-perceptions of tribals people of themselves as the original inhabitants or as shifting cultivators and hunters and gatherers got solidified with the colonial government putting a ban on these practices. Thus the primordial tribal identity was hardly traditional in nature and in fact reflected the destruction of the productive forces in tribal societies.

32.4 TRIBALS AND THE NATIONALISTS: ANTHROPOLOGY FOR NATION BUILDING

In the contrast to the views of the anthropologists and the colonists the nationalists of the 1930s and 40s were severely critical of colonial policies and hostile towards anthropological writings that celebrated the cultural primitivism. The supporters of tribal culture values considered the relationship between tribes and peasants to be exploitative in character. They contended that the segregation of these people was the most effective way of modernising them. Nationalist anthropologists and Congressmen contested these assertions, thereby arguing that the basis of exclusion was completely unfounded. The Congress debated the pro-exclusion British officials on two counts. The first argument was political. It concentrated on being anti-imperialist in its stance and laid emphasis on the development of an overwhelming Indian identity that was intended to mobilise people against the colonial rule. The second contention contested the social and anthropological basis of the contentions made by those supporting the government policies of Exclusion and Partial Exclusion.

The Congress thought that the future of tribals was integrally linked with the economic progress of the rest of the Indian population. They did not want to deny these communities an opportunity to associate and learn from other advanced communities. They disagreed with the official view that the tribal people had special needs and rejected anything that celebrated the distinctiveness of cultures. For example in this scheme of thinking anthropology deserved contempt. Two leaders of the Central Provinces, M.S. Aney and N.M. Joshi, charged all anthropologists with desiring to keep all the “primitive races of India uncivilised and in a state of barbarism as raw material for their science in order to add to their blessed stock of scientific knowledge.

But the most articulate position in this respect was taken by G.S. Ghurye in his monograph *Aborigines – so called and their future* in which the crux of his thesis was that ‘aborigines’ were an integral part of the Hindu society since a very long time. Explaining why these communities must be called “so-called aborigines” he said that:

“It is clear from this discussion that the proper description of these peoples must refer itself to their place in it near Hindu society and not to their supposed autochthonism. While sections of these tribes are properly integrated with Hindu society, very large sections, in fact a bulk of them, are rather loosely assimilated. Only very small sections, living in the recesses of the hills and the depths of the forests, have not been more than touched by Hinduism. Under the circumstances the only proper definition of these people is that they are imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society. Though for the sake of convenience they may be designated the tribal classes of Hindu society, suggesting thereby the social fact that they have retained much more of the tribal creeds and organisation than many of the castes of Hindu society, yet they are in reality Backward Hindus”.

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According to Ghurye, the historical process inevitably led to the Hinduization of the tribals. He argued that they would witness moral and economic betterment if they were 'properly assimilated' into such a society. Their dance and music would be allowed in Hindu society; and even if they lost some part of their culture, they would be at an advantageous position in the long-run. Of the preservation of "tribal culture" Ghurye stated that:

"Isolationism or assimilationism does not therefore appear to owe its inspiration either to a supposedly queer academic interest of the anthropologist or to the possibility of the perverse mentality of British administrators. It is very largely a matter of opinion as to [which is] the best way of preserving the vitality of the tribal people only secondarily complicated by other considerations".

Ghurye stated that the exclusion of the tribals was a political statement that was to be opposed. According to him its sociological and historical assumptions were inaccurate. He saw the peasant and tribal communities as open and dynamic structures, each influencing the other. But despite this conceptual framework, the merits of the assimilation of the tribes into Hindu society continued to be over emphasised in Ghurye's work.

Ghurye was not the only nationalist sociologist to criticise the pro-Exclusionist policies. In an essay entitled 'Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption' Nirmal Kumar Bose laid down his interpretation of the relationship of the dominant Hindu communities with tribes. He said that,

"From what has been observed among the Juangs and from the reading of law books, it is to be noted that the Hindu society while absorbing a new tribe or while creating a new *jati* by differentiation of occupation, always guaranteed or tried to guarantee monopoly in a particular occupation to each caste within a given region. The last point is very important; for the same *jati* may be found practising many different trades if it finds the prescribed hereditary occupations no longer economically satisfactory".

The stances of both Ghurye and Bose resulted in a defence of Hindu culture and society. They saw the tribal identity as a sub-set of the larger identity of the caste Hindu society and therefore did not consider the assimilation into Hindu society a major problem. But this was not true of all nationalists. Social workers like A.V. Thakkar reflected upon the need to develop a strong nationalist identity. In 1941 Thakkar wrote that,

"These people were the original sons of the soil and were in possession of our country before the Aryans poured in from the North West and North East passes, conquered them with their superior powers and talents and drove them from the plains to the hills and forests. They are older and more ancient children of the soils than the Hindus and more so than the Muslims and Anglo-Indians. But they are steeped in ignorance and poverty and do not know their rights and privileges, much less their collective and national responsibility".

In his interpretation of the tribal past, Thakkar tried to reinstate the position of these communities as the 'original inhabitants of India'. However in doing so he also asserted that the present conditions of poverty and ignorance in which tribal people lived had to be changed. This transformation could not be brought about through a policy of isolationism or Exclusion. Thakkar argued that the spirit of provincial government of national responsibility could only be inculcated into these communities through a policy of "assimilation". But his path of assimilation was slightly different from that of Ghurye and Bose. He said that:

“It is difficult for me to understand why these persons [persons in favour of Exclusion and Partial Exclusion] fear the contact with the Hindus and Muslims of the plains. In few cases the social evils of the plains are likely to be copied by unsophisticated aboriginals. But it is not right to consider that contact will only bring bad customs into tribal life and that the aborigines will suffer more than they benefit. Safeguards may be instituted to protect the aborigines from more advanced people of the plains, as has been done with regard to non-alienable land. But to keep these people confined to and isolated in their inaccessible hills and jungles is like keeping them in glass cases of a museum for the curiosity of purely academic persons”.

Thakkar considered the strategy of assimilation was an essential part of their development process. He believed that if these communities learnt some good things from the Hindu society, they would also be exploited by it. Hence he proposed a different type of a policy of protection for these communities. Rather than the confinement of these communities in a segregated space, he proposed protection of the forest communities through the legislation of special laws. In this sense, even if Thakkar was opposed to the Exclusion, he was in favour of some kind of protection for tribals.

The predominant nationalist view that the tribes was not a historically and anthropologically valid category was reflected in the writings of post colonial writers who were inspired by them. Reviewing the literature on tribes and peasantry Andre Beteille wrote in 1987 that there was no satisfactory way of defining the tribal society. Arguing that it was difficult to call any one a tribal in Indian society, rather the agrarian society was comprised of a heterogeneous body of peasants cut up into various ethno-linguistic categories. In a similar vein Guha also argues that historically informed anthropologists like G.S. Ghurye and D.R. Gadgil were justified in repudiating the categories of aboriginals and tribals and that the historical record supported such skepticism. Thus we find that the anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of contemporary tribal India were profoundly influenced by the writings of people who studied tribes in the colonial times.

32.5 SUMMARY

In this unit we introduced you to various strands of writings on tribal studies. We saw how the colonial officials and the nationalists differed in their perceptions of tribes in India. Different shades of opinions amongst both of them have also been spelt out.

32.6 GLOSSARY

Pre Class Society : Historically societies that emerged before the formation of classes occurred. These societies were primarily marked by kin based or lineage based formations.

32.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the different views of British officials about tribes in India?
- 2) What was the defining principle of the nationalists on tribes in India?

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M. A. History

List of Courses

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M. A. Course - Evolution of Social Structures in India Through the Ages

Block-wise Course Structures

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