

The Hillsmen of Gangpur: A Discourse on Resistance Movements.

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The present paper makes an endeavor to study the social structure and discontent among tribals leading to resistance movement in the ex-princely state of Gangpur, India. The tribals ranged from Zamindars and village chiefs to the agricultural laborers. There was considerable social differentiation in the social structure. The policy of colonial Government in replacing the tribal chiefs with outsiders resulted in depeasantisation. The movement collapsed after the arrest of the leaders. But the failure of did not lessen its historical importance. A dynamism was generated in the tribal society because of its reaction to changing situation, both internally and externally.

The changing socio-economic situation and resistance struggles of the tribals have drawn the attention of social anthropologists and historians. The tribals constituted about 65 per cent of the population of the princely state of Gangpur, Orissa in eastern India. The rulers of feudatory states were effectively acting as agents of British imperialism. They tended to

demand excessive revenue from their subjects and the king of Gangpur was not an exception. The result was “depeasantization” and landlessness among tribals, leading to their discontent. Similar developments were also found in the other feudatory states of Orissa⁴⁹.

Raja Raghunath Sekhar Deo introduced a new revenue settlement in 1874 and transferred some villages by auction to the highest bidders who came from the neighboring states. With the influx of Brahmins, Agharias and Telis, there was a change in social structure. Many tribal chiefs lost their earlier privileges. The land revenue policy of the colonial government was another cause of tribal discontent. Starting from the new settlement of the king in 1874, the misery of tenants, poor peasants and agricultural laborers increased. From an amount of Rs.5,200 in 1865, the revenue was increased by Rs.15, 000 along with increased supply of paddy and cereals⁵⁰. The rent paid by fief-holders and gauntias (village chiefs) was not sufficient for the ruler, who was engaged in constructing a magnificent palace. The leases to chiefs was discontinued, then auctioned, and the highest bidders, usually from outside the state, received the lease agreement.

This led to revolt. A tribal gauntia named Madro Kalo rallied some chiefs behind him and rose in rebellion. With assistance of the British government, the revolt was suppressed. Edward Gait, Chief Secretary to government of Bengal reported in 1897 that the Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum had intervened with an armed police force and that the leaders were arrested⁵¹. A new settlement was imposed on the cultivators in 1900 after an agreement between the king and gauntias. There was augmentation of rent on all types of land⁵². The increase in land revenue demand further continued in 1911 and 1936. The discontent among tribals, which had been growing since the last decade of the nineteenth century, flared up at this latest increase in land revenue demand. A converted Christian; Nirmal Munda led the aggrieved tribals and demanded a revision of the land settlement. It may have been more than a coincidence that the movement was led by a Christian. In 1870,

49 Eschmann, A., H. Kulke and G.C. Tripathi (1978)

50 Senapati, N. (1975)

51 Ibid

52 Mukherji, I.B. (1978)

a Lutheran mission had started its activities in Raiboga and set up a station there, while a German Evangelical mission had opened in Kumukela. The missionary activities played an important role in spreading education among Munda tribals. Thus political consciousness developed. Christianity became an instrument to fight the oppressors and it became the rallying point of the anti-feudal struggle. But we should not overemphasize the importance of religion in the movement as Hindu tribals also joined later.

There was a campaign for refusing to pay any rent to the state under the leadership of Nirmal Munda. Dahijira village became the nerve-centre of the agitation and non-Christian tribal leaders like Bahadur Bhagat and Yakub Gudia joined hands with Nirmal Munda. The administration sought the help of the Church Council of Ranchi to appease the tribals, but the efforts of the delegation proved futile⁵³. A petition was submitted to the queen Regent Janaki Rathnaya Amarjee at a meeting held at Sargipali on February 9, 1939. About 5,000 people from 30 villages articulated their anti-establishment feeling by demanding free transfer of land, establishment of a co-operative credit society, freedom to sell lac, silk, wax etc., and abolition of forcible contribution in cash or kind and an end to the bethi (forced labor) system. The nonchalant attitude of the queen gave a fillip to the no-rent campaign, and the Mundas refused to pay revenue dues. Following a carrot and stick policy, the administration issued arrest warrants. The situation was viewed seriously by the colonial government. On April 25, 1939, about 80 tribals had gathered around the village Simko facing the house of Nirmal Munda. The attempt to arrest him led to a police firing, in which 28 tribals were killed, according to the official report⁵⁴.

After the arrest of the leaders, the movement collapsed. But the Prajamandal movement was organized in Gangpur in 1946, and the state merged with Orissa two years afterwards. The tribal society had experienced internal social differentiation, but it had also experienced external pressure due to diminution of forest land, increase in land revenue demand, influx of outsiders and the oppressive policy of the king. The failure of the tribal revolt did not lessen its historical importance, for it generated dynamism in the tribal society because of its reaction to the changing situation.

53 Pati, S. (1987)

54 Amrita Bazar Patrika, May 2, 1939

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