

## Lesson at a Glance

- The **customs** and **rituals** of **tribal societies** differ from those laid down by the **Brahmans**. Unlike the caste societies, the societies of tribals did not have the sharp social divisions. Those who belonged to the same tribe shared common ties of kinship. But, this did not mean that there were no social and economic differences within tribes.
- By the 19th century, tribal people in different parts of India were involved in a variety of activities.
- Some tribal people engaged in **jhum** or **shifting** cultivation. In this type of cultivation, small patches of land were made cleared off trees. The **cultivators** burnt the **vegetation** and spread the ash from the firing, which contained potash to fertilise the soil. They used equipments like axe and hoe for preparing the soil for cultivation. They did not plough the land and sow the seeds. Instead they used to scatter the seeds on the field. Once the crop was ready and harvested, they moved to another field.
- **Shifting cultivators** were found in the hilly and forested tracts of north-east and central India.
- Some tribal groups earned their livelihood by hunting animals and gathering forest produce. They saw forests as essential for survival. The *Khonds* were such community living in the forests of Orissa. They ate fruits and roots collected from the forest. They used many forest shrubs and herbs for medicinal purposes and sold forest produce in the local markets.
- At times they exchanged goods—getting what they needed in return for their forest produce. Some of them were engaged in some odd jobs in villages such as carrying loads or building roads etc.
- But a time came when supplies of produce shrank. As a result more and more tribal people began to wander around in search of work.
- However, *Baigas* remained in the forest. They did not go anywhere.
- Several tribal groups were engaged in heeding and rearing animals. They were **pastoralists** who moved with their herds of cattle or

sheep according to the seasons. The **Van Gujjars** of the Punjab hills and the **Labadis** of Andhra Pradesh were cattle herders, the Gaddis of Kulu were shepherds and the **Bakarwals** of Kashmir reared goats.

- Many tribal groups preferred to settle down instead of moving from one place to another. They began to use plough, and gradually got rights over the land they lived on.
- The British officials found the settled tribal groups like the **Gonds** and **Santhals** more civilised than hunter-gatherers or shifting cultivators.
- The British rule, however, changed the life of the tribal people.
- The tribal chiefs were considered important people because it is they who controlled their territories. Under the British rule they lost their administrative power and were forced to follow law made by British officials in India.
- The British never liked those tribal groups who moved about and did not have a fixed home. They wanted these tribal groups to settle down. Settled peasants were easier to control and administer than people who were always on move.
- The British also wanted a regular revenue income for the state. Hence, they introduced land settlements—that is, they measured the land, defined the rights of each individual of that land and fixed the revenue demand for the state.
- The British effort to settle **jhum** cultivators was not very successful.
- The British brought several changes in forest laws. This affected the tribal lives. The British extended their control over all forests and declared that forests were state property. Some forests were classified as **Reserved Forests** for they produced timber which the British wanted. In these forests people were not allowed to move freely and practise **jhum** cultivation. As a result, several **jhum** cultivators moved to other areas.
- Now, the British faced a problem of shortage of labour. Hence, they decided that they would give **jhum** cultivators small patches of land in the forests and allow them to cultivate these on the condition that those who lived in the villages would have to provide labour to the Forest Department. After this forest villages were established around the Forest Department.
- Many tribal groups reacted against the colonial forest laws.
- During the 19th century, traders and moneylenders began to come into the forests. They offered cash loan to the tribal people and asked them to work for wages.

- The case of the silk growers is worth-mentioning in this regard. In the 18th century, Indian silk was in great demand in European markets. Hence, the East India Company officials tried to encourage silk production to meet the growing demand.
- The **Santhals** of Hazaribagh reared cocoons. The silk traders sent in their agents who gave loans to them to collect the cocoons. The growers were paid three to four rupees for a thousand cocoons. These were then exported to Burdwan or Gaya where they were sold at five times the price. Thus, the silk growers earned very little.
- The plight of the tribals who had to go far away from their homes for work was even worse.
- Finally, the tribal groups in different parts of the country rebelled against the changes in laws, the restrictions on their practices, the exploitation by traders and moneylenders, etc. The movement that **Birsa Munda** led is worth-mentioning here.
- Birsa Munda himself declared that God had appointed him to save his people from trouble, free them from the slavery of **dikus** (outsiders). Soon, thousands became the followers of Birsa. They all were unhappy with the changes they were experiencing and the problems they were facing under British rule. They wanted to recover their golden past.
- A movement began under the leadership of Birsa Munda. The political aim of the **Birsa Movement** was to drive out missionaries, moneylenders, Hindu landlords and the government and to set up a Munda Raj with Birsa at its head.
- As the movement spread, the British officials arrested Birsa in 1895.
- In 1897, he was released. Afterwards, he toured the villages to gather support. He urged people to destroy 'Ravana' (**dikus** and the Europeans) and establish a kingdom under his leadership.
- Birsa died in 1900 and the movement initiated by him faded out, but its significance cannot be undermined.

### ■ TEXTBOOK QUESTIONS SOLVED ■

#### Let's Recall

Q. 1. Fill in the blanks:

- (a) The British described the tribal people as .....
- (b) The method of sowing seeds in **jhum cultivation** is known as .....

- (c) The tribal chiefs got ..... titles in central India under the British land settlements.  
 (d) Tribals went to work in the ..... of Assam and the ..... in Bihar.

**Ans.** (a) savage (b) broadcast  
 (c) land (d) tea plantations, coal mines

**Q. 2.** State whether true or false:

- (a) **Jhum** cultivators plough the land and sow seeds.  
 (b) Cocoons were bought from the Santhals and sold by the traders at five times the purchase price.  
 (c) Birsa urged his followers to purify themselves, give up drinking liquor and stop believing in witchcraft and sorcery.  
 (d) The British wanted to preserve the tribal way of life.

**Ans.** (a) False (b) True  
 (c) True (d) False

### Let's Discuss

**Q. 3.** What problems did shifting cultivators face under British rule?

**Ans.** The life of shifting cultivators was directly connected to the forest. So, when the British brought changes in forest laws, their life was badly affected. The British extended their control over all forests and declared that forests were state property. Some forests were classified as Reserved Forests for they produced timber which the British wanted. In these forests people were not allowed to move freely and practise *jhum* cultivations. As a result, many *jhum* cultivators had to move to other areas in search of work.

**Q. 4.** How did the powers of tribal chiefs change under colonial rule?

**Ans.** The tribal chiefs were important people. They enjoyed a certain amount of economic power and had the right to administer and control their territories. Under the British rule, the functions and powers of these tribal chiefs changed to a great extent:

- (i) They were allowed to keep their land titles over a cluster of villages and rent out lands, but they lost much of their administrative power and were

forced to follow laws made by British officials in India.

- (ii) They had to pay tribute to the British and discipline the tribal groups on behalf of the British.  
 (iii) They lost the authority they had earlier enjoyed amongst their people, and were unable to fulfil their traditional functions.

**Q. 5.** What accounts for the anger of the tribals against the dikus?

**Ans.** The tribals wanted to drive out the *dikus*—missionaries, moneylenders, Hindu landlords, and the government because they saw them as the cause of their misery. The following facts account for their anger against the *dikus*:

- (i) The land policies of the British were destroying their traditional land system.  
 (ii) Hindu landlords and moneylenders were taking over their land.  
 (iii) Missionaries were criticising their traditional culture.

**Q. 6.** What was Birsa's vision of a golden age? Why do you think such a vision appealed to the people of the region?

**Ans.** Birsa was deeply influenced by many of the ideas he came in touch within his growing-up years. The movement that he led aimed at reforming tribal society. He urged the Munda to give up drinking liquor, clean their village, and stop believing in witchcraft and sorcery. He often remembered the golden past of the Mundas, when they lived a good life, constructed embankments, tapped natural springs, planted trees and orchards, practised cultivation to earn their living. They did not kill their brethren and relatives. They lived honestly. Birsa wanted to restore this glorious past.

Such a vision appealed to the people of the region because they were very much eager to lead a free life. They had got fed up with the colonial forest laws and the restrictions that were imposed on them.

## Let's Do

**Q. 7.** Find out from your parents, friends or teachers, the names of some heroes of other tribal revolts in the twentieth century. Write their story in your own words.

**Ans.** Students are suggested to do this work themselves.

**Q. 8.** Choose any tribal group living in India today. Find out about their customs and way of life, and how their lives have changed in the last 50 years.

**Ans.** Students are suggested to visit a neighbouring tribal area and collect information regarding their customs and way of life and other things.

