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## Introduction to Tribal Societies

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In 1895, Birsa Munda emerged as a significant figure among the tribal communities of Chhottanagpur in Jharkhand. He was believed to possess miraculous powers and was seen as a divine savior by thousands of followers. Birsa belonged to the Munda tribe, but his movement included other tribes such as the Santhals and Oraons. These tribal groups were facing challenges under British colonial rule, including threats to their traditional ways of life, livelihoods, and religious practices.

Tribal societies were distinct from caste-based societies, with customs and rituals different from Brahmanical traditions. They generally lacked the rigid social divisions of caste systems and shared strong kinship ties. However, social and economic differences did exist within tribes.



*Fig. 1 – Women of the Dongria Kandha tribe in Orissa wade through the river on the way to the market*

The Dongria Kandha women of Odisha, shown wading through a river carrying goods on their heads, exemplify the close relationship tribal communities have with their natural environment. Their traditional methods of transport and livelihood reflect sustainable living practices.

## Exam Questions

**Q1:** Who was Birsa Munda and why was he important to the tribal communities?

**A1:** Birsa Munda was a tribal leader from the Munda community who led a movement to

protect tribal rights and culture against British colonial oppression and exploitation by outsiders called dikus.

**Q2:** How were tribal societies different from caste societies?

**A2:** Tribal societies had customs and rituals different from Brahmanical traditions and lacked the sharp social divisions characteristic of caste societies, emphasizing kinship ties instead.

## Traditional Livelihoods of Tribal Communities

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By the nineteenth century, tribal groups in India engaged in various forms of livelihood:

### Jhum Cultivation (Shifting Cultivation)

Many tribes practised jhum cultivation, which involved clearing small forest patches by cutting and burning vegetation to prepare land for cultivation. After harvesting, the cultivators moved to new fields, allowing the soil to regain fertility over time. This method was common in the hilly and forested regions of northeast and central India.

### Hunters and Gatherers

Some tribes, like the Khonds of Odisha, depended on hunting animals and gathering forest produce such as fruits, roots, and medicinal herbs. They also traded forest products with local artisans and markets.

### Settled Cultivation

Other tribal groups began settled cultivation, using ploughs and cultivating the same land year after year. Land rights were often communal, with clans holding collective ownership. Some individuals within clans gained power and rented out land.

*Fig. 2 – Dongria Kandha women in Orissa take home pandanus leaves from the forest to make plates*



Dongria Kandha women carrying pandanus leaves used for making plates illustrate the sustainable use of forest resources by tribal communities.

## Exam Questions

**Q1:** What is jhum cultivation and where was it practised?

**A1:** Jhum cultivation is shifting cultivation involving clearing and burning forest patches for farming, practised mainly in the hilly and forested tracts of northeast and central India.

**Q2:** How did hunting and gathering support tribal livelihoods?

**A2:** Tribes hunted animals and gathered forest produce like fruits and medicinal herbs, which were essential for their survival and trade.

# Impact of Colonial Rule on Tribal Communities

British colonial policies significantly affected tribal life. Tribal chiefs lost much of their traditional administrative power and were subordinated to British laws. The British aimed to settle nomadic tribes as peasants to facilitate revenue collection and control.

Land settlements defined individual land rights and revenue demands, disrupting communal land ownership. Forest laws declared forests as state property, restricting tribal access to forests for cultivation, hunting, and gathering. This forced many tribals to seek wage labor, often under exploitative conditions.



*Fig. 6 – Bhil women cultivating in a forest in Gujarat*

Shifting cultivation continues in many forest areas of Gujarat. You can see that trees have been cut and land cleared to create patches for cultivation.

Bhil women cultivating land in Gujarat demonstrate traditional agricultural practices affected by colonial policies.

Tribal groups faced exploitation by traders and moneylenders, leading to debt and poverty. Many tribal revolts occurred against these injustices, including the movement led by Birsa Munda.

## Exam Questions

**Q1:** How did British forest laws affect tribal communities?

**A1:** British forest laws restricted tribal access to forests, banning traditional practices like shifting cultivation and hunting, which undermined their livelihoods.

**Q2:** What were the consequences of land settlements introduced by the British?

**A2:** Land settlements disrupted communal land ownership, imposed revenue demands, and created distinctions between landowners and tenants, affecting tribal social structures.

## Birsa Munda and the Tribal Movement

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Birsa Munda was born in the mid-1870s in a poor Munda family. Influenced by tribal uprisings and religious teachings, he sought to reform tribal society by urging people to abandon harmful practices and revive their traditional ways. He opposed missionaries, landlords, moneylenders, and British officials, whom he called dikus (outsiders).

Birsa's movement aimed to establish a Munda Raj, restoring tribal autonomy and rights over land. His followers attacked symbols of colonial and outsider power, including police stations and churches. Birsa was arrested in 1895 and died in 1900, but his movement led to laws protecting tribal land rights and inspired future tribal resistance.

## Exam Questions

**Q1:** What were the main goals of Birsa Munda's movement?

**A1:** To reform tribal society, reject exploitation by outsiders, restore tribal land rights, and establish a Munda Raj under tribal leadership.

**Q2:** What was the significance of Birsa Munda's movement?

**A2:** It forced colonial authorities to protect tribal land rights and demonstrated tribal capacity for organized protest against injustice.

## Tribal Revolts and Resistance

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Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tribal groups across India rebelled against colonial policies, forest laws, taxes, and exploitation. Notable uprisings include the Kol rebellion (1831–32), Santhal revolt (1855), Bastar rebellion (1910), and Warli revolt (1940). These movements expressed tribal anger and resistance in their own cultural ways.

### Exam Questions

**Q1:** Name some major tribal revolts against British rule.

**A1:** Kol rebellion, Santhal revolt, Bastar rebellion, Warli revolt, and Birsa Munda's movement.

**Q2:** Why did tribal revolts occur during colonial rule?

**A2:** Due to loss of land, restrictions on traditional practices, heavy taxes, and exploitation by outsiders.

## Traditional Tribal Crafts and Economy

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Tribal communities engaged in various crafts such as weaving mats and cloth, using natural materials from forests. Women played a significant role in these activities, often balancing work with childcare.



*Fig. 8 – Godara women weaving*

Women from the Godara community weaving cloth illustrate the importance of traditional crafts in tribal economies.



*Fig. 9 – A Hajang woman weaving a mat*

For women, domestic work was not confined to the home. They carried their babies with them to the fields and the factories.

A Hajang woman weaving a mat while carrying her baby shows the integration of work and family life in tribal communities.

## Exam Questions

**Q1:** What role did weaving play in tribal communities?

**A1:** Weaving was a traditional craft important for making clothes and mats, contributing to the tribal economy and cultural identity.

**Q2:** How did tribal women balance work and family responsibilities?

**A2:** Women often carried out craft and agricultural work while taking care of children, integrating domestic and economic roles.

## Search for Work and Labour Migration

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With the decline of traditional livelihoods, many tribal people migrated to work in tea plantations in Assam and coal mines in Jharkhand. They were recruited through contractors who paid low wages and restricted their movement. Working conditions in mines were harsh and dangerous, leading to health problems and high mortality.



*Fig. 10 – Coal miners of Bihar, 1948*

In the 1920s, about 50 per cent of the miners in the Jharia and Raniganj coal mines of Bihar were tribals. Work deep down in the dark and suffocating mines was not only back-breaking and dangerous, it was often literally killing. In the 1920s, over 2,000 workers died every year in the coal mines in India.

Coal miners from Bihar covered in coal dust illustrate the difficult and hazardous working conditions faced by tribal laborers.

### Exam Questions

**Q1:** What kinds of work did tribal people do outside their communities during colonial times?

**A1:** They worked in tea plantations, coal mines, and as laborers in various industries under exploitative conditions.

**Q2:** What were the health risks associated with working in coal mines?

**A2:** Exposure to coal dust caused lung diseases like pneumoconiosis, leading to chronic respiratory problems and death.

## Glossary

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- **Bewar:** A term used in Madhya Pradesh for shifting cultivation.
- **Fallow:** A field left uncultivated to restore soil fertility.
- **Jhum Cultivation:** Shifting cultivation involving clearing and burning forest patches for farming.
- **Mahua:** A flower used for food and alcohol production.
- **Sal:** A type of tree found in Indian forests.
- **Sleeper:** Horizontal wooden planks on which railway tracks are laid.
- **Vaishnav:** Worshippers of the Hindu god Vishnu.

## Quick Reference

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- Birsa Munda led a tribal movement against British colonial oppression in the late 19th century.
- Tribal livelihoods included shifting cultivation, hunting-gathering, and settled farming.
- British policies disrupted tribal land rights and forest access, leading to poverty and rebellion.
- Tribal revolts were expressions of resistance to colonial exploitation and loss of autonomy.
- Traditional crafts like weaving were important for tribal economies and culture.
- Many tribals migrated for work in plantations and mines under harsh conditions.

## Solved Examples

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## Example 1:

**Question:** Explain the impact of British forest laws on tribal communities.

**Answer:** British forest laws declared forests as state property and restricted tribal access for cultivation, hunting, and gathering. This disrupted their traditional livelihoods, forcing many to seek wage labor and causing economic hardship.

## Example 2:

**Question:** Describe the main features of jhum cultivation.

**Answer:** Jhum cultivation is a form of shifting agriculture where forest patches are cleared by cutting and burning vegetation. Crops are grown for a season, after which the cultivators move to new fields, allowing the soil to recover.

## Practice Set

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### Easy

- Who were the dikus according to Birsa Munda?
- What is shifting cultivation?

### Moderate

- How did British land policies affect tribal land ownership?
- Explain the role of women in tribal weaving traditions.

### Challenging

- Discuss the significance of Birsa Munda's movement in the context of tribal resistance.

- Analyze the effects of colonial forest laws on the economic and social life of tribal communities.

## Answer Key

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- **Easy 1:** Dikus were outsiders such as missionaries, landlords, moneylenders, and British officials seen as oppressors by tribal people.
- **Easy 2:** Shifting cultivation is an agricultural practice where land is cleared and farmed temporarily before moving to a new area.
- **Moderate 1:** British land policies introduced individual land rights and revenue demands, disrupting communal ownership and traditional systems.
- **Moderate 2:** Women played a key role in weaving, producing cloth and mats essential for daily life and trade.
- **Challenging 1:** Birsa Munda's movement was significant as it mobilized tribal people to resist colonial exploitation and led to legal protections for tribal land.
- **Challenging 2:** Colonial forest laws restricted access to resources, undermined livelihoods, and forced tribals into poverty and labor migration.