



Contribution of Tribals in the Indian Freedom Struggle and Social Movement

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Introduction:

In the making of modern India, the tribal communities have played a very significant role in protecting the culture of the nation and safeguarding the motherland. From this perspective, India has been divided into urban India and rural India. Among these, the tribal society is largely scattered across rural, hilly, and valley regions. Although this tribal society remains illiterate and away from mainstream development, it possesses its own distinct culture. Their dialects and customs are different from those of other societies, and they remain detached from evils such as idol worship, mob rule, and violence. Because of exploitation by landlords, moneylenders, contractors, and the ruling authorities, many injustices and atrocities were inflicted on the tribals, which led to deep suffering. As a result, tribal, bearing the pain of injustice and atrocities, carried on constant struggles. From the very beginning, they were living a natural life in forests and hills, self-reliant and sufficient to meet their primary needs. For this reason, they had no special relation with the outside world. But gradually, with the passage of time, circumstances began to change. The exploitation of society increased. Due to this, there arose various social, cultural, and economic movements. These agitations and

conflicts emerged out of the existence of the tribal society. Through these struggles, new social systems began to form. In tribal society, there was no external connection with the outside world. As a result, their life was peaceful. There were no social conflicts or movements.

After the arrival of the British, new social conflicts arose in India. Among these conflicts, there were some important tribal conflicts. The main reasons for these conflicts were the spread of the British religion, the birth of the British political system, new land revenue policies, taxation, new laws, cultural interference, destruction of forests, environmental exploitation, forced labor, and excessive administrative interference. Because of this, seeds of social conflicts were sown in tribal society. For the sake of their existence, they struggled, and in this process, conflicts constantly took place. Although tribal society resisted these challenges, historians did not pay enough attention to them. Special discussions were never held about the conflicts of Indian tribal. Yet, these conflicts are of immense importance in Indian social history. The social conflicts of India are incomplete without mentioning them. The amount of bloodshed in these conflicts is very high. Just as the mainstream society had to suffer

massacres, similarly, tribal society too had to endure killings. In fact, many of the massacres of tribals went unnoticed. Thousands of tribals were killed in these conflicts. However, these incidents did not find any special mention in history. Many conflicts were suppressed and ignored. Tribal conflicts were regarded only as rebellions. Historians did not give importance to them. As a result, these conflicts remained hidden in history. Tribals carried out many such struggles, but because their society was isolated and backward, their role in history remained limited. Their contribution was neglected by historians. Because of this neglect, their struggles could not be recorded in history as part of the mainstream freedom struggle. For the sake of existence, they struggled, and as a result, this struggle took the form of constant conflicts. In this, the tribal society had risen. But historians did not record it.

Special discussions have not been conducted in relation to the conflicts of Indian tribes. Yet, the conflicts of tribals are extremely important in the history of Indian social struggles. The number of massacres caused during these conflicts was very large. In the same way as society suffered massacres, many tribal communities also suffered massacres. Thousands of tribals were killed in these conflicts. However, no special mention of these events has been made. Many conflicts have been hidden. Tribals carried out many struggles, but as their society was isolated and backward, their role in history did not receive due recognition. Historians did not pay attention to them. As a result, these conflicts could not be recorded in the same way as the Sepoy mutiny or other conflicts. They have remained hidden in history.

The national revolt of 1857 is regarded as the first war of independence. However, tribals had already started revolting

against the British from 1782 itself. If tribal struggles had received cooperation from other sections of society, then the British power in India would not have been so firmly established.

The peculiarity of tribal uprisings and revolts was that tribals fought with great courage and spirit. Even though government orders imposed heavy taxes on them, they would continue their struggle. Tribals had very few weapons, and their main weapons were bows, arrows, spears, axes, swords, and slings. Against these primitive weapons, the British had modern arms and a strong army. As a result, lakhs of tribals were killed in battles. But their contribution was not given proper importance in the pages of national history.

Among the tribal Movement movements, some important uprisings can be cited such as the Tamara Movement, the Kherbar Movement, the Santhal Movement, the Munda Movement, the Jharkhand Movement, the Bodo Movement, the Bhil Movement and many other important tribal struggles. Ragvairal has mentioned in his book (1971) that from 1778 to 1971, more than 73 tribal movements took place. The tribal movement has long been against British rule, and the feeling of nationalism was strong among the tribal tribes.

Santhal Movement – 1855:

In India, the Santhal community is considered to be the largest among the tribal groups. In the northern part of the country, the Santhal tribe suffered exploitation from British moneylenders, landlords, and officials. The Santhals were continuously exploited. Many complaints were made to the British government regarding this, but the government did not pay any attention. As a result, in June 1855, in the regions of Murmu, Banka, and smaller villages, thousands of Santhals united and began a rebellion against the British

government. The British government suppressed the movement with cruelty and did not grant any concessions. As a result, the rebellion turned into a major struggle. The Santhals fought bravely against the British. Many landlords, moneylenders, and zamindars were killed. Due to this, the rebellion spread across large parts of Bengal.

The government declared martial law in these regions. As a result, in 1855 alone, fierce battles were fought between the Santhals and the British army. In this struggle, around 50,000 Santhals were killed. The leaders of the Santhals, Sidho, Kanhu, and Chand, sacrificed their lives in this fight. The powerful British suppressed the rebellion with force, yet this movement inspired many other uprisings in tribal society. This rebellion played an important role in creating an atmosphere of nationalism against the British government.

Birsa Munda Movement – 1895:

Among the famous tribal rebellions in India, the Birsa Munda uprising is remembered with respect. The Birsa Munda revolt was organized to protect tribals from exploitation. Before the arrival of the British, the tribal society lived independently and self-sufficiently. Tribal culture, religious customs, traditions, and practices were deeply rooted. But after the arrival of the British, the situation of tribals worsened. The British began converting tribals to Christianity by forcing them and exploiting their innocence. Zamindars and moneylenders took advantage of their ignorance. To free his people from this oppression, Birsa Munda raised the banner of revolt. By raising the slogan of "Birsa Raj," he inspired the tribals to unite and fight against British exploitation. Birsa Munda rose up. Through this movement, he opposed the injustice and exploitation of many tribal

brothers. He opposed the exploitation of tribals, the oppression of peasants, and the unjust appropriation of land by landlords. His main aim was to liberate the tribals from the clutches of the British and landlords. Birsa Munda always said, "I will soon free you from the clutches of the landlords." He urged the tribals not to obey the orders of the government, police, forest officers, and landlords. Birsa awakened his people to demand their rights, thus leading a great movement. Alarmed by this, the British arrested Birsa in 1895 and sentenced him to two years of imprisonment. Even after Birsa's release, the movement for freedom continued peacefully. Since his religious preaching posed a challenge to British rule, the British soon imprisoned him again. But after his release, he began organizing the tribals. He gathered tribal forces, held meetings, and inspired them for the struggle. He created many posts in his army. He appointed a general, minister, and commander-in-chief, and trained them in military tactics. In 1899, Birsa led his first armed rebellion, launching an attack on British rule with the strength of tribals. For their rights, he adopted the path of violence, leading to a great uprising. Birsa Munda's rebellion is considered a war against British rule. In every village, he taught his people to fight for their rights. Birsa Munda inspired his followers to fight against injustice, oppression, and exploitation. Many tribals joined him. The British government, frightened by his movement, mobilized its army. Birsa Munda's bravery and leadership became known everywhere. Therefore, the British used deceit and arrested Birsa Munda. On 3rd February 1900, Birsa Munda and his associates were captured and imprisoned by the British. In jail, Birsa Munda fell seriously ill and died on 9th June 1900. Some believe his death was due to illness, while others suspect poisoning. Birsa

Munda occupies an important place in Indian history as a great tribal revolutionary. Among the tribal revolutionaries, Birsa was the only tribal who rose to such prominence. Even today, a statue of Birsa Munda stands in the Indian Parliament. It is believed that Birsa's rebellion is the pride of the tribals. Birsa's rebellion became an inspiration for the tribals, giving them the strength to rise and fight for their rights.

Jharkhand Movement:

In the Nagpuri tribal region, the national freedom movement created new awareness among the tribals. This came to be known as the Jharkhand Movement. The main objective of this rebellion was to free the tribal areas from non-tribal control. The exploitation of land, forests, and water resources, along with cultural oppression, uneven development, and the plundering of tribals, became the foundation of the rebellion. Based on these issues, the tribals began to build their own identity. Along with this, many social organizations were also formed. Some progressive leaders began to lead the tribals in this struggle. In 1946, the Adivasi Mahasabha was founded. Under the leadership of Jaipal Singh Munda, the demand for tribal self-rule began to be raised. However, this demand was not fulfilled. Eventually, in 1950, the Jharkhand Party was established. This party's main leader was Jaipal Singh Munda. Later, this party merged with the Congress. After this, in 1972, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) was founded. Sibu Soren. This organization began to put forward the demand for a separate state of Jharkhand. It is believed that the Jharkhand state, which was created later, would bring progress and reforms for the tribals. The Munda, santhal, and Gond tribal had high hopes that this separate state would provide them social, economic, and political

justice. However, their problems have still not been completely solved.

Bhill Movement:

The Bhil Movement is considered one of the most important tribal Movement. This Movement, along with the Munda Movement, is of great significance in tribal history. The Movement took place in the Satpuda mountain ranges, which geographically spread over parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. This region is known as the Bhil region. The region between the Tapti and Narmada rivers is called the Bhil region, also known as the *Bhil Pradesh*. The Bhil tribals of India traditionally depended on forests and their environment for farming, hunting, gathering fruits, collecting wood, or working as laborers. This was their daily livelihood. However, after the arrival of the British, the lifestyle of the Bhils changed. As a result, their social, economic, religious, cultural, and political traditions, as well as their rights over natural resources, were disrupted.

The Bhil uprising of 1817 in Khandesh is particularly significant. This uprising was against the oppression of the landlords, moneylenders, and government officials. The Bhils resisted the looting, exploitation, and harassment of peasants and poor tribals. The first District Collector of Khandesh, Captain Briggs, recognized this uprising as a reaction against the cruelty of landlords and moneylenders. To suppress the uprising, the British established military camps in Bhil tribal areas, destroyed crops, and carried out brutal punishments. Still, the Bhils continued their struggle. They had a natural love for independence and were used to living in a free environment. Therefore, the killing of their leaders by the British further enraged them. When one leader was captured or killed, another would rise immediately to

lead the rebellion. Hence, the British found it very difficult to suppress the Bhil Movement.

To suppress the revolt, the British government established the Movement They announced that Bhills would be paid wages, given employment, and provided military training. They appointed local traders and moneylenders as intermediaries, who often exploited the Bhils instead of helping them. Despite this, the Bhils did not accept foreign rule. Many Bhil chiefs like Bhima Naik resisted British power. Bhima Naik gave fierce resistance to the British, continuing the fight for years. He trained Bhil youths in warfare, and they bravely fought against British armies. The British referred to him as the *Bhil General*. Ultimately, Bhima Naik became a symbol of the Bhil rebellion. From 1857 to 1880, in the history of Khandesh, the famous British East India Company (England) government had complete control. During this period, not a single year passed without revolts by the Bhils (tribals) against the British. This fact is not well-known in Maharashtra. It is important to highlight this.

The Bhil uprising spread in Malegaon in 1818 and soon engulfed the entire region of Rajasthan. Later, the leadership of this uprising was taken over by Govind Guru. The center of this movement was near the Rajasthan-Gujarat border, and it became very strong there. Under Govind Guru's leadership, the Bhils organized a huge assembly in 1903, demanding their traditional rights. This frightened the surrounding princely states and the British. Out of fear, the British kept a close watch on Govind Guru's activities. The British government sent an army against the Bhils and tried to suppress the movement. Despite the suppression, the Bhils stood united. On 17th November 1913, under Govind Guru's leadership, a massive tribal gathering took place at Mangadh Hill. Around 1.5 lakh

(150,000) Bhils attended this gathering. Alarmed, the British attacked them, and in the brutal firing that followed, about 1,500 Bhils were killed. This event is remembered in history as the "Mangadh Massacre," similar to the "Jallianwala Bagh Massacre." After this, many Bhil leaders were arrested, and Govind Guru was sentenced to death. This massacre was one of the greatest and most important massacres in history. But, unfortunately, historians have not given it the recognition it deserves. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is well-known, remembered by everyone, and honored in history. In that incident, 389 Indians were martyred. However, in Mangadh, around 1,500 Bhils (tribals) were martyred. Even though this number is larger, Mangadh has never been given the same recognition as Jallianwala Bagh, which is remembered as a symbol of India's freedom struggle.

The Mangadh massacre has been neglected by historians and is rarely mentioned in golden letters. In fact, many freedom fighters like Savaakar, merchants, soldiers, and farmers from among the Bhils, under the leadership of Tantya Bhill raised a revolt against the British on 25th March 1884. Similarly, many tribal revolutionaries from Maharashtra also rose in revolt under the leadership of Bhima Naik, Khaja Naik, Bhagoji Naik, Panthaji Naik, ramji bhangare, Raghaji Bhangare, and Umaji Naik. These tribal leaders shook the British rule and challenged their authority by revolting in forests, villages, and surrounding areas. But the bravery and sacrifices of these revolutionaries were deliberately ignored by British historians. Even after independence, mainstream Indian historians failed to give them the importance they deserved. Therefore, in India's history of freedom struggle, the tribal contribution appears very small. The reason behind this marginalization is that

tribals, even today, continue to suffer from economic, social, and political exploitation.

Summary:

These important tribal uprisings during and after the freedom struggle must be remembered. The tribal way of life in India has always been based on agriculture, forests, and cattle-rearing. But in the name of modernization and national development, tribals were forcibly displaced from their lands, deprived of forest rights, and their entire livelihood was destroyed. Without making them part of the process of national development, they were instead pushed out of it, leading to their marginalization. As a result, after independence, tribals have continued to face exploitation of their land, rights, and livelihoods. Even today, they remain victims of political and economic neglect.

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