

A Historical Perspective on the Crisis of Forest Oriented Indigenous Culture in the Jungle Mahal Area of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Cultural domination was established along with colonial domination in India. My study area is south west Bengal that was known as in the British imperial period. Forest was deeply involved in the cultural life of the indigenous people here in the pre-British era. 'Mondal System' was at the heart of the land system here. Indigenous peoples lost traditional land and forest rights as a result of British colonial forest policy. Although they lost these rights, they were not willing to lose the essence of their culture. But due to scarcity and poverty, cultural domination began over them. I have tried to analyze the source and character of this cultural domination. I used the help of some official reports like Census report, District Human Development report and district gazetteers as historical sources of my paper.

Keywords: Forest Coulter , Jungle Mahals , Forest Policy, Deforestation, Agrarian Relation.

1. Introduction

Culture is the collective manifestation of social behaviour and rules. However, geography and economics control cultural life deeply. In the eighteenth century, the economy of the Jungle Mahal area was land and forest oriented. In the pre-British period, the indigenous peoples of the area enjoyed unrestricted rights to water, land and forests. But as a result of permanent land settlement and the British forest they lost their traditional rights over water, land and forest. This was the beginning of cultural domination.

2. Field of My Study

Jungle Mahals district¹ was formed by the British East India Company by the Regulation XVIII of 1805 A.D. and the district was abolished in 1833 A.D. In fact, the geographical boundaries of the jungle Mahals district has changed frequently. A vague term applied in 18th century to British possessions and some dependent leadership lying between Birbhum,

Bankura, Midnapore and Chota Nagpur². Suchibrata mentioned the term 'Jungle Mahals' is loosely applied to this part of Bengal extending from the hill areas of Birbhum to Ranchi. Part of Birbhum, Bankura, Burdwan, Midnapure and present day Purulia and Jhargram district was known as Jungle Mahals which was a part of the Jungle Terrai district. The most common feature of these areas was the deep forest.³The soil of this area was rocky. River system here was not in favour to spread of agriculture. Irrigation system was not conducive to the spread of agriculture. Various Tribal groups such as Santals, Bhumij, Munda, Mahali, Kora, Lodha et. mostly lived here. L.S.S O'Malley argued about Bankura district, castes and tribes of aboriginals or semi –aboriginals are most numerous, the Santals, Bauris and Bagdis alone accounting for over one-fourth of the total population.⁴ O'Malley also pointed West Midnapore was largely inhabited by Santals and other aboriginal tribes.⁵He wrote the same about the Birbhum district.⁶

The tribal people of this area depended on forests for their livelihood.

3. Review Literature

In the late nineteenth and twentieth century Indian history, these indigenous peoples are rarely found. The reasons for this, of course, are much discussed. Even after independence, along with development, a section of Indian society has been gradually consumed by quicksand. They gradually became isolated from the mainstream of national life. Their grief was expressed in the pens of various writers. When Ranjit Guha published his book 'Elementary Aspect of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India' in 1973, the controversy over the theoretical basis of the peasant protest movement began. Indigenous people had entered the subaltern group. It has been published in various history books of the subaltern historians. Despite this, there are still some gaps. Imperialist, nationalist, and subaltern historical thinking failed to understand the Indigenous mentality. This limitation has since been overcome.

Ranabir Samaddar⁷discusses about the transition of Jungle mahalas from being a frontier region administered by custom and local power to its coming under the full-scale rule of colonial Bengal. But he also ignores the deforestation here.

Suchibrata Sen⁸discusses the economic changes in the lives of the Santals of Jangal Mahal during the colonial period. But he also didn't elaborate what impact the British forest policy had on tribal life here.

Pradip Chattopadhyay⁹has focused on the changed identity of the Santals in South West Bengal. He discusses the impact of the forest on indigenous public life in the jungle

Mahal in economic aspect. But he did not elaborate on the forest policy of the colonial government and its impact .

4. The Purpose and Objectives of the Study

I have tried to analyze the pride of the indigenous culture of this area and the character of its crisis in the twentieth century. I shed light how the peasantry came to an end in the life of a section of the Santal community in this area and they got the character of worker. The present research paper raises some relevant questions and tried to answer them:

- i) The traditional tribal culture of this area was like?
- ii) What role did forests play in this enduring indigenous culture?
- iii) What role did forest policy play in changing this culture in the twentieth century?

5. Methodology

I have used various government sources especially census reports, forest survey reports, and district gazetteers as material and also used some secondary material. At the same time, I have collected information by talking to different people of the tribal society.

6. Finding My Study

6.1. Forested Jungle Mahal Area

Jungle Mahal territories was covered in dense forest up to the pre British period. From the Jain and Buddhist accounts it appears the Rarh region was covered by dense forest. According to the 'Ramacharitham' the feudal Zamindars of forest region helped to Raja Rampul to put down for controlling the Kaivarta Revolt. At that time Raja Rudrasheikhar was his main helping hand who was the king of Tailakampa. Most probably Tailakampawas the capital of Panchkot. In the medieval period this area was known as Jharkhand. Krishnadasa Kaviraja in his 'Chaitanya Charitamrita' says that Chaitanyadev used the forest route of Jharkhand when he went Nilachal (Orissa) to Brindaban. The 'Bhavishya Purana' which written in the 15th -16th century described to this area as densely forest with Sal and other trees. Abul Fajal in his 'Ain-i-Akbari' described to Bishnupur as 'Banbishnupur'.

6.2. Forest-Oriented Indigenous Culture Here

Various tribal group mostly lived here. O'Malley mentioned that a quarter of the total population of Bankura district belonged to tribal groups.¹⁰ He further mentioned that Medanipur district was inhabited by Santal and other Asibasi tribal groups.¹¹ During the famine of 1770 AD, there was a shortage of farmers in the area. When the new land system was introduced in 1793, the Santals were used to cut down the forest and prepare to the land for cultivation. Under the leadership of Majhi, when they acquired the jungle as a group, they got joint ownership. With the establishment of the village in Jungle, the rules of Santal

society related to agriculture were developed. Various tribal groups in the region used to collect their basic necessities from the jungle. The rights of the aborigines were not violated during this time. Land and forest oriented culture developed among the tribal here. Forests were involved in every stage of tribal religion and cultural life. They considered the forest as the gift of the God. In a very natural way trees were worshiped as a God by them. Actually, The origins of the religious life of each nation are hidden by the ancient people in the worship of natural forces. As well as the presence of forest in their religious life is very normal. In this context 'Karam Puja', 'Salui Puja etc. can be mentioned.

6.3. Permanent Land Settlement.

In early phase of the British East India Company forest was considered as an obstruction to agriculture and consequently a bar to the prosperity of Empire. That time the British Company tried to bring more extensive forest areas under cultivation. large forest areas were transferred to landlords or to the cultivators in India especially in Bengal and Punjab.¹² The British Raj tried to change the revenue system in the jungle Mahal area between 1772 and 1792A.D. The forest in the respective estates were brought under the jurisdiction of the Bengal Zamindars through the permanent settlement and it began to be leased to earn more income against the interest of the forest dwellers. At that time there were established as new zamindar classes in the Jungle Mahal territories. The zamindars cleared the forest and took it to agricultural land for tax liability. The traditional 'Mandal System' or village community here had been dismantled.

6.4. Colonization of Forests Here

Until the pre-British period, forests were governed by the village community. However, from this time the forest began to be destroyed due to urbanization and agricultural expansion. Up to the first phase of the British imperial government forest was an important source of revenue. With the introduction of free trade economy demand of the forest products began to increase. As a result forest was destroyed in large scale in here. The most important reasons for upstream forest here were as follows-

6.4.1. Spread of Railways

The Bengal Nagpur Railway was formed in 1887 for upgrading the Nagpur Chhattisgarh Railway. It extended up to Asansol via Ballarpur as shorter Howrah Mumbai route to skip Allahabad This was the main purpose of this Rail line.¹³ The Bengal Nagpur Railway main line from Nagpur to Asansol, on The Howrah Delhi main line ,was opened for goods traffic on February 1891.¹⁴ It was connected to Kharaghpur and Howrah in 1900A.D.¹⁵ Bengal Nagpur Rail lines were extended to Gomoh, on East India Railway`s mail line in 1907. The

Mohuda Chandrapura branch line was opened in 1913. Bankura Damodar Railway (BDR) started on 1916 A.D. Bengal Nagpur Railway was the pioneered development of the Railway in Eastern and Central India. Actually the Branch of the Bengal Nagpur Railway has extended over the Jungle Mahal areas. Only railway in the Jungle Mahals is a branch of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway, known as the Jherria- Kharagpur railway. Its length is about 200 km. There are six railway stations within the Midnapore district namely Kharagpou, Midnipore, Godapiasal, Salboni, Road Chandrakona and Gorhbeta. Another seven railway stations, viz, Pirdoba, Bishnupur, Ramsagar, Ondagram, Bankura, Chhatna and Jhantipahari are in Bankura district. Adra is the main junction railway station on this line in Purulia district. With the introduced of railways and expansion of PWD works forest was destroyed in large scale in this areas. The British East India Company tried to develop the coal industry through Howrah -Ranigangh Railway. The British East India Company also tried to bring various timber and non-timber forest products to Calcutta through this railway. Of course there was administrative and military necessity also. Spread of railways has stopped the forest growth and destroyed the forest within reach of the rail lines. Direct demands for construction works and railway fuel has destroyed the forest.¹⁶ Systematic exploitation of forests on a scientific basis started only after the opening of Kharagpur- Gomoh branch of the then Bengal Nagpur Railways in 1902 when the private owner began to treat their forests as an asset capable of yielding regular returns.¹⁷ The forest of both side of the Rail line were destroyed. A lot of trees were destroyed for build-up Railway Stations and various railway buildings. Scientific method did not follow in case of felling of trees. Many trees have been destroyed for testing, which tree would be good for railway slipper.

6.4.2. Urbanisation:

During the British rule, some of the jungle areas began to grow as semi-urban towns for administrative and commercial purposes as like Kharagpur town was formed along the railway. Barakar, Asansol, Kulti And ,Burnpur developed as industrial areas for the sake of rail and coal industries.

6.4.3. P.W.D Expansion

Not just rail, but for the expansion of forest PW roads many forests were destroyed here. Many roads were built over the forests of the jungle areas. Many roads came from different places and merged at the railway station. The most famous roads were 1) Chaibasha to Saraikella via Puncha. 2) Hajaribag to Ramgarh via Purulia Kenjakura. 3) Bankura to Burdwan via Beliatare Somakukhi. A road has gone from Sonamukhi to Baharampur via Panagarh and Illambazar. 4) Bankura to Cattack via Ondha, Bishnupur, Garhbeta, Mednepure,

Dantanand Baleshwar .5) Great Military Road which extend from Calcutta towards Uttar Pradesh via Jahanabad (Aram bag), Bishnupur, Bankura, Chhatna and Raghunathpur. Many short roads has been made for internal communication over the forest of Jungle Mahal area. In 1908 L.S.S. O'Malley pointed that the public works Department of Bankura district maintained altogether $58\frac{1}{2}$ miles of roads in Bankura, of which $55\frac{1}{2}$ miles are metalled and 3 miles are un metalled. The District Board maintained 61 miles of metalled and 541 miles of nonmetalled roads, beside a number of village roads with an aggregate length of 105 miles.¹⁸

7. Changes in Tribal Culture Here in the Twentieth Century

7.1. Impact of the Colonial Forest Policy

The series of forest Acts were introduced by the colonial government. But the imperial Forest Acts could not be protected the forest here. In fact the royal government tried to protect the forest for commercial value. The colonial Government had destroyed the large amount forest of Jungle Mahals to build the Colonial structures like Railways and Royal Navy. Later, the colonial government was forced to conserve forests to confirm supply of woods for Railways sleepers and Royal Navy. The imperial Government felt the need to protect the forest from 1850s in their own interest. The imperial Government wanted to continue the supply of timber for the Railways sleeper and Royal Navy. They began to impose government control over forest products. The monopoly rights of the Company Government was established over the forest resources. As a result of all these forest laws, the indigenous groups in the area began to lose their traditional rights to water, land and forests. They started to be uprooted from the forest. Shifting cultivation was banned. The exclusive rights of the company government over forests and forest resources were established. When the tribal lands were taken over by foreigners, deep despair descended on their lives which was an ax attack on land and forest oriented indigenous people.¹⁹ Colonialism changed the relationship of the jungle with the tribes.²⁰

7.2 Change of livelihood of the Tribal People

The tribal people here lost their land as a result of the permanent land system and the imperial forest laws took away their last resort. They repeatedly joined the rebellions against forest law to restore their traditional rights on the land ,water and forest. But the government's strict policy of repression suppressed the rebellion. They were deep crisis for basic needs of livelihood. In this helpless state they did not want to give up their cultural identity. Santal was not ready to do anything other than agriculture. The introduction of Bengal Nagpur railways created a huge demand for labor. The railway authorities did not want to employ people in

the Jungle Mahal area as laborers but the Santals in the area were not mentally ready to work as laborers. When the Bauris (another subaltern group) of Bengal went to work as porters in Mauritius due to scarcity, the Santals refused to go there.²¹ Eventually they are forced to surrender to scarcity. The Santals have gradually become isolated from peasant life. Due to scarcity they were forced to migrate as laborers to the tea plantations in Assam or coal fields of Jharia and Raniganj area. Under this situation working life of the Santals as 'majdoor' started since 1859-60.²²

7.3. Failure Indigenous land Conservation Initiatives

Indigenous land conservation initiatives have been around since the beginning of the twentieth century. Section 65 of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1917 stated that Santal lands could not be acquired without the permission of the District Collector. This law reduced the chances of the tribals getting loans. In fact the situation has not changed much. The peasantry of Santal did not survive here.

8. Conclusion

All the behaviours of human life cannot be explained by economic reasons alone. However, it is true that the indigenous social customs of the Jungle Mahal developed on the basis of the natural environment. Indigenous peasants have a somewhat distinct tradition from the social relations in which the caste Hindu peasant consciousness developed. The Santals did not consider themselves to be the lowest class of society. Point to be noted that begging and prostitution did not exist in Santal society. They were always ready to give his life to protect the honor.²³ However, in the Jungle Mahal region of the twentieth century, there was a crisis in land and forest oriented indigenous culture, which was rooted in the land and forest policy of the colonial government. Actually, the tribal relationship with forest was not only driven by economics, it was a spiritual relationship. Forest conservation was their social norm. But in colonial aspect, forest areas became a source of income and later became a commercial commodity. As a result, change in tribal culture became inevitable. Under the influence of globalization, the rural indigenous culture gradually retiring in the presence of market culture. This culture needs to be protected.

¹ **Twenty-four Mahals or districts were included in this jungle mahal district. Fifteen Mahals including the Panchayat were taken from Birbhum. Senpahi and Vishnupure were added to the jungle mahal from Burdwan. Chhatna, Barabhum, Manbhum, Supur, Ambikanagar, Simalapal and Velaidiha were taken from Madinipur.**

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