Chapter II

CHOTANAGPUR IN PERSPECTIVE:
LAND, PEOPLE AND TENSIONS

The Chotanagpur region during the British period comprised Singhbhum, Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Palamau and formed south Bihar which is one of the oldest regions of the World (Gondwana Land). After the division of the state of Bihar into two i.e. Bihar and Jharkhand, the whole of south Bihar now forms the state of Jharkhand. As of now, it comprises the districts of Garhwa, Palamau, Chatra, Koderma, Giridih, Deogarh, Dumka, Godda, Sahibganj, Pakur, Dhanbad, Bokaro, Hazaribagh, Lohardaga, Ranchi, Gumla, Paschimi Singhbhum and Purbi Singhbhum. (Please refer to Appendix for geographical location of districts and other details like minerals, road, rail etc.)
The tribal population of the region is divided into various tribes and they generally belong to the Proto-Australoid stock although traces of Mongoloid species have also been found. The main tribal groups are the Hos, the Santhals, the Oraons, the Mundas, the Asurs, Korwas, Birjhias, Chick Baraiks, Lohars, Karmalis, the Mahalis, the Bhumij Kols, the Cheros, the Kharias, Hill Kharias, Sauria Paharias, the Paharias etc. The occupational structure of the tribals differs immensely and they differ among themselves in level of socio-economic development. The region has very thick vegetative cover spread all over and abounds richly in flora and fauna as well as mineral resources.

This region is also important for the recurrence of various resistance movements throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The British forest policy towards Chotanagpur, thus, makes a curious and interesting study especially during the World Wars, when a particularly heavy demand for timber led to large-scale ruthless exploitation of forests.
In fact, from the very beginning of the British rule, the relative isolation of the tribal society in general and Chotanagpur in particular, was ended by the penetration of outsiders – money-lenders, shopkeepers, contractors, traders etc. British legal conceptions of absolute private property eroded traditions of joint ownership like the Khuntakatti tenures. From the 1870 onwards the British tightened their control over forest zones for revenue purposes. Shifting cultivation was thus forbidden in many areas from 1867 onwards and attempts were made to monopolize forest wealth through curbs on the use of timber and grazing facilities by way of demarcating ‘reserved’ and

1. Tribe denotes any aggregate of people united by ties of descent from a common ancestor, community of customs and traditions. In colonial India, apart from some primitive food gathering, they were the lowest strata of peasantry subsisting through shifting cultivation, agricultural labourers and coolie recruited for work in distant plantations, mines and factories.

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and 'protected' forests.\textsuperscript{2} The opening of the tribal areas through the establishment and consolidation of British administration and laying of new lines of communication thus upset the traditional rights like the Khuntakatti tenures\textsuperscript{3} and long existing unrestricted use of forests. The British forest policy in Chotanagpur during the World Wars assumes special significance mainly because a substantial proportion of augmented demand for timber due to war needs was supplied

\textsuperscript{2} Reserved' forests were those where the government held absolute rights of ownership and their products were not to be used by the local inhabitants unless specifically permitted. Access into these forests was also restricted except as thoroughfare. 'Protected' forests were those, which were not yet to be surveyed and settled, but the access of local inhabitants and privileges were permitted for the time being except where specifically permitted.

\textsuperscript{3} Khuntakatti tenures were those, which were reclaimed and held by persons claiming to be descendants of the original founders of the village in which such lands were situated. These were held either rent-free or quit-rents fixed in perpetuity.
from these forests. This led to ruthless plunder of the timber species like sal, sissoo, bijasal, teak, asan etc. as well as bamboo in which Chotanagpur excelled. Other forest products like lac, and catechu were important items of export and these were found abundantly in Chotanagpur. Lac in particular had gradually assumed strategic importance owing to its use as insulator in electrical circuits and also in explosives. By the time of the Second World War, electrically operated machines were widely used. Infact, war had become more sophisticated. In order to meet war demands all machinery had to be activated, which, along with some hasty forest policies, led to severe and unplanned felling. The damage done to the private forests was even more severe since the Forest Department did not have any control over these areas. The owners of these private forests – the local rajas, jagirdars, or zamindars – were not guided by any principle of conservancy and hence, the damage done to these forests was colossal and the forest authorities, after the
passage of the Private Forest Act in 1946, strove very hard to replenish the damaged species.

These developments not only disturbed the vegetation and ecology of the region, but the very fabric of socio-economic life was set out of tune. From the very beginning of the British rule, the penetration of outsiders whom the local inhabitants called ‘dikus’, was creating tensions. Changes in the long existing forest rights of the local inhabitants by the British rule made matters still worse mainly because their socio-economic life was so intricately linked with forests. Thus, any alteration in traditional rights was bound to have repercussions which manifested itself by way of tribal movements of varying dimensions in the region like the Kol uprising of 1820 and 1831-32, the Santhal insurrection of 1855, the Munda rebellion of 1895-1900, the Tana Bhagat movement of 1914, upheavals among the Ho and Santhals of Chotanagpur in 1931-32 and the Jharkhand movement of the 1940s. These insurrections and
revolts have been dealt with in detail in a separate chapter on the Jharkhand movement.

The Chotanagpur region, thus, has been the cradle of various tribal movements throughout the Nineteenth and early Twentieth century. Since the forest policy during the British rule has not been adequately probed, the present study seeks to explore imperial machinations into the making of the forest policy in the Chotanagpur region.

Chotanagpur region lies south of Bihar and forms the major part of the Chotanagpur plateau, which is one of the oldest regions of the world (Gondwana land). The region not only abounds in rich flora and fauna of different varieties, but also has richest cluster of minerals in the country. The region is also a commingling of peoples of different origins and cultures. Despite modern ideas and institutions penetrating their region, the tribal inhabitants
have maintained their ethnic identity, customs, economic life etc. Ever since the British established their authority over the forests, the people of the region have been clamoring for their traditional claims over long existing forest rights. The richness of forest and mineral resources in the region took the British deep inside Chotanagpur, and with them came a series of people – contractors, shop keepers, money lenders etc. – who were not only given patronage, but were also protected from local population when ever opposed. These men, with new ideas and institutions, disturbed the very balance of socio-economic and cultural life of the tribal population, which they had nurtured from time immemorial. The conflict between the rights of the local inhabitants and the outsiders resulted in various tribal movements whereby the tribals sought to reassert their traditional rights often by way of violent protests with religious overtones.
Chotanagpur plateau has very regular and rich rainfall averaging 50 to 60 inches annually, almost all over the plateau. Although some portions of northern districts of Hazaribagh and Palamau have rainfall less than 50 inches, most parts of Singhbhum and Ranchi record rainfall between 60 and 70 inches. In the Netarhat region, the rainfall is as high as 80 inches annually. Rainfall thus facilitates a very rich growth of vegetation. Chotanagpur forests cover an area of about 12,000 sq miles and Hazaribagh, Singhbhum, Palamau and Ranchi account for 75 percent of the total forests. These forests fall under two categories – moist deciduous and dry deciduous types. The latter type of forest is poor in its quality of timber and is mostly covered by extensive growth of sabai grass (Eulalzopsis binata) and bamboo (dendrocalamus strictus) with patches of sal (shorea robusta). The whole region, however, has a rich growth of sal and the best sal trees are found in Singhbhum some of which are of superfine quality matchless in India. Sal trees of Singhbhum grow up to a height of 130-150 feet and Saranda Pir forests excel in this. Others species of the region include asan (Terminalia
tomentosa), dhaura (Angeissus latifolia), jamun (Syzygium jambolana), bijasal (Petrocarpus marsupium), karam (Adina crodifolia), simul (Samalia malferica), kendu (Diospyros arborea), khair (Acacia catechu), arjun (Terminalia arjuna), gamhar (Gmelina arborea) etc. In the dry open hills, sal trees are sparse giving place to dry mixed forests of salai (Boswellia seratta), jhingan (Channea grandis), bamboo, sabai grass etc. Mahua (Bassia latifolia) and kusum (Schbeichera trijuga) are found around villages in and around jungles. Medicinal plants include harra (Terminalia chebula), bahera (Terminalia balerica) and amla (Phyllanthus officinlis). These three herbs are used in the tanning industry as well as Ayurvedic medicines.

The region is very rich in wildlife of different varieties, which have been well supported by thick vegetative cover. Wild elephants are common in Singhbhum and Palamau. Tiger, panther, beer, pigs and wild dogs are also found in these forests. Sambhar, barking deer, spotted deer, which once abounded these
forests are constantly decreasing due to hunting by tribals as well as hunters from outside. With the passage of the Indian Wildlife Act, however, this process has somewhat halted. Snakes like python, common cobra and king cobra, coral snake, banded karait and black karait, Russel’s viper, dhaman etc, are noticeable in the region. A large number of peninsular birds, Indo-Gangetic birds and birds of Assamese, Indo-Burmese and Indo-Malaysian origin can be seen in the Chotanagpur region.

The Chotanagpur region abounds in mineral deposits and has richest cluster of minerals in the country. Rich mineral deposits include iron ore, coal, bauxite, mica, copper, manganese, as well as dolerite, asbestos, limestone and uranium. Coal is abundantly available in Jharia, Giridih, Ramgarh, Dhanbad etc. Singhbhum is particularly rich in iron-ores, its important mines being Noamundi, Kiriburu etc. Copper is found in the Ghatshila region and uranium ores are mined at Jadugoda. India is the largest
producer of mica in the world and over 80 percent of it is produced from the mica mines of Koderma and Hazaribagh.

With hilly terrain spread all over the plateau, laterite and red soil types mainly cover the region. Although the production of crops is not much as compared to the Gangetic plains of north Bihar, the region produces food crops like paddy, wheat, bajra, maize, barley etc, as well as mustard, surguja and pulses.

In Singhbhum, backward methods of cultivation were adopted from the very beginning. The tribals were generally hunters and food gatherers, who were forced to agriculture by the contraction of the forest areas and a consequent decrease of the game. The tribals of Chotanagpur practiced two forms of cultivation – Purunga or Jhumming and Gora or dry cultivation. The Purunga cultivation was practiced in the upper and steeper slopes of hills. In this, a portion of the forest was cleaned and after raising one
or two crops, the cultivator moved to another area and repeated the same process. In the *Gora* form, which was practiced on lower slopes of hills and on level lands in the valleys and near the village sites and which was of semi-permanent nature, the practice was to fell trees in the forests, burn the felled produce and mix the ashes with the soil. The area was then cultivated. However, in course of time, the area was degraded and became unfit for cultivation. In Palamau, the area available for cultivation didn’t form the bulk of the area of the district, because the whole district has a hilly terrain. Here there are two main zones of soil for agricultural purposes. The first consists of river valley basins of *Amarth, Koel* and the *Son* and contain stretches of fertile alluvial soil where varieties of rice and to a lesser extent sugar cane, wheat, barley, gram, *kurthy* and *surguja* are grown. The second comprises the hilly tracts where the soil formed is of thin, loose and gravelly type. This area is mostly covered with jungles and cultivation is mostly carried out in the valleys lying among the hills, rivulets and rivers. Elsewhere in the Chotanagpur region, agriculture mixed with forestry is
practiced. Overall, the economy of the people is intractably connected with the forests in one respect or the other. In Singhbhum district, in particular, the people are closely bound up with forests.

As far as land tenures are concerned, even before the British came to the region, Chotanagpur was divided into tenures ranging from the ones granted by the rajas to the traditionally held tenures. The local rajas and independent chiefs in lieu of military services granted jagir tenures, but later services of civil and religious nature were also awarded with jagir tenures. Almost all such grants were service grants and the grantees were bound to perform duties as prescribed to them. This tenure was

* The basic data about the flora and fauna, occupational structure and other geographical details have been taken from the district gazetteers of various districts under study published by the Govt. of Bihar in 1958.
numerous in Ranchi district and formed the most important form of tenure.\(^4\) *Manjhihas* lands were those, which were 'reserved' for the use of respective proprietors of the villages and at their absolute disposal.\(^5\) These lands were landlord's privileged lands corresponding to those which were known in Bengal as *Khamar or Nij Jot* and in other parts of Bihar as *Zirat or Kamat*. *Bhuihari or Khuntakatti* tenures were the traditionally held tenures of the *Mundas, Bhumij* tribes etc. *Mundas, Ho, Bhumij* etc, claim that they first settled in Chotanagpur, cleared the jungles and established their villages, which came to be known as *Khuntakatti-hatu* or the villages of the family of original


settlers. The lands, hills, jungles, streams and everything within the limit of the village became the common property of the members of the village family or the Khuntakattidars. Bhuinhari was the remnants of the old Khuntakatti tenure and it was a local variation of the word Khuntakatti. It is thus defined as those tenures "which have been claimed and are being held by persons claiming to be descendants of the original founders of the village in which such lands are situated. They are held either rent-free or at quit rents fixed in perpetuity." The ordinary stock of raiyati land in the cultivating possession of the raiyat was known as Rajhas tenure. Khorposh tenure consisted of grants of villages or portions thereof made to relatives by way of maintenance. Owing to the prevalence of the law of primogeniture, the eldest son succeeded to the landed property, but by custom, he was to make maintenance grants to younger

brothers or other near relatives. The Khorposh or maintenance grants were either non-resumable or resumable and rent free grants. Khairat tenures were grants of land made rent free generally to the Brahmins on special occasion by the people of all classes from an ordinary raiyat to a big landlord. Important Khairat tenures in Chotanagpur were Brahdater, Debotar, Gurutar, Brit, Kushbrit, Mahtram, Hindaic etc. The Manki and Mundari tenures were the survival of the old Mundari system under which each village had its Munda or Mura and each group of twelve or more villages its Manki.

Their tenures were heritable and succession was governed by primogeniture. A small quit rent was paid to the superior landlord, which was not liable to enhancement. The Munda was subordinate to the Manki and paid quit-rent to him. The coming of the British rule and the introduction of the legal conceptions of absolute private property eroded traditions of joint ownership
and sharpened tensions within tribal society. The British were concerned with establishing a legal and administrative structure that would assure them a stable system or revenue collection and provide a framework of order within which they could conduct their economic affairs. The erosion of long standing traditional rights thus created tensions that often took violent forms.

The people of Chotanagpur come from different origins, ranging from original settlers (tribal population) of the outsiders from the plains. Despite constrains of varying dimension, the tribal population of Chotanagpur has tended to maintain its ethnic


identity. The outsiders, coming from the plains of Bihar and Bengal had different socio-economic life style and differed fundamentally from that of local inhabitants. The penetration of the 'dikus' (outsiders) in the garb of traders, shopkeepers, moneylenders, thikadar etc. was not welcomed by the local inhabitants who perceived the outsiders to be destroyers and grabbers of their long existing rights in the land forests. The result was a series of conflicts between the local inhabitants during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The various tribal movements in the region were an indicator of the ever-growing apprehension among the tribal population.

The population of the newly created state of Jharkhand is 26,909,428, as per the provisional results of the Census of India, 2001. The main tribal population of the region includes Oraon, Munda, Ho, Bhumij, Santhal, Bhuiya, Birhor etc. The tribal

population is mainly concentrated in the districts of Singhbhum and Ranchi. In Singhbhum, the Ho tribe people are most numerous. Although the 1951 census didn’t publish separate enumeration for different tribes and lumped all schedule-tribe population together which was 7,13,522, according to 1931 census, Ho, were 3,38,827 in number. Similarly santhals were 1,40,110, Bhuiya 25,468, Munda 57,450, Oraon 11,220, Bhumij 66,846. During the early period of the British rule, the Ho tribe was by and large nomadic in their habits, was poor cultivator and didn’t occupy a place or a village for more then 10-15 years. They mainly practiced jhuming (shifting cultivation). Gradually they settled down and began to practice some semi-static cultivation. Some of the tribes of singhbhum like ho, bhumij etc. claim to be the earliest settlers in the region and that they first cleaned the jungles and thus established khuntakatti tenure rights. It was this traditional claim over tenures, which they sought to re-establish through resistance movements, which had been gradually encroached upon by the outside settlers.
Ranchi district has the highest concentration of schedule tribes in Bihar. According to 1961 Census, the tribal population of Ranchi was 1,317,513 out of the total schedule tribal population of 4,204,784. Oraon is the most numerous tribal populations in the district (5,64,774 as per 1961 census). It is very significant that Ranchi has a sizeable number of Christian population. They numbered 3,66,155 according to 1961 census. Most of the Christian population of the district is tribal who have been baptized to Christianity by missionaries like Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Seventh Day Adventurists who came to the region along with the British. The activities of the missionaries in Chotanagpur were a significant development of the British period. The missionaries popularized Christianity by way of opening schools, health centers, providing some legal aid and certain other development programmes. Although they were active in Ranchi, Singhbhum and Hazaribagh districts, they were very successful in Ranchi. Their advance was, however, checked in singhbhum mainly because the Mankis and Mundas (village heads) had tremendous influence in the community and they
didn’t help the early Christian pioneers. Nevertheless the coming of Christianity in Chotanagpur elevated the education standard of the people and their socio-economic life improved greatly. The tribals began taking up higher education and employment in government services. In the 1930s, the leadership as well as main support for Adibasi Mahasabha and Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, which was later transformed into the Jharkhand movement for a separate state, came from the Christian population of Ranchi and adjoining areas.

The socio-economic life of the people of Chotanagpur is thus closely interlinked with forests. The dependence of people on these forests for their needs has been so strong that any alteration in the existing rights and privileges was bound to have its repercussion on the existing pattern of socio-economic and cultural life. The penetration of the British rule along with other outsiders (dikus) disturbed the fabric of socio-economic life. Their traditional claims of unrestricted use of forests were
altered by the creation of 'reserve' and 'protected' forests. The introduction of legal concepts of absolute private property eroded traditions of joint ownership (khuntakatti tenure rights). The activities of moneylenders, contractors, thikadar and the like were no less rapacious. Despite initial attempts like the Chotanagpur Tenure Act of 1869 and the Bihar Tenancy Act of 1885, agrarian laws in the region were not adequate enough to protect the rights of the local inhabitants and the outsiders continued to grab land from the local people by paying meager amount and often even without it.\textsuperscript{10} The colonial system thus

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\textbf{10 Sachchidananda: \textit{Pattern of Politico-Economic Change among Tribals in Middle India in} Francine R. Frankel and M. S. A. Rao (eds.): \textit{Dominance and State Power in Modern India}, Oxford University press, Delhi, 1990, p. 187.}
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dealt a heavy blow to the isolation of tribal society and put an end to the political dominance of the tribes in their own habitat. Tribal communities were encouraged to market their surplus produce, and thus brought in a new system of production relation with other populations in the region. At the same time, the colonial system strengthened the feudal layer in tribal society consisting of chiefs and landlords. 11 These created conditions in which the tribal economy and political system were consistently weakened by prevailing market forces and British administrative practices.

The period of colonial rule, thus, witnessed a number of tribal uprisings, in which large number of non-tribals also took part.

administration like the new legal system, revenue administration, evangelization and these movements were led by traditional chiefs or their subordinates who had been displaced by the new colonial system and mobilized large masses who protested against the oppressive structures built by a rising new class in the wake of the colonial moneylenders. Thus the Kol Rebellion of 1832 started mainly because of insufficiency of food, hatred against the jagridars, exploitation, deprivation of justice and alienation of land. The mobilizers of the movement echoed the slogan that all land belonged to the tribals and hence resisted any move to take over their land or alter land relations. The Santhal Insurrection of 1855 was the watershed between the two phases of the tribal movement¹² and it shared the characteristics of both the resistance and the agrarian revivalist movements. These uprisings were not

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directed against the small tribal elite who were not perceived as a part of the oppressive structure, but against the outsider ‘diku’, missionaries and administration. The Santhal Rebellion forced the government to review its policy towards the Santhal tribals, and it was followed by formation of the ‘Santhal Pargana’ district to provide for better administration for the Santhal tribe.

In the second half of the 19th century Sardar Agitation started in the Ranchi district. It was also called ‘Mukti Ladai’ whereby the Sardars claimed to be decendants of the original settlers and protested against forced labour and other exactions aimed at ousting the zamindar. It was the Sardari agitation that prepared the ground for the emergence of the Birsa Movement.\footnote{13}{Francine R. Frankel and M. S. A. Rao (eds.): op. cit., p. 32}
The most important tribal uprising of the region was the Munda rebellion spearheaded by Birsa Munda who displayed a unique mix of secular and religious motivation. The first uprising in 1895 was not very militant, but the second one in 1899-1900 took the region by storm. The movement was basically agrarian and defensive and through this, Birsa sought a direct solution to the problems facing his people. He built up a religious movement complete in its institutional, theoretical, prophetic and regulatory aspects. 14 Birsa opposed both, the missionaries and the government and promised the establishment of an independent ‘Munda Raj’ in which there would be no oppressive officials, ‘Diku’ or missionaries. The movement was crushed by ruthless use of force by the British. Another movement called Tana Bhagat Movement was started by Jatra Oraon in 1914, who directed his attack against all kinds of superstition and witchcraft, prohibited animal sacrifice and

the consumption of meat and liquor. The movement also had an agrarian context, which was directed against the British. In fact, a large number of *Tana Bhagats* took part in the no-rent campaigns and also in both the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements led by Mahatma Gandhi. In 1931-32, there was another upheaval among the *Ho* and the *Santhals* of Chotanagpur. A massive operation against the spirits (*bongas*) began along with agitations for the restoration of land to the tribal.\(^{15}\) The movement, which was soon ended with arrest of its leaders, was reformist and tried to bring the tribals closer to Hinduism. The movements spearheaded by *Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj* and *Adibasi Mahasabha*, which in the 1940s culminated in the *Jharkhand* agitation for a separate state have been dealt in a separate chapter on the *Jharkhand* movement.

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A significant feature of the tribal population of Chotanagpur was tribal emigration. The growth of land alienation, the establishment of rent and money lending that called for cash income and gradual increase in the tribal population as the death rate declined led to the emergence, by the second half of the 19th century, of a pool surplus agricultural labour. In the middle of the 19th century the British were looking for a labour force they could recruit to work in their plantations in Assam and Bengal as tea planters. The tribals of Chotanagpur were attractive recruits, who were surplus and needed work. An efficient system of recruitment through agents was established and recruitment began in the middle of the 19th century among the Santhal and Munda. The Santhals emigrated from Santhal Pargana and Manbhum, and the Munda from Ranchi and Hazaribagh. By 1891, there were 190,000 tribals in the tea graders of Assam and about 70,000 in Bengal. This process slowed down after

1921 and declined sharply with depression in the tea industry after 1931. In 1961, there were about a million people of Chotanagpur origin in Assam and west Bengal. Myron Wiener has pointed out that though emigration was not a substitute for protest and the tribals did both, for several decades when emigration was at its highest, political protests did appear to diminish. And, in the 1930s when as result of worldwide depression and the decline of tea market, emigration from Chotanagpur to Assam and Bengal drastically declined, protest among the tribals again resumed, this time with the formation of the *Adibasi Mahasabha*, which took separatist form in the 1940s.

By the close of the colonial period, thus, Chotanagpur underwent a demographic transformation. The consolidation of British rule, the influx of plainsmen and the large-scale

17 Ibid., p. 43.
emigration of tribals to the tea gardens of Assam and Bengal resulted in the large proportion of population from outside the region.¹⁸

Tribals became minority in their own area and the numerical dominance of the non-tribal population was reinforced by their advanced agricultural technology, better education and effective influence in the administration. The tribals received little support from the British administration with some exceptions like Sutherland in Santhal Parganas, and Wilkinson in Singhbhum. The policy of isolating the tribal areas from the incursion of outside elements did not succeed. On the contrary, most of the outsiders, who were agents of exploitation and oppression, received active support from the local administration. On account of large-scale alienation of tribal land and the growing pressure of population, landlessness among the tribals began to

¹⁸. Francine R. Frankel and M.S. A. Rao (eds.): op. cit., p. 78.
increase. The Christian missionaries, who had actively worked to protect tribal interests, withdrew their support once tribal agitators became hostile to the British especially towards the end of the Sardari agitation in the last decades of the 19th century. The British adopted somewhat ambiguous policy towards the tribals. Each insurrection was quelled with a heavy hand. After the restoration of peace, some ameliorative measures were taken to protect tribal interests but these quickly exhausted their utility. The miseries of the tribals, thus, increased and there were repeated uprisings, and the leaders, in their desperation sought refuge in millenarium sentiments, nativism and a return to a ‘golden age’ in which tormentors such as the landlord, moneylenders and police didn’t exist.

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