Chapter – V

THE JHARKHAND AGITATION

The origin of the Jharkhand agitation, which was so widespread and a force to be reckoned with in the 1940s, and which assumed such important ramifications in the contemporary political scenario leading to the formation of separate state of Jharkhand, can be seen in terms of the deep seated problems faced by the people of Chotanagpur during the British rule. The very nature of colonial rule gave way to contradictions on all fronts of socio-economic and political life if Indians. The British colonial policy basically hinged on two strands. One strand viewed the future in which European theory and practice was to lead the way towards an integrated and centralized Indian polity, which would promote free trade within a
global market. The other strand saw the future of India as retaining its differences under a benevolent British suzerainty in alliance with the 'natural' leaders of the country (identified as native princes and rulers, dominant caste/tribal groups). As far as the tribal regions were concerned, one group, mainly comprising of missionaries, viewed all Indian practices as 'corrupt and backward' and sought their replacement by the 'superior' European practices. The other group tended to work with the existing structure of the society, particularly the caste system.

Nevertheless, both points of view concurred on the history of tribal society and viewed it as victim of the Hindu caste system. Under the British rule, therefore, the central premise was that until the time when tribal communities were integrated into the dominant socio-political system, they required a great degree of protection. Once the structures of the colonial state was in place, the state had the ability to choose between direct intervention and a judicious veto (maintaining a policy of non-intervention but intervening...
occasionally to enforce or disallow certain actions which were important to the colonial enterprise).  

At the same time, a policy of exclusion was adopted in the tribal areas, which excluded the operation of ordinary laws of British India. These areas were administered by the Governor of the province in which such areas lay and not the elected governments (under the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935) and the financial allocations for these areas were not subject to voting in the legislatures. Furthermore, the concept of protecting the tribal communities from the adverse effects of rapid integration into the economy and polity emanated from the nature of British rule itself. The concept of direct rule was a natural offshoot of this policy and was integrationist in character.

The policy of direct rule was further reinforced when frequent tribal revolts began as a result of the gradual implementation of direct rule. This necessitated establishment of lines of communication to facilitate administration and rapid deployment of army followed by cantonments, traders and a faster pace of urbanization. The policy of direct rule further compounded higher in-migration of non-tribals into the region. As a result of these mechanisms, the tribal areas were integrated into the new economic and administrative set-up, which ended the relative isolation of the tribes and their political dominance in the region. 2

Early policy of the British in the tribal areas of Bihar (as elsewhere) included use of military force followed by legislations legitimizing its power in the region. In such areas, colonial intervention began with the concept of maximization of rent and confined itself to material domain and thereby created material structures aimed at

greater intervention in the economic life of the region. However, frequent revolts by tribals in the mid Nineteenth century, the Kol Insurrection of 1831-32 and the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 to name a few, the British realized that the policy of maximization of rent from land through intermediaries could not work. It was now prudent on the part of the colonial administrators to think that the long lasting benefit from the mineral rich region of Chotanagpur meant legitimization of British intervention. Gradually, therefore, a regular administration and police force were established in the region. In order to facilitate the process of legitimization, a number of laws were enacted such as the Wilkinson Rules, Chotanagpur Tenancy Act and the like. With these processes, the British gradually armed themselves with sufficient legislative as well as administrative powers for an effective exploitation of the region.

Although the formation of Chotanagpur Improvement Society (Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj) in 1920 set the trends which later, in the late 1930s and early 1940s took the form of a 'separatist movement', the grievances of the tribals of Chotanagpur were deep
rooted and can be traced even before the coming of the colonial rule. The penetration of the 'diku', the outsiders from the plains in the garb of traders, shopkeepers, moneylenders, contractors etc. badly affected the long existing rights and privileges as also many customs etc. of the tribal populace. The forms of protest against these oppressors included various resistance movements, often violent and taking messianic and religious overtones. These movements mobilized large masses that protested against the oppressive structures built by a rising new class in the wake of colonial administration. These structures included the new legal system, revenue administration, evangelization and money lending. All these rebellions were defensive movements, the last resort of the tribals driven to despair by the encroachment of outsiders on their lands and economic resources.3

The loss of ancestral lands generally began in the 17th century. The

region was then governed by the Maharaja of Chotanagpur who was a tribal. Early in the 17th century, however, the Maharaja who then had a feudatory relationship with the Mughal Emperor, to whom he paid tribute, fell under Hindu influence. He formed an alliance with Rajput families in neighbourhood regions and invited a number of Rajput and Brahmans mainly from Orissa to settle in Chotanagpur to serve in his wars against neighboring states. In return for services, the Brahmans and Rajputs were awarded grants of land or villages – not as cultivators, but as rent collectors. Rent collection worked like an elaborate marketing system. Each middleman took a share of the profit. The tribal peasant cultivated the soil and paid rent to the non-tribal landlord, who paid a share to the Maharaja of Chotanagpur who in turn paid a share to the Mughal ruler. The East India Company initially superimposed its rule over the Maharaja in the same as Mughals. But in Chotanagpur, as elsewhere, the British were concerned with establishing a legal and administrative structure that would assure them a stable system of revenue collection and provide a
framework of order within which they could conduct their economic affairs.

By the beginning of the 19th century, thus, a four-tiered system of administration had developed. At the top was the Company followed by the Maharaja of Chotanagpur, then a number of local rajas, mainly non-tribal, who were subservient to the Maharaja and finally intermediary rent collectors appointed by the rajas known as the thikadar. The thikadar actually collected rent directly from the peasants and were called ‘dikus’. Later the term ‘diku’ was referred to by the tribals for any outsider, coming and settling in the region. These thikadar gradually strengthened their hold over the tribal population and began grabbing land, often by fictitious means, thereby alienating the tribals in their own region. The creation of the category of ‘reserved’ and ‘protected’ forests by the British administration in order to exclusively exploit the forest wealth, directly interfered with the long existing traditional rights of the unrestricted use of these forests by the tribals.
From time to time, efforts were made by the British Indian administration to stem the process of land alienation. After the *Kol Insurrection* of 1831-32, sets of rules were framed to regulate the sale and mortgage of land by the tribals. The *Chotanagpur Tenure Act* of 1869 sought to redress the grievances of the peasantry but it was confined to certain privileged agricultural tenures and took no notice of *Khuntakatti* villages. In 1876, the government forbade the sale and transfer of land either privately or by the order of courts. The *Bihar Tenancy Act* of 1885 prevented the transfer of land even in the form of gifts. But, by this time, the damages done to the tenures were great and a thorough revision was needed in this regard.

*The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act* of 1908 was a big attempt in this regard. The Act was intended for the protection of the peasantry against alien adventurers. It sought to check the transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals except under specific conditions. Nevertheless, the tribals had lost a lot and the *‘Dikus’* were protected by the British police and forces in their pursuits. The
occurrence of so many resistance movements in this region throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries is, thus, not a surprising phenomena.

A significant factor in the tribal life of Chotanagpur was the arrival of a large number of missionaries in the region, who worked in close collaboration with the colonial administration. The missionaries pleaded that the tribal converts were loyal subjects of the British and that they were entitled to privileged treatment. With the passage of time, Christianity became the most important factor of cultural change in colonial Chotanagpur. The G. E. L. Mission came to Chotanagpur in 1845 and began the process of conversion. Their efforts received a setback on account of the Mutiny of 1857, but revived soon thereafter so that other missionaries of the

*Anglican and Roman Catholic Mission* also came into the field in the late 1860s. The missionaries concentrated their efforts on major tribes particularly on the more affluent and prestigious sections among them.\(^5\) Missionary efforts were more successful among the *Kharia, Oraon, and Munda* while the percentage of Christians among the *Ho and Santhal* were much smaller. The largest number of conversions took place in those areas where tribals were subjected to worst kind of exploitation by the landlords. The Christian missionaries stimulated among the tribals, a consciousness of their past and present exploitation and their rights and privileges. Even though the missionaries themselves withdrew immediately when they foresaw an eminent confrontation with the administration, their contribution was evident in the education and enlightenment they made possible for some tribals. Thus, from the

\(^5\) Ibid. p. 36.
beginning of the 20th century and even two decades after independence, the most important leaders of the tribals in the Chotanagpur were Christians.

Some of the important tribal revolts and movements that took place in Chotanagpur include the Revolt of the Raja of Dalbhum, Bhumij Chaur of Manbhum, Revolts of Kolor Hos and Mundas in Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana (1795-1800), Tamar revolts in 1801, Chotanagpur Tribal Revolt (1807-08), the Kol Insurrection (1831-32), Tamar Revolt (1820), the Santhal Uprisings (1855-56), Bokta Rising and Rai Movement of 1857, Sardari Larai or Mukti Larai Movement (1858-59), Munda Rebellion (1895-1900), Tana Bhagat Movement, Kol and Ho Upheavals of 1930s etc.

Among the earliest tribal revolts was the Tamar Revolt, which was reported over seven times between 1789-1832. The tribals revolted against the British authority and its army in Midnapore, Koelpur, Dhadha, Ghatshila, Jamda etc. The people of this revolt fought against faulty and alien system of the government. The Kol
Rebellion of 1832 started mainly because of insufficiency of food, hatred against the Jagirdars, exploitation, deprivation of justice and alienation of land. The leaders raised the slogan that all land belonged to the tribals and fought to protect their rights.

The Santhal Insurrection shared the characteristics of resistance and revivalist movements. These uprisings were not 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 Insurrection forced the government to review its policy towards the Santhal tribals and it was followed by the formation of the 'Santhal Pargana' district to provide for a better administration for the Santhal tribe. The Sardari Agitation (Mukti Larai) against the 'Dikus' started in the 1880s in Ranchi district. The Sardars claimed to be descendants of the original settlers and protested against forced labour and exaction and aimed at ousting the Zamindars. It was the Sardar agitation that prepared the ground for the emergence of Birsa
The Sardar agitation passed through three phases (K. S. Singh) – Agrarian Phase (1858-81), the Revivalist Phase (1881-90), and Political Phase (1890-95) – resulted in the formation of Chotanagpur Tenure Act (1869) also known as Bhuihari Survey and Chotanagpur Tenure and Tenant Procedure Act (1879).

The Munda Rebellion, led by Birsa Munda took place mainly because of the desire for economic liberation from the yoke of zamindars and the British rule. In 1895, due to encroachment of Munda land by the immigrant landlords and also allurement of Munda labourers to the tea estates of Assam and Bengal, Birsa started preaching against the outsiders and displayed unique mix of secular and religious motivation. The first uprising of 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

6. Ibid. p. 76.
through this, Birsa sought to redress the problems faced by the people of the region. 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 the missionaries. The millenarian character is significant of the Munda Rebellion. Birsa clearly was a great freedom fighter who fought to drive away the British, the missionaries and the zamindars.

The Tana Bhagat movement started in 1914 and was directed against all kinds of superstition and witchcraft, prohibited animal sacrifice and consumption of liquor etc. The agrarian character of the movement was directed against the oppressive landlords. 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. The 1931-32 upheavals among the Ho and the Santhals of Chotanagpur started
against the superstitious beliefs as well as struggle for the restoration of lands to the tribals.

These revolts that rocked the region throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, clearly indicate the accumulation of a series of pent-up grievances against the British rule and the outsiders. The situation was thus, heading for a bigger movement that was well organized and encompassed within its fold, a vast area with far-reaching ramifications. This was the Jharkhand agitation of the 1940s, which had its direct linkage with the two societies – the Chotanagpur Improvement Society (Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, 1920) and the Adibasi Mahasabha (1938). Developments after 1920 were different from those of pre-1920 period particularly in their organization and external stimuli. The Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj and the Adibasi Mahasabha were, both, very well organized and had large-scale support from the Christian missionaries. The movements of post-1920 period show a distinct change in the behavior pattern of tribal movements and the period also saw the
rise in terms of ethnicity, of a 'separatist movement' and its transformation into a regional movement.  

In order to assert their identity, the *Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj* submitted a memorandum to the visiting Simon Commission. This document not only tried to break away from the colonial typecasts but also suggested an alternative framework for looking at the population of the region.


problems of tribal Bihar. The memorandum began by portraying the standard bleak picture of the tribal people, their ignorance and their exploitation by outsiders but went on to propose an entirely different set of remedies. It argued for abolition of the prevailing system of laws of tenancy as, according to it, under the existing conditions “to all interns and purposes, the aboriginal people are serfs and village organization is ‘feudalistic’. The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act has only confirmed these unjust divisions of lands and aggravated the lifelong grievances of the aboriginals”. The Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj broke new grounds when it demanded that “each village should have its own Corporation for self-government in civil matters and judicial panchayat in certain matters and executive body in dealing with village lands”. It also dealt, at length, with the basis of franchise, divisions of existing provinces, and law and judiciary. With regard to education, the Society demanded that “compulsory primary education be introduced....[T]he education at primary stage be imparted

through the medium of languages spoken in the area”. It asked for a local board of education and recurring grants.¹⁰

The Simon Commission, in its main report although did not refer to the rather progressive demands of the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, this by default implied that the Commission was in agreement with the majority view that tribal people were primitive and backward and required ‘protection’.¹¹

Analyzing the dynamics of the ‘separatist movement’ in Chotanagpur, K. S. Singh has pointed out at least six factors.¹²

¹¹ Prakash, Amit: op. cit. p. 60.
First, Chotanagpur was the most advanced of the tribal regions in terms of literacy, political consciousness and industrial progress. Second, the major tribal communities were concentrated in a geographically distinct region. Third, Christianity came in a big way in Chotanagpur and the missionaries very effectively influenced the major tribes. Infact, there was no other region of tribal middle India which witnessed such a spread of Christianity. As Christianity spread, it performed many roles: it gave them a history and a myth; it accentuated the notions of private rights in land; it promoted education and medical care; it also emphasized a sense of separateness from the rest. Fourth, the Chotanagpur tribe had a tradition of militant and organized struggle going back over a hundred years, and the tribal system had survived relatively intact in this region. Fifth, there was a rich corpus of anthropological literature to draw upon in order to create a new sense of history, which could legitimize the tribal search for identity. Sharat Chandra Ray, the father of anthropology, gave an eloquent expression to the tribal demands for separation. And finally, Chotanagpur was
exposed to the operation of many interests. The Bengalis formed a sizeable professional and land owning community, and the Muslims were a significant trading professional and land owning interest. The *Bengali-Bihari* controversy over employment in the late 1930s and the Muslim League politics also affected the development of the tribal separatist movement.

The formation of many institutions and societies mainly by the Christian missionaries is a significant feature of this region, which introduced reforms and stimulated development programmes among the tribes. The missionaries pioneered the *temperance movement* to check the evils of drinking among the tribals and formed co-operative societies to free them from the clutches of moneylenders like the *Roman Catholic Co-operative Society* founded in 1906. Societies for the promotion of education started as early as 1898 called the *Christian Association* formed by Lutheran graduates and followed later by the *Munda-Oraon Education Conference* and the like. We also notice the formation of certain
non-tribal solidarity societies for the socio-economic uplift of the region as a whole. In 1912, for example, the *Chotanagpur Charitable Association* was formed by all aboriginal Christians and non-Christians to raise funds to provide scholarships for students. Voices were also raised for forging unity of the people of Chotanagpur for abolition of differences among the Christian and non-Christian tribals as also among all tribals — *Munda, Oraon, Tamars, Mahali* etc. A new sentiment thus spread in the air: "*All Adibasis are one*".

After the 1919 constitutional reforms, the demand for protection of regional and sectarian interests led some educated Christian tribals to organize the Chotanagpur Improvement Society (*Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj*) at the instance of the Anglican Bishop of Ranchi. The Society, in which educated Christian tribals, mostly students took active part, voiced their concern over the absence of security for tribals and stressed the need for the preservation of tribal identity in the changing political environment. The Society, through its organization, managed a sustained struggle, which was gradually
voicing to secure employment for educated tribals, reservation in services and legislative bodies and the formation of a sub-state joined to Bengal or Orissa. In 1928, it presented a memorandum to the Simon Commission articulating the demands for autonomy of the tribals. Although the Society sought to enlarge the movement and spread its activities to the villages, it remained essentially an urban movement.\textsuperscript{13} The main leaders of this movement were Paul Dayal, Bandi Oraon, Rev. Joel Lakra, Theodore Huard and Anand Mashi Topno. The Memorandum put up before the Simon Commission had its impact at the time of framing of the Govt. of India Act of 1935 that provided for an All India Federation and a new system of government for the provinces on the basis of provincial autonomy.\textsuperscript{14} Even before this, a separate organization

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p. 334.

\textsuperscript{14} Vidyarthi, L. P. and Sahay, K. N.: \textit{Dynamics of Tribal Leadership in Bihar}, Allahabad, 1976, p. 76.
called Kissan Sabha was formed in 1931 under the leadership of Theble Oraon, a non-Christian. This Organisation was formed because the leaders were not satisfied with the set-up and functioning of the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj and that the urban oriented leadership of the Samaj failed to penetrate the rural areas. The 1937 elections were to cost dear for both the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj and the Kisan Sabha as the Congress swept the polls. One reason for this debacle was that another breakaway organization, the Catholic Sabha had gained much popularity because of the better-organized Catholic mission and this put the two organizations at a serious disadvantage.\textsuperscript{15}

The defeat of the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj in the 1937 elections perturbed the Christian tribals and resulted in the formation of the Adibasi Mahasabha in 1938. The Samaj also merged with the

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*Mahasabha*, which now represented an advance over the *Samaj* and commanded a wider political base and claimed pan-tribal composition and objectives. The *Adibasi Mahasabha* was also supported by factors like Bihari-Bengali controversy and the Muslim League politics. The Bengalis felt that their interests in Bihar were not safe and therefore, they could combine with the tribals to form a separate state. The Muslim League, during the mid 1940s played with the idea of forming a corridor passing through the tribal areas to link East and West Pakistan.\(^{16}\) They therefore sympathized with the tribals and gave financial support to *Adibasi Mahasabha*. The leader of the Mahasabha, Jaipal Singh gave a militant turn to the separatist movement and in order to achieve its aim, the *Mahasabha* extended full-fledged support to the British administration. The *Mahasabha* was led by professional political

workers, some of who were highly educated and articulate and employed sophisticated techniques to mobilize people. It became a Chotanagpur movement extending over both rural and urban areas and involved tribals other than Ranchi tribals as well. The Adibasi Mahasabha not the formation of a sub-state, but complete separation from Bihar.

Meanwhile, many violent incidents took place, which demonstrated the militant nature of the movement. But, it did not pay dividends and the Mahasabha was routed in the 1946 elections where again Congress won. The link with Muslim League was broken and the Bihari-Bengali controversy died down. The leaders of the Mahasabha, thus, realized the failure of militancy and thus effected many changes in the Organisation with the coming of the Independence. The framers of the Indian constitution gave India a

17. Ibid. p. 341.
secular look. The minority was granted more concessions and the tribals were recognized as minority community and put under the Fifth and Sixth Schedule.

With its defeat in the 1946 elections, the Adibasi Mahasabha was wound up and the Jharkhand Party formed in 1950. The new party had a changed character owing to several factors. The 1941 Census had given an exaggerated figure of the tribal population in Chotanagpur, which had sustained the Adibasi Mahasabha. The 1951 Census, like the 1931 census showed that tribals were not a very large community. In fact, they had never been in majority in the Chotanagpur region. Therefore, Jharkhand Party was thrown open, at least in principle, to all Chotanagpruis. Thus, the separatist movement was transformed into a party-based movement, and a transition from ethnicity to regionalism as a formative factor in the

18. Ibid. p. 344.
movement. The concept of Jharkhand was now enlarged to include all the regions, which once formed Chotanagpur Administrative Division. Thus, the tract inhabited by the Chotanagpur tribals, who formed parts of Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh were included in the Jharkhand. Gradually, Jharkhand Party emerged as a significant political force in the region and its influence increased in Orissa where it captured five seats in the Second General Elections. The process behind the formation of a purely tribal movement, thus, came from the missionaries and the tribal students. In fact, the growing strength of Christian population in Chotanagpur was a major factor in this regard. From an urban movement between 1920-38, chiefly through the activities of the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, it developed into a pan-tribal movement covering major regions of tribal Bihar and

19. Ibid. p. 345.
embracing both, Christian and non-Christian tribals. In this, the Christians played a major role. The failure of the Adibasi Mahasabha in the 1946 elections revealed the shortcomings of the organisation and the rejection of the militant nature of the movement. The formation of the Jharkhand Party after independence opened its door to all Chotanagpuris and stressed its regional character.

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