CHAPTER IV

AGRICULTURAL PURSUITS OF THE TRIBALS
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Tribals lived in almost all districts of Orissa. The Southern Orissa consisting of Ganjam and Koraput district and most of the princely states of Orissa were predominantly inhabited by the tribals. The most prominent of these tribes were Khandhas, Savars, Santals, Bhuiyas, Juangs and Gandas.

The tribals did not live in the same village with Oriyas. They were generally shy and would run away if the villages were invaded by the European strangers. Among the agreeable features in their character were; their love of independence, bravery, hospitality and industry. Their bad qualities included vindictiveness, ferocity and inordinate debouch. As regards the character of the Khandhas, who constituted the principal wild tribe in Southern Orissa, T. J. Maltby stated:

"They possess a great love of liberty. They are faithful to their friends, brave, hospitable and laborious and unlike the Hindus in the plains, they are too simple-minded to tell a lie, and prefer the truth. Death is preferred by them to transportation for life. Their worst vice is drunkenness which is almost universal amongst them. Occasionally they show their love for revenge, and even for brutal passion."
Their favourite amusement is hunting which they pursue with an indefatigable labour rarely abandoning the pursuit of a wounded animal, until they have run him down.¹

The tribals were wild, uncivilized and barbarous. They were primitive in their habits. They followed many irrational and superstitious practices in their socio-religious life. The Khandhas who were the most important and numerically most significant tribe of Orissa States, were practising inhuman practices such as human sacrifice and infanticide since time immemorial.

Generally, they performed human sacrifice to appease Earth Goddess who would ensure good harvest. When the blood of the victim would fall on the ground, the turmeric, the most important agricultural product of the Khandhas, would turn deep red. Hence, this would be in greater demand in the market. It goes to the credit of the British authorities that they succeeded in detecting and suppressing human sacrifice and infanticide. Even then much remained to be done in reforming the tribals of Orissa in their socio-cultural life.

The tribals were not entirely dependent upon the produce of their fields for their food supply. Even in ordinary years they lived chiefly upon jungle produce. It formed no unimportant part of their diet. Jungle products were used more or less throughout the year. Hunting was a regular feature of the tribal economy. It was done either individually or in a group and the hunting implements included bow and arrow. The animals which were killed were eaten rather than sold.  

SHIFTING CULTIVATION

While the caste-people or non-tribals carried on plough cultivation, the shifting cultivation was extensively practised by the tribals. The plough cultivation was carried on by them on a small scale. The tribal communities of Orissa were heavily dependent on shifting cultivation for their livelihood. This was the most primitive system of cultivation. The degree to which this primitive system was followed depended on the extent of forest or open country available. In the districts of Koraput and Ganjam and in the princely states of

2 L.S.S.O' Malley, Bengal District Gazetteers (Angul), Calcutta, 1908, p. 22.
Athmallick, Bamra, Bonai, Kalahandi, Keonjhar, Pal-Lahara and Rairakhol, where the country consisted for the most part of vast tracts of lofty hills and dense forests, the system of shifting cultivation was followed to a great extent.

The shifting cultivation meant a primitive form of farming employed by the aboriginal tribes for raising crops on steep slopes of hills after cutting and burning the vegetation. It was a cultivation by rotation on the hill-slope and hill top by slash and burn tillage. This was variously known in different part as 'rama' by the Khandhas of Phulbani and Kalahandi, 'bringa' by the Bhuiyas in Keonjhar and 'poudu' in other states.

The tract affected by shifting cultivation was only about 300 sq. miles in extent in 1936. The population of the hill tribes engaged in this type of cultivation did not fall far below 10 lakhs at that time. In 1952, about 13,000 sq. miles were affected to a greater or lesser degree by the evil effects of shifting cultivation and a population of almost a million people depended on this method of cultivation for their livelihood.

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Causes of Shifting Cultivation:

Shifting cultivation wherever it existed with the primitive tribes, had a historical background. From time to time they were deprived of their more fertile lands and were subjected to ruthless exploitation by the invading people which had resulted in the hill-men's flying into greater and greater wilderness. Even if the warlike struggle against them had stopped, the infiltration of the people from the plains continued resulting in depriving the hill-ment of all the good lands they reclaimed. At last they were practically banished to the rugged and mountainous regions where the hill-slopes were the only space left for them to grow their crops for their livelihood. When deprived of all settled cultivation, a hill-man was left with very little choice for his living and shifting cultivation for him was the easiest means for his existence.

Being compelled to live in wild conditions and without the opportunities of a modernised life a hill-man had to develop a life in accord with the natural surroundings in which he lived and hence developed a very superstitious mode of living and shifting cultivation formed often a religio-cultural part of his existence. 4

4 D.P. Tripathi, Shifting Cultivation in Orissa, Cuttack, 1952, pp. 17-18.
The primary reason for shifting cultivation was the want of lands for a fixed mode of living because of dispossession of such lands and the gradual banishment of the hill-man to the forest-clad hill-slopes. The tribals in despair migrated into the inaccessible tracts and cultivated the hill-slopes for which as he knew, there would practically be no rivalry or no casting of a covetous eye. Clearing an area by fire and growing a crop and harvesting it was probably the easiest way to reclaim an area with least labour and to harvest a crop in the shortest possible time. Being deprived of the plain lands they found solace in shifting cultivation only.

Thus the most important reason which led to the shifting cultivation was that the tribals had been deprived of all the best lands in the plains by the process of mounting land alienations. One of the conditions which favoured land alienation was the lack of land survey and settlements in the tribal areas. The tribals did not have patta rights for the lands they cultivated. In addition to this, the lacunae in the law relating to land alienation had always favoured the cunning non-tribals to circumvent the protective legislation and had access to lands which were cultivated by and in the possession of the tribal people.

Most of the tribal people were indebted to the non-tribal
traders, merchants and money-lenders. The factors responsible for their indebtedness were (a) unproductive agriculture, (b) expensive festivals and rituals, (c) lack of proper marketing facilities for the forest produce which they collected; and (d) the excise laws which prohibited them to brew their liquor by indigenous methods and compelled them to purchase drink from Government sponsored liquor shops.

Being exceedingly trustworthy, the tribal people believed it as their sacred obligation to pay back their debts whatever might be the burden. But their creditors did not wish repayment in cash but aimed at the produce raised by the tribals in settlement of the debts. The rate of interest was never stipulated in terms of money. For each rupee advanced, a specific quantity of produce in the form of paddy, cereal, pulse, tamarind was asked towards interest for the fixed time.

The money-lenders by various dishonest methods such as use of blank promissary notes in which the thumb impression of the tribal debtors were taken without any mention of the amount of the loan lent and use of false weight inflated the

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5 K.S. Singh, Economics of the Tribes and their transformation, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 149-252.
debts of tribals, thus keeping them in perpetual debt. Compelled by the necessity and obligation as mentioned above, the tribals were forced to cultivate all available tracts, raise produce and pay in kind to the money-lenders.

In a sense, therefore, the money-lenders had compelled the tribals to continue the practice of shifting cultivation. The short-sightedness of the tribals and the greed of the money-lenders had been responsible for starvation, landless condition and migration to which the tribal people were subjected. Plots of land or crops were placed under usufruct mortgage towards the repayment of loans lent to the tribals. This showed that even though the few tribals possessed some land and put their hard labour in cultivation and growing crops, they did not enjoy the fruits of their labour.

The tribals lacked the necessary agricultural inputs such as plough and plough-bullocks, seeds and fertilisers, and so on, to carry on cultivation in the plains. Without the necessary capital and other infrastructure which were associated with sound agriculture, it was not possible for the tribals to undertake cultivation in the plains.

For the tribal people money was not a great factor as the satisfaction of their immediate needs. It was due to this peculiar psychology and lack of future orientation that they
were satisfied with the meagre produce they got from shifting cultivation. Even though the produce from the shifting cultivation was not sufficient to fulfil the minimum food requirements, the tribes did not find any other alternative on which they could embark to improve their economic condition.

Techniques of Shifting Cultivation:

Shifting cultivation as opposed to settled cultivation is self-explanatory. It is assumed to be the oldest method of agriculture from the time man learnt the use of land and fire. It continued to be followed by the hill-tribes, who were primitive in their habits in the hilly tracts of the country where they predominated. The country where they practised it was forest-clad land with slopes and undulations and ordinarily unsuitable for agricultural purposes. It consisted of clearing a patch of forest on a hill-slope during the months from January to March and the subsequent raising of crop on the ground so cleared. When the cut materials had

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become sufficiently dry, generally by the middle or end of April, it was burnt and the ashes eventually spread over the ground. Where the jungle contained many trees, a number of these were kept standing but they were either girdled or so severely burnt at the base that they died during the course of the year. These trees were utilised as poles or used as supports for growing a species of climbing plants called 'Dhonk' (creeper). These trees were generally cut down in the second year and then burnt to fertilize the cleared space. As all the patches belonging to a village were continuously treated in such a manner, each tribal area presented a dreary and depressing spectacle of ash-strewn hill-sides, charred stumps and skeleton of trees where the people tended their cattle. After the first burning all half burnt branches were collected in hills and completely reduced to ashes and the ashes were scattered over the cleared space just before the seed was sown. The preparation of the soil, was generally completed by the beginning of May but sowing was deferred till the first shower of the monsoon to moisten the perched earth when broadcasting or dibbling of the seeds of the various grains was done without the help of the plough. After a period of cultivation

7D.P. Tripathi, Shifting Cultivation in Orissa, Cuttack, 1952, pp. 24-26.
ranging from 1 to 4 years the land was abandoned, till the trees were sufficiently grown to admit of a second felling. The process continued till the soil was exhausted and ultimately no further growth remained except probably some thorny bushes and shrubs. Flat land was however not subject to so much of erosion as a sloping land. The one more unfortunate thing about shifting cultivation was that no trees were allowed to remain even as boundary marks or for seed purposes except a few on occasions for offering shade to the wife and children of the hill cultivator.  

The method of growing of a crop in an area cleared by fire for shifting cultivation was to scatter the seeds over the ashes and the ground was not dug with a hoe, nor even the ashes raked over the ground, the only spreading being done by the rain. The hill main, however, scraped a hole here and there with an unpointed stick and he dropped in seeds such as beans, cucumber, gourd, etc., generally near dried up trees to climb on to the dried up stumps. Such a process of burning an area, taking off it a crop or two and then abandoning the land and similarly laying waste another such plot went

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on unceasingly resulting after 3 years or so, according to
the nature of the soil, in the complete exhaustion and impo­
verishment of the areas so laid waste, bare of any seed pro-
spects. When no more forest growth was possible, it was fina­
ly given up - a bare hill-side useless for any purpose,
producing only thorns, wild shrubs and coarse grass. It was
with hilly lands that we were most concerned because of the
fact that flat land was not subject to waste in the same way,
on the other hand, a flat patch of land was capable of becom­
ing and, in most cases, suitable to become fit for permanent
cultivation whereas shifting cultivation was essentially a tem­
porary feature.

The practice of Podu or shifting cultivation varied in
detail in accordance with the nature and extension of the
forest land available but it was an invariable rule that the
land thus cleared was abandoned at the end of two or at the
most three successive years of cultivation by which time the
value of the soil was lost.9

For hill-side cultivation, ploughs were not used but

9 J.K. Das, Tribes of Orissa, Census
the soil was prepared for sowing by hand mattocks (Kodikies) and forks. The highlanders of some states used a shouldered hoe. The agricultural activities in case of an area under shifting cultivation actually began with the summer showers of April and May and continued till about middle of December by which time all the crops grown were harvested. The hoe was used more particularly by some of the more primitive hill-men in south and west of Kalahandi State. But whether an area was ploughed or hoed, the seeds were always broadcast in the half-burnt slash and ashes. But it was customary in certain places to sow the seeds in the upper half of the clearing so as to get the seeds washed down by the first showers of the monsoon and thus to distribute them more or less evenly over the areas. For the most part, at least three or four kinds of seeds were sown on the same plot, the resultant crop being a mixed one.

In podu areas invariably dry crops were grown. A particular crop was not grown in any one season as a fixed principle as the growing of mixed crop was the rule rather than the exception. The crops grown were usually hill-rice, millets, ragi, janha, kangu, gulji, suan, kandul, castor, niger, etc. Varieties of crops were broadcasted and beans were at times grown in the middle. These crops were reaped between September and November or even December and the ground was prepared for the next season for sowing by felling the secondary growths, thorns and shrubs in between January to April.
Thus, two crops could very conveniently be had in two successive years from the same piece of land. Seldom more crops than two were taken from one clearing as the fertility of the soil temporarily stimulated by the ashes from the burnt vegetation soon got lost and the yield in the third year would be less than what it was in the 2nd year of cropping.  

Effect of Shifting Cultivation:

Shifting cultivation wherever it existed along with the hill-tribes, had developed like an inseparable avocation for them. In some princely states like Kalahandi, Bolangir and Keonjhar it had struck roots so deeply as a habit with them that at once they took a rebellious attitude if any interference took place in their practice of shifting cultivation.

This primitive method of cultivation was quite incompatible with the principles of forest conservation and therefore, innumerable disadvantages followed from it. It was not only positively an evil but inherently defective and economically unsound.

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The destruction of forests by fire for shifting cultivation had led to dust-storms, desert conditions, less of soil fertility, disturbance in rainfall and water supplies, floods, swamps, and extreames of climate. As early as 1872 it was remarked as follows about the reckless forest destruction by the hill tribes:

"I can myself call to mind a score of hills that have been completely cleared off forests. Where five years back I have hunted by son in rough jungle, that have now no vestige of existence. Old man pointout to country where there is not a scope large enough to hide a 'Sambar' in 100 sq. miles and tell me that in their youth that land was covered with jungle . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Within my own circle of observation I can point to one or two villages that five years ago had two crops but there is now no water for the second."\(^{11}\)

In the more accessible and much less densely covered regions, forest growths were felled in every 8, 10 or 15

years' duration or even much less and thus they had never a chance of recovery. They had a stunted appearance with tangled undergrowth and with no seedlings left. The problem in consequence had assumed vast dimensions and of great importance altogether out of proportion of the size and resources of the state. This was the position in Bolangir, Kalahandi, Bonai, Gangpur and Keonjhar States where the period of felling was four to five years only and the shrubs had vanished over considerable areas and much of the land was very barren.  

One of the most striking aspect of areas heavily affected by shifting cultivation was the change that took place in the status of the vegetation before it ultimately disappeared and gave way to rubble and finally to bare rocks. Continuous cutting and burning, removed the soil and eventually exposed the parent rock and as a result in sal areas the plant rapidly disappeared being replaced by some form of dry deciduous forests. In course of time bamboo appeared with the

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dry mixed forest and increased in proportion. The tree species completely vanished under the stress of burning and the removal of the soil. In course of time bamboo also degraded in size till they gradually disappeared.

The worst evil with it was its tendency to swallow up vast and valuable forests in the course of a few years. Due to heavy forest fires due to shifting cultivation annual rainfall appeared to be adversely affected. Once a rich plant growth in the hill tracts was being wiped out by repeated podu fires. Most of the perennial streams that flew from these areas were going down in the volume of their flow. The forest products of the area such as myro-balans, stag-horns, hide, wax, honey, komilla dye, sikai (Acacia concinna), etc., were conspicuously getting scarce. Thus shifting cultivation spread from area to area causing harm in several ways. 13

The shifting cultivation resulted in indiscriminate deforestation in large-scale which did harm to agriculture. F.C. King of Indian Civil Service pointed out that reckless

13D.P. Tripathi, Shifting Cultivation in Orissa, Cuttack, 1952, pp. 34-35.
deforestation which had gone on since 1880 in the Sambalpur district and its adjoining states had seriously affected cultivation in three ways. It had prejudiced the cultivation of sugarcane by making its fencing expensive. The loss of firewood had driven the poor classes to the use of cow-dung for fuel with the result that there was no enough manure to spare for the light-soiled uplands which formerly grew cotton. Lastly it was said that the certain areas which had the deepest soil and were most closely cultivated, received a shorter rainfall than they used to have.  

Control of Shifting Cultivation:

Shifting cultivation was the most serious problem of forest administration. Early reports show that when Ramsay Cobden joined as the Political Agent for Orissa State, the hill tracts in several states had been greatly bare of tree growth. It seemed that the complete transformation of evergreen jungle into the bare hill slopes would take place in the near future.

The prevention and control of podu cultivation had

14F.C. King, Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers (Sambalpur), Patna, 1932, p. 124.
for many years been among the chief preoccupations of officers of the princely states. Education and continuous propaganda had effected something. The policy of reservation of forests and the prosecution of offenders had done a good deal more. But the practice still persisted to a great extent and it seemed impossible to find any means of abolishing it without arousing the greatest discontent among the hill tribes.

The most primitive tribes were the worst addicts, and as these inhabited the remotest parts, control of the practice was especially difficult. The forests that were suffering on the most extensive scale from shifting cultivation were probably those of the Kalahandi State, where the tribals had on several occasions burnt down and cultivated hill slopes within reserved lands in defiance of prohibition. 15

The policy hitherto adopted in dealing with shifting cultivation in several states had been to permit each family of hillmen to fell a reasonable extent of unreserved forest, which varied with circumstances, on payment of an cess of an anna or two an acre. But all cases of such cultivation without

15 L.N. Sahu, Jeypore Tribes, 1942, pp. 140-144.
permission were dealt with under the law by prosecution or levying a compounding fee. The system could not be said to work well and it was the exception rather than the rule for a hillman to apply for permission. Applications had to be presented in writing and necessarily the passing of orders took sometime. The hillman scorned such formalities and generally cut down the portion of jungle which attracted him most without a thought of asking for permission. It was suggested: "A better policy would be to set aside in each village a certain limited area within which podu cultivation will be permitted and to prohibit it rigidly elsewhere. But it will not be possible to initiate this until a forest survey of the whole estate, with a demarcation of all reserved and protected lands, has been completed."\(^\text{16}\)

**TERRACED CULTIVATION**

The tribals of Bolangir State practised cultivation in their terraces. The terraces were built right up to the beds of hillstreams and extended many hundred feet from the depths

of the valleys to the hill-slopes and in some places rising up to the hill-tops.

The terraces were works of great engineering skill. The platform of each terrace was flat and the fall of each terrace was stone-packed. The construction of the terraces was so ingeniously and skillfully made that no soil was carried down by the water that was flowing from higher terraces to the lower ones.

The water management was equally skilful. The flow of water from one terrace to the other was controlled by channels and waterways which were provided in the ridges of the terraces. The water management was so skilful that it avoided flooding of the terraced fields.

Where water was always available, paddy was grown twice a year in the terraced fields. Two varieties of paddy were transplanted in the terraced fields - an early variety called Amba Dham and the late variety called Bada dhan.

Terraced fields are privately owned and are handed down from father to son. At the time of distress they were mortgaged to local money and paddy-lenders who belonged mostly to the pana community. The panas possessed much influence in the tribal area and were mainly brokers and sycophants.
In short they got prosperous taking advantage of the ignorance and superstition of the tribals.

They observed certain rituals in connection with terraced cultivation. The principal one was connected with transplantation. Before the seedling were pulled out for transplantation, a ritual was performed in the seed bed. On this occasion dried fish and fowl were offered to a deity called Jatra. The belief was that the deity would be pleased and protect the plants from the attack of insects and would reward the people with a bumper crop.

DECLINE OF AGRICULTURAL PURSUITS

The tribals were wild but extremely simple. They had no education and were completely ignorant of laws. Taking advantage of their ignorance and illiteracy, the merchants, from the plain compelled them to sell their produce at a much less price. Sri Bimal Mishra of Indian Administrative Service in his book "Land Tenure and Land Reforms in Orissa" wrote: "Instances were frequent in which the tribal used to be cheated and

17 K.S. Singh, Economics of the Tribes and their Transformation, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 253-255.
all his earnings from the podu cultivation so dear to his heart and so much connected with his special life used to be taken away by the man from the plains. And when the tribal thinks, that his feelings have been wounded or the fruits of his labour have unjustly been taken away, he used to rise in revolt.

This led to their increasing miseries. Taking advantage of this situation, these greedy and unscrupulous non-tribals spared no efforts to get the possession of their cultivated lands by means that could hardly be legal. The continuous transfer of lands from the tribals to the non-tribals did incalculable damage to their agricultural pursuits.

The tribals used to hold land directly under the Government and claimed permanent right in the soil. Even after the British came to power, the tribal continued to hold that they were the landlords.

In earlier days there was more land in relation to population and the tribals were in possession of extensive holdings. When someone had difficulties in utilizing all his land for growing crops, the profitable course open to him was to lease out the same land to some of his relatives on the basis of produce-rent which varied from one third to half of the yield.
With the passage of time the region inhabited by tribes was opened up by degrees and many outsiders infiltrated into it as agents of local chiefs and of Government, and domestic servants of the Mutha-heads. Later on liquor vendors, brokers, peddlers and money-lenders found their way into these hill fastness for the purpose of carrying on business. Every class of intruders tried to grab land from the tribal, by some means or other and exploited them beyond measure. Particularly the Oriya Sondis, who rendered the tribal poorer by supplying liquor to their taste, were the exploiters of the worst type. They made the tribal alienate their lands from their possession. 18

The tribals generally lived in a state of chronic indebtedness. The important reasons for their indebtedness were (a) Unproductive agriculture, (b) Exploitation of the tribals by the Mahajanas and merchants, (c) Restrictions on the use of the forest, (d) Expensive festivals and rituals, (e) their hand-to-mouth style of living.

Most of the tribals were indebted to non-tribal mahajans

18 L.N. Sahu, Jeypore Tribes, Cuttack, 1942, pp. 137-139.
or money-lenders. The money-lenders who usually held the debtor's lands exacted a high rate of interest. Ignorant borrowers could not recover the possession of their lands, until the produce of the field mortgaged, paid off original and its interest. 19

The Mahajans very often got their original bonds renewed and the borrowers had to pay compound interest. They borrowed from year to year repaying in the harvesting season and again borrowing in the summer. Once a royat borrowed from the mahajan, it was hardly possible for him to get out of his clutches.

In course of time, Mahajans acquired more and more of the lands mortgaged by the tribals. The large-scale dispossession of the tribals from their agricultural lands became a regular process.

On the transfer of the lands from the tribals to the non-tribals, W.M. Yeats wrote:

"Once the tribals and other hill tribes were Lord of

\[\text{Board of Revenue, Land Tenure and Land Reforms in Orissa, 1962, pp. 16-17.}\]
hills they have been inhabiting from time immemorial. But gradually some of their lands have passed out of their hands. Though there is a law that the land of the aboriginal should not pass hands without the permission of the Magistrate, yet there are various subterfuges which are applied to wean the land away from the hands of the aboriginals. A Kumti or a Sondi or some other money-lender gives some money to a tribal and the latter then becomes his slave. By various means the money-lender manages to get the consent of the tribal to sell his land, as it were out of his own accord. Again, other subterfuges are also applied. Suppose you and I want to take a particular land which today belongs to a tribal. Only make him indebted and try not to realise the land rent from the tribal. After three or four years the land is auctioned and particular persons then get an opportunity of purchasing the land on auction but very often the lands pass only to another member of a hill tribe as the purchasing of the land of a member of a hill tribe by a non-hillman requires the permission of the District Collector. Thus gradually lands are passed out of the hands of the tribals and other hill tribes and today they are proletarians serving for others, on the fields which belonged to them."20

20 W.M. Yeats, Census of India, Vol. XIV, Madras, 1931, pp. 82-83.
The tribals having been gradually dispossessed of their cultivable lands, special measures were necessary to protect them against further dispossession. The Agency Tracts Interest and Land Transfer Act (I of 1917) was passed prohibiting all transfers from the tribals to the non-tribals without express permission of the authorities in British Orissa. Such measure was not adopted in any of the princely states. So there was no check on the transfer of cultivated land from the hands of the hill tribes and today they are dispossessed of their lands.21

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