

**TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND
APPROACHES**

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, English

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture28

Lecture 28: Dispossession & Conflict

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on tribal studies in India: interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches. So today we are going to discuss the disposition of tribal people from their lands and forest areas and the resulting conflicts. between the tribals and the non-tribals. Land has always been the basis of tribal economy, socio-cultural as well as religious and spiritual identities, a source of tribal livelihood, and therefore land defines and marks their very existence.



The tribal lives are very closely related to, connected to, and interlinked with the forests for food, fuel, medicine, fodder, as well as livelihood. Traditionally speaking, the ownership of land was by the community, and the economic activity of the tribals was mainly agrarian, including shifting cultivation. which fostered egalitarian values that influenced the tribals' power relations and organizational system. The forests and hills are the main sources of tribal identity. And in fact, there is a propinquity.

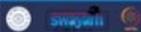
We see that there is a kind of understanding that the hills, rivers, and the forests are The different vegetations are the ancestors of different tribes. So they have their concept of totems, where each clan traces back to an ancestor that could be a flora or a fauna rather than a human. So, the tribals have a very close, respectful relationship—a relationship of reverence and respect—with the flora and fauna that they consider as their ancestors. Under such circumstances, the degradation of the lives of tribal people caused by the loss of access to their forest lands and resources

And their involuntary displacement from their own lands needs to be understood not only in economic terms but also in socio-cultural terms. Loss of forests for the tribals means loss of their cultural heritage, loss of their connection or bond with ancestors, and thereby a loss of cultural identity. So, the colonial state began the process of acquiring tribal lands. The passing of the Indian Forest Act of 1865. This law was created to acquire forest lands and create infrastructure such as railways.

Tribal Land Acquisition Through Forest Laws

- The Colonial State began the process of acquiring tribal land through the passing of the Indian Forest Act of 1865. This law was created to acquire forest lands and create infrastructure, such as railways.
- Later, through the enactment of the Indian Forest Act of 1878, the State got monopoly control over the forest lands for commercialisation purposes. Subsequently, the Indian Forest Act of 1927 was enacted, which formed the basis of forest laws. Under its provision, new rights were acquired by the State under the principle of eminent domain, and cultivation by people who are descendants of the original settlers of these lands was categorised as illegitimate.



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So, in the name of development, deforestation would be allowed. Felling of trees would be allowed. Making railroads, railway bridges, and paths would be allowed. This would happen without the consent or consultation of the tribal people. Later, through the enactment of the Indian Forest Act of 1878, the state gained monopoly control over forest lands for commercialization purposes.

Subsequently, the Indian Forest Act of 1927 was enacted, which formed the basis of forest laws. Under its provisions, new rights were acquired by state authorities under the principle of eminent domain, and cultivation by descendants of the original settlers of these lands was categorized as illegitimate. To put it simply, the tribal people themselves were disallowed from using forest lands and resources, whereas the state and its authorities—put plainly—dispossessed the tribal people and barred them from using

these lands, while easily exploiting these domains. Under the principle of eminent domain. And they granted themselves the rights to exploit forest resources rampantly.

Now, forests were categorized into three types: reserved forests, protected forests, and village forests. The earlier customary rights of the tribal people or communities in forests and common lands were included in a record of rights under the state tenancy law. This included rights such as the right to take forest produce from forest land, graze cattle and fish, reclaim jungle land or wasteland, and further, convert the land into cultivable land, all of which were restricted. So, under the new laws, all these practices and subsequent mobilities were restricted.

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The recording of the forest rights of tribal people was discontinued as reserved forests and protected forests were brought outside the scope of legal rights settlement. The British forestry and land acquisition depended on its elaborate administrative structure and introduced stringent laws and even the practice of scientific forestry, right? When we talk of scientific forestry, it entails experimenting with the natural flora and fauna by

introducing, for example, a new species of tree or plant in a forest where it has never grown. So, introducing eucalyptus in the eastern belts of India has had very detrimental effects. Because the way each species needs water or the amount of water that each species of plant needs is very different from the other.

If one foreign species drinks up all the soil water or soil moisture, that would happen at the expense of other neighboring trees drying up and ultimately dying. So, the practice of scientific forestry and experimentation with forests could always be very dangerous and could have very detrimental effects. So, the traditional system of livelihood of the tribal communities that were dependent on shifting cultivation was severely affected by the practice of scientific forestry. The colonial forest administration denied the forest rights of these forest-dependent tribes.

Land Alienation and Displacement of Tribals

- British Forestry and land acquisition depended on its elaborate administrative structure, the introduction of stringent laws, and even the practice of scientific forestry.
- The traditional system of livelihood of tribal communities that were dependent on shifting cultivation was severely affected. The colonial forest administration denied the forest rights of these forest-dependent/tribal communities, and ecological considerations were given secondary importance, as colonizer's main objective was revenue generation.
- Customary rights of the tribal communities were turned into privileges with the exercise of state's control over forests.



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Tribal communities and ecological considerations were given secondary importance. So, what would happen as a result of these experiments? What were the outcomes of such scientific interventions? In fact, there could be very long-standing negative effects of scientific forestry, but such possibilities were being ignored for the time being.

So, the colonizers' main objective was revenue generation. Here, we need to understand a principle and basic thing: how the Britishers and even the non-tribals perceived the forest, as opposed to how the tribals have always looked at the forest and treated it. For the former—the British authority—the forest was nothing but a source of generating revenue. Whereas, for the tribal people, as I have already explained, the forest is part of their life system. The forest is part of

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their familial system and an intrinsic part of their own identity, their community's identity, and their personal identity. So, they take from forests—the tribals take from forests—only what they need. But they never treat the forest as a source of raw materials for industrial purposes, for scientific experiments, and so forth. So, the customary rights of the tribal communities had turned into privileges under British colonization, with the exercise of the state's control and monopoly over forest areas.

So it seemed that what they considered as their rights until recently had suddenly become a privilege. They would need to ask people and seek permission before even accessing the forest areas, which was problematic and unacceptable to the tribal people. The demarcation and fencing of reserved forests brought about an effective loss of forest control by the forest dwellers or the tribes.

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On the other hand, the forest department made a huge surplus by supplying urban needs for fuelwood, furniture, and building materials, facilitated by improved communications at the cost of breaking down the forest-dependent tribal communities. So the forests would be used for all kinds of developmental purposes: a source of fuelwood, furniture, building materials, as well as improved communications. And even as we see railroads and bridges being built through these forests, all these developments and improvements in terms of science and technology would take place at the cost of breaking down, at the cost of jeopardizing the forest-dependent tribal communities.

With control over these forest lands, the colonial government made active efforts to remove these tribal communities from their ancestral spaces for commercial purposes. Apart from the intrusion into the livelihood of the traditional forest dwellers, the tribal people's identity came entirely under colonial construction. So it is at this point in time that the identity of the tribal communities was referred to as Adivasi, Shidule tribe, Esti, or the indigenous people tribe. And they would be perceived as a distinct and vulnerable section of society by the colonial government. So, it is in fact very paradoxical that first they are jeopardized and made vulnerable from a self-sufficient cosmos and then they are

Seen and marked as vulnerable people who needed to be taken under the tutelage and protection of the government. They needed none of these. They were very happy in their own ecosystem until it was disrupted by outside forces in the first place. The colonial government portrayed the tribes as distinctive and unable to assimilate into mainstream society. With the introduction of the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, it is evident that normal laws applicable to other areas could not be applied to areas inhabited by the tribes.

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- The colonial government portrayed the tribes as distinctive and unable to assimilate into mainstream society. With the introduction of the **Scheduled Districts Act of 1874**, it is evident that normal laws applicable to other areas could not be applied to areas inhabited by the tribes. This act became the foundation for the notion of 'Backward Areas' in the Government of India Act 1919.



This act, the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, became the foundation of the notion of backward areas in the Government of India Act, right. So we see the larger happenings around the country during this time. We see the Congress being formed, the anti-colonial struggles stemming from different parts of the country. They are collaborating and coming together against the British, and independence is almost visible on the horizon.

It becomes a matter of time. But then around the same time, the British devised all these divide-and-rule policies where even separate electorates came up; we see Indians for the first time start seeing themselves in terms of their communities, and community values change. and stereotypes are reified and reinforced and actually juxtaposed with one another. That's how the communal strife begins. And in this larger scheme, what happens to the tribal people when they become a scheduled tribe?

They become so; they gain some footing, in a sense—some traction in the larger scheme of, you know, the larger scheme of the formation of an independent nation that is almost visible a few decades down the line. But such scheduled status is not devoid of stereotypes. A scheduled tribe is a backward tribe. That's the legacy—the colonial legacy they carry, the burden they bear through the post-colonial decades, even after the country gains independence from British colonizers.

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The Madras Presidency, which is present-day Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, along with a few districts and taluks from Karnataka, Kerala, and Odisha. The Madras Presidency case was an ideal example of tribal land alienation, the development of the plantation economy, and tribal displacement due to the advent of colonial rule in India. With the introduction of the Madras Forest Act of 1882, a large extent of unoccupied government land was notified as reserve forests. Consequently, the forest-based tribal economy was greatly curtailed and monopolized. Earlier, these resources were utilized by the tribals without any hindrance or restrictions.

The Madras Forest Act of 1882 thus restricted the unlimited access that the tribals had over the forests and forest resources. According to the Madras Forest Act, the tribals could claim only a right of way or passage, watercourses, pastures, and forest produce. However, these rights were to be further determined by the forest department. So, they had to appeal to the forest department for the sanctioning of these rights. Fresh clearings for cultivation or any other purpose were also not naturally allowed.

If the prohibited items were used by the tribals, they were liable for imprisonment up to 6 months or a fine of about 500 rupees, which was a huge sum in the late 19th century. So, they could only access a list of resources that were allowed by the forest department. Anything outside of that, if they tried to access in the forest, they would be liable to imprisonment and a fine. The rights of grazing on the forest land were also limited and liable for suspension. They would be suspended if they were found grazing their cattle in forest lands.

If the tribals grazed their cattle in the closed land, they would be either imprisoned for a month, or fined with a hefty sum of 200 rupees, or both. These restrictions on the forest-oriented tribal economy might have forced the tribals to dispose of their lands eventually.

The government maintained that the tribals were the main cause of deforestation. However, very ironically, it turns out that the government encouraged the non-tribals to cultivate in the same reserve forests.

So, it was also a question of revenue at the end of the day. Who could generate greater revenue? If the non-tribals had some methods, some scientific knowledge to grow more crops and earn better revenue from the same land, then the British would not hesitate to give those lands to the non-tribals rather than to the tribals. So, the colonial government had restricted the availability of forest land through the reserve forests. However, the non-tribals—both the Britishers as well as the native privileged class—were allowed to appropriate the same tribal lands even during the early 19th century when coffee plantations were being introduced.

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The arrival of the British settlers was the actual beginning of the problem of tribal land alienation. Afterwards, the British applied for land for coffee cultivation. This land was granted to the British settlers for coffee cultivation under the government order. It was not the British planters alone who had taken away the tribal lands. Alongside, we see the colonial administrators, such as the collectors and judges, who had forcibly occupied these lands.

In the early 19th century, the presence of non-tribals in the hills was insignificant. After the settlement of the British in the hills, this trend of migrating to the hills on the part of non-tribals also began. Other non-tribals also started moving into the hilly regions. These people had migrated to the hills to take advantage of the low price of land. Until the late

19th century, the tribal lands might have been alienated by non-tribals and not just by moneylenders and traders.

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- Until the late nineteenth century, the tribal lands might have been alienated to the non-tribals and not just to money-lenders and traders.
- In the pre-colonial era, the fear of malaria and other contagious diseases prevented the non-tribals from settling in the hills. However, the British planters initially focused on the problem of land alienation, and the non-tribals followed the path.



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In the pre-colonial era, the fear of malaria and other contagious diseases prevented non-tribals from settling in the hills. However, with the British planters initially focusing on the problem of land alienation, the non-tribals among the natives followed their path. So once the British planters started settling in the hilly areas, the non-tribals also followed suit. They started moving in, occupying, and appropriating the tribal areas.

So, until the non-tribal intrusion took place in the hills, the tribals lived in their ancestral habitat and followed their own organic system of agriculture and farming, protected from the outside world by hills and forests. People would not bother to settle in those terrains owing to a lot of foreign insects and species, especially due to the fear of mosquitoes. So, the tribals in their own areas produced food grains and reared animals almost exclusively for their own consumption. So, the question of industrializing those areas and commercializing the forests had never been in question as long as only the tribals lived in those regions, in the hills and the forests. However, we see that after the settlement of the non-tribals, the introduction of reserve forests and commercial crops, as well as the extension of communication facilities, were some of the new ideas and concepts foreign to the tribals.

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- Until the non-tribal intrusion took place in the hills, tribals lived in their ancestral habitat, protected from the outside world by hills and forests. They produced food grains and reared animals almost exclusively for their own consumption
- After the settlement of non-tribals, the introduction of reserve forests and commercial crops, and the extension of communication facilities, the tribals' subsistence economy got commercialised, and it led to the alienation of their lands.



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These had percolated into their regions, and all these factors—commercialization of crops, creating communication facilities, extending communication facilities through forest and hill areas—had all led to the commercialization of the tribal subsistence economy, and all these factors had together led to the alienation of the tribal lands. The subsistence economy was maintained with the help of land and forest resources until the introduction of coffee plantations. The British planters appropriated large tribal lands directly, besides indirectly occupying huge tracts of unoccupied forest areas. Due to the interplay of several forces and restrictions, along with the intervention of external factors,

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- The subsistence economy was maintained with the help of land and forest resources till the introduction of coffee plantations. The British planters appropriated large tribal lands directly, besides indirectly occupying huge tracts of unoccupied forest areas.
- Due to the interplay of several forces and restrictions along with the intervention of external factors, the tribal living pattern had also changed. Consequently, the tribals could not meet their subsistence within the limited resources. This deficiency led to indebtedness among the tribals.
- The money-lenders extracted the income of the tribals in the form of interest till they lost their lands. They were the principal cause of tribal land alienation during the late nineteenth century.



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the tribal living pattern had undergone—had seen—a huge setback. It had changed. Subsequently, we see that the tribals could not meet their subsistence needs within the limited resources. Such deficiency would lead them into a perpetual state of indebtedness, and we see the figure of moneylenders emerging as very negative figures in these areas.

The moneylenders extracted the income of the tribals in the form of interest they were doling out to the tribal man, who would mostly be illiterate. Lost all of his lands. So the moneylenders cheated the land from them, extracted their incomes, turned the tribals into slaves—effectively into landless slaves and wage workers, laborers in their own ancestors' lands. They were the principal cause; the moneylenders were the principal cause of tribal land alienation. All throughout the late 19th century.

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The tribals thus started mortgaging their lands to secure loans from the moneylenders. The extent of tribal lands mortgaged for loans contributed more directly to the crisis of land alienation than any other forms of indebtedness. The tribal lands in the hill areas were transferred not only to non-tribals but also, to some extent, to other tribals themselves. The common method of clearing debts among the tribals in Madras Presidency was through disposing of their lands. So, as a way of concluding, the process of the colonial government's slow but steady increase of control and monopoly over the tribals and their resources, when looked at from the tribal's point of view, was nothing short of an irreversible and, in a way,

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an irreconcilable adverse consequence on their traditional system. It tainted their system; it defiled their system in such a manner that could not be changed down the centuries. So initially, the problem of tribal land alienation was the creation of the British coffee planters. Subsequently, the non-tribals started settling down in the hill areas, following the Britishers. And they also started imitating the British Raj's consumption patterns, the pattern of consumption.

Conclusion

- The process of the colonial government's slow but steady increase of control over the tribals and their resources, when looked at from the tribal's point of view, was nothing but an irreversible adverse consequence on their traditional system.
- Initially, the problem of tribal land alienation was the creation of the British coffee planters. Subsequently, the non-tribals started settling down in the hill areas following which the tribals imitated their consumption patterns.
- Ultimately, unable to meet the expenditure with their meagre income, they were forced to borrow money for which they began to pledge their lands. Finally, they would dispose off their lands and become landless labourers.



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Land and tribal exploitation that was introduced by the British would later be followed by the native non-tribal privileged class people. Ultimately, unable to meet the expenditure with their meager income, they were forced to borrow money from the moneylenders, for which they began to pledge their lands. So finally, they would dispose of their lands and become landless laborers and wage workers. They became tenants on the same lands that their ancestors had rightfully owned. So with this, we come to the end of our lecture here today.

Let's meet for another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.

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