

Theme Ten

Colonialism and Countryside

Development in Rajmahal hills

The tribal areas in Rajmahal hill of Bengal under went many changes as a result of the establishment of British rule. The travel accounts of Francis Buchanan, gives us the salient features of the life of tribes in Rajmahal hills. According to his description, the hills were very thick and impenetrable. It was an area that signified danger. Wherever he went, people were hostile and were apprehensive of officials.

Buchanan's journal gives us information about the Paharias of the Rajmahal hills. The Paharias were the hill folk and lived around the Rajmahal hills at the late eighteenth century. Their main activities were to collect forest produce and practice shifting cultivation. They used hoe for cultivation. They cleared patches of forest by cutting bushes and burning the undergrowth. These patches were enriched by the potash from the ash. They grew variety of pulses and millets for their own consumption. They scratched the ground slightly with hoes and cultivated the cleared land for years. Then left it fallow to get its fertility and moved to new areas. They were hunters, shifting cultivators, food gatherers, charcoal producers, silkworm rearers and strongly connected to the forest. The Paharias frequently raided the plains of the settled agriculturists. These raids were important for them at the time of scarcity.

But when the region came under the British rule, they began to face new problems. The Zamindars and jotedars promoted the cultivation and clearing forests, The British wanted to extent cultivation by clearing forests, because they always aimed maximum profit. More over to the British, tribal men were primitive and uncivilised.

The Santhals had come to the Rajmahal hills in 1780s. The British gave land to the Santhals and persuaded them to settle in the foothills of Rajmahal. By 1832 a large area was demarcated as Damin-i-Koh and was declared as the land of the Santhals who lived within it. After the demarcation, the settlement areas of the Santhals expanded rapidly from 40 Santhal villages in 1838 to 1,473 villages by 1851. Their population increased from a mere 3,000 to over 82,000. The Santhals cleared the forests, ploughed the land. When the Santhals settled in Rajmahal hills they were resisted by Paharias. But Paharias did not succeed in their attempt and they were forced to withdraw deeper into the hills. Historians used the term struggle between Paharias and Santhals as struggle between 'hoe and plough'.

The cultivation of Santhals improved on a large scale. They cultivated both food crops and commercial crops. But the condition was not safe to the Santhals. They lost their cultivating lands. British imposed heavy revenue on Santhals lands. When they failed to pay revenue their lands were confiscated. To pay the heavy revenue, they were to approach the money lenders. In course of time the lands were taken by the money lenders.

Thus the Santhals were forced to organise revolt. Sidhu and Kanu gave the leadership to the revolt. Thousands of Santhals took arms against the Zamindars, money lenders and British officials. The British took brutal measures to suppress the revolt. Thousands of Santhals were killed, villages were wiped out and ultimately British crushed the Santhals rebellion.