

CBSE Class 8 Social Science History Notes

Chapter 4 - Tribals, Dikus and the Vision of a Golden Age

In this chapter, students will read some of the questions related to Tribals, Dikus, etc. A few of the questions are: What problems did Birsa set out to resolve? Who were the outsiders being referred to as dikus, and how did they enslave the people of the region? What was happening to the tribal people under the British? How did their lives change?. In this article, we have provided CBSE Class 8 Social Science History notes for Chapter 4 - Tribals, Dikus and the Vision of a Golden Age, which are written in an easy to understand language. Going through these will save valuable time for students as they will get well acquainted with the important topics.

Overview

The customs and rituals followed by most tribes were very different from those laid down by Brahmins. These societies were not characterised by division of caste societies. All those who belonged to the same tribe thought of themselves as sharing common ties of kinship. But, they did have social and economic differences within tribes.

How Did Tribal Groups Live?

The tribal people of India were involved in a variety of activities by the nineteenth century.

Some were jhum cultivators

Some tribal people practised jhum cultivation, that is, shifting cultivation. This cultivation is done on small patches of land and the planters cut down the treetops to allow sunlight to reach the ground, and burnt the vegetation to clear it for cultivation. After the crop was ready and harvested they were shifted to another field. Shifting cultivators were found in the hilly and forested tracts of north-east and central India. These tribal people moved freely within the forests and that's the reason they practised shifting cultivation.

Some were hunters and gatherers

Tribal groups in many regions survived on hunting animals and gathering forest produce. The Khonds were a community who survived on collective hunts and divide the meat amongst themselves. This community ate fruits and roots and used oil extracted from the seeds of the sal and mahua to cook food. Shrubs and herbs were used from forests for medicinal purposes.

These forest people exchanged goods with the things they needed in return for their valuable forest produce. When the forest produced shrank, tribal people had to wander out in search of work as labourers. Tribal groups were dependent on traders and moneylenders because they often needed money to buy and sell in order to be able to get the goods that were not produced within the locality. But, the interest charged on the loans was very high.

Some herded animals

Herding and rearing was also an occupation for many tribal groups. They were pastoralists who moved with their herds of cattle or sheep according to the seasons.

CBSE Class 8 Social Science History Notes

Chapter 4 - Tribals, Dikus and the Vision of a Golden Age

Some took to settled cultivation

Tribal groups, even before the nineteenth century, began settling down. The land for the Mundas of Chottanagpur belonged to the clan as a whole. All members of the clan were regarded as descendants of the original settlers, who had first cleared the land. British officials saw settled tribal groups as more civilised than hunter-gatherers or shifting cultivators.

How Did Colonial Rule Affect Tribal Lives?

During British rule, the lives of tribal people changed.

What happened to tribal chiefs?

Before the British arrived, the tribal chiefs were important people. They enjoyed economic power and had the right to administer and control their territories. But, their functions and powers changed under British rule. They lost their administrative powers and were forced to follow laws made by British officials in India.

What happened to the shifting cultivators?

The British wanted tribal groups to settle down as it was easier to control and administer settled peasants. The British introduced land settlements to get regular revenue sources for the state. Land settlement means the British measured the land, defined the rights of each individual to that land, and fixed the revenue demand for the state. The British effort to settle jhum cultivators was not very successful. Facing widespread protests, the British had to ultimately allow them the right to carry on shifting cultivation in some parts of the forest.

Forest laws and their impact

Tribal lives were directly affected by the changes in forest laws. Some forests were classified as Reserved Forests as they produced timber which the British wanted. The British people stopped the tribal people entering the forests but they faced a problem of getting laborers. So, the colonial officials came up with a solution. The colonial officials decided to give jhum cultivators small patches of land in the forests and allow them to cultivate. In return, those who lived in the villages had to provide labour to the Forest Department. Many tribal groups disobeyed the new rules, continued with practices that were declared illegal, and at times rose in open rebellion.

The problem with trade

During the nineteenth century, traders and moneylenders started coming into the forest more often. They wanted to buy forest products, offered cash loans, and asked tribal groups to work for ages. In the eighteenth century, the demand for Indian silk was high in European markets. The silk market expanded so the East India Company encouraged silk production. The Santhals of Hazaribagh reared cocoons and the traders dealing in silk gave loans to the tribal people and collected the cocoons. The middlemen made huge profits.

CBSE Class 8 Social Science History Notes

Chapter 4 - Tribals, Dikus and the Vision of a Golden Age

The search for work

From the late nineteenth century, tea plantations started coming up and mining became an important industry. Tribals were recruited in large numbers to work at the tea plantations of Assam and the coal mines of Jharkhand.

A Closer Look

Tribal groups from different parts of the country rebelled against the changes in laws, the restrictions on their practices, the new taxes they had to pay, and the exploitation by traders and moneylenders.

Birsa Munda

Birsa was born in the mid-1870s and as an adolescent, he heard tales of the Munda uprisings of the past and saw the sirdars (leaders) of the community urging the people to revolt. In the local missionary school, he heard that it was possible for the Mundas to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, and regain their lost rights. Birsa also spent some time in the company of a prominent Vaishnav preacher. Birsa started a movement and it aimed at reforming tribal society. He urged the Mundas to give up drinking liquor, clean their village, and stop believing in witchcraft and sorcery.

In 1895 Birsa urged his followers to recover their glorious past. He talked of a golden age in the past – a satyug (the age of truth) – when Mundas lived a good life, constructed embankments, tapped natural springs, planted trees and orchards, practised cultivation to earn their living.

The political aim of the Birsa movement was to drive out missionaries, moneylenders, Hindu landlords, and the government and set up a Munda Raj with Birsa at its head. The movement was widespread so the British officials decided to act. Birsa started touring the villages to gain support using traditional symbols and language to rouse people, urging them to destroy “Ravana” (dikus and the Europeans) and establish a kingdom under his leadership.

In 1900 Birsa died of cholera and the movement faded out. But, the movement was significant in at least two ways. First – it forced the colonial government to introduce laws so that the land of the tribals could not be easily taken over by dikus. Second – it showed once again that the tribal people had the capacity to protest against injustice and express their anger against colonial rule.