

UPSC Civil Services Examination

UPSC Notes [GS-I]

Topic: NCERT Notes: Tribal Uprisings in the 18th and 19th Centuries

Tribal Uprisings in British India UPSC

Many of the various tribal groups in India revolted against the forceful and devastating intrusions into their life and region by the British and other Indians. The tribals had been living peacefully and in harmony with nature for hundreds of years in their own forests. The British came and introduced many changes in their way of life and also introduced outsiders into their turf. This reduced them to the status of labourers and debtors from masters of their own land. The uprisings were basically against this unwelcome intrusion, and a fight for their independence.

Causes of Tribal Revolts in India

Causes of the tribal uprisings

- The tribals' mainstay were shifting agriculture, hunting, fishing and the use of forest produce.
- With the influx of non-tribals into the traditional regions of the tribals, the practice of settled agriculture was introduced. This led to loss of land for the tribal population.
- The tribals were reduced to being landless agricultural labourers.
- The British introduced money lenders into the tribal areas which led to severe exploitation of the local tribals. They became bonded labourers under the new economic system.
- The tribal societies had a system of joint ownership of land which was replaced by the notion of private property.
- There were restrictions imposed on the use of forest produce, on shifting agriculture and on hunting practices. This led to loss of livelihood for the tribals.
- Tribal society was traditionally egalitarian compared to mainstream society which was marked by caste and class distinctions. With the coming of the non-tribals or outsiders (called dikus), the tribals came to be classified under the lowest rungs of society.
- A Forest Department was set up in 1864 by the government mainly to control the rich resources of Indian forests. The Government Forest Act of 1865 and the Indian Forest Act of 1878 established complete government monopoly over the forested land.
- The work of the Christian missionaries also led to social upheaval in tribal society and this was also resented by them.

Major tribal uprisings

Kol Rebellion (1832)

- The Kols were one of tribes inhabiting the Chhotanagpur area.
- They lived in complete autonomy under their traditional chiefs but this changed when the British came.
- Along with the British came the moneylenders and the merchants.
- The Kols then lost their lands to farmers from outside and also had to pay huge amounts of money in taxes. This led to many becoming bonded labourers.
- The British judicial policies also caused resentment among the Kols.
- There was an insurrection in 1831-32 which saw the Kols organise themselves and revolt against the British and the moneylenders.
- They killed many outsiders and burned houses. This armed resistance went on for two years after which it was brutally suppressed by the British with their superior weaponry.
- The Kol Rebellion was so intense that troops had to be called in from Calcutta and Benares to crush it.

Santhal Hul (1855)

- The Santhal Hul (rebellion) occurred in the regions of present-day Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal against the British as well the Zamindari system from 1855 until 1856 when the movement was crushed by the British.
- When the Zamindari system was introduced in the Bengal presidency, the British and the Zamindars claimed the traditional Santhal land as their own.
- The Santhals were exploited mercilessly by the landlords who charged exorbitant rates of interest (sometimes as high as 500%) which ensured that the tribals were never able to repay their loan.
- They lost their land and also were turned into bonded labourers.
- They had to suffer extortions, forceful deprivation of property, abuse and violence, cheating in business deals, wilful trampling of their crops, etc.
- The government supported the landlords instead of helping the tribals whose grievances were genuine.
- The first rebellion occurred in 1854 led by Bir Singh of Sasan in Lachimpur.
- The second rebellion started in June 1855 when two brothers Sidhu and Kanhu organised 10000 Santhals and declared a revolt.
- They killed many moneylenders and Company agents. Their revolt was very intense and massive in scale.
- The Santhal community celebrates the day of rebellion to this day.
- The revolt was violently suppressed by the British with about 20000 Santhals being killed including the two leaders.

Munda Ulgulan (1899 – 1900)

- The Mundas inhabited the Chotanagpur area.

- The Khuntkatti system, which was a joint holding of land, prevailed among the Mundas. But the advent of the British and the outsider-Zamindars replaced the Khuntkatti with the Zamindari system. This caused indebtedness and forced labour among the tribals.
- There were many rebellions during the late 18th century and the 19th century against the British and the dikus (landlords, moneylenders, merchants).
- The Mundas were able to get an able and charismatic leader in **Birsa Munda** who proclaimed a rebellion in 1894.
- He declared himself 'God' and organised his people to revolt openly against the government. He urged people to stop paying debts and taxes.
- He was arrested and spent 2 years in jail before being released in 1897.
- In December 1899, he launched an armed struggle on the landlords and the government.
- The Mundas torched police stations, houses of the landlords, churches and British property.
- In 1900 Birsa Munda was caught. He died in jail due to cholera aged just 25.

These were the main uprisings by the non-frontier tribals. The frontier tribals also revolted against the British annexation of their lands. The main frontier tribal uprisings were Khasi Uprising (1830s), Ahom Revolt (1828) and Singphos Rebellion (1830 – 1855). In the 20th century, Rani Gaidiniliu led the Naga Movement (1905 – 1931).

