# UNIT 7 POPULAR UPRISINGS : SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

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# 7.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- know about the factors responsible for various peasant and tribal uprisings that took place in the second half of the 19th century,
- discover the nature and main characteristics of these uprisings,
- understand the attitude of the colonial regime towards these uprisings,
- know how the working class emerged in India,
- explain the problems faced by the working class,
- know about the initial struggles waged by the working class, and
- understand the importance of these struggles.

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The English were able to suppress the uprising of 1857 but this could not end the feelings of bitterness towards their rule—particularly amongst the peasants and tribals who had to reckon with the oppressive character of the regime in its severest form. They were exploited by both the colonial Government and the landlords because the latter were now looked upon by the Government as "natural leaders" of the people.

In many regions the peasants and tribals rose in revolt against the British. In this unit we have attempted to familiarise you with some of these uprisings of peasants and tribals.

With India becoming a part of the British empire more and more British capitalists invested their capital in India to extort profits. A few modern industries, were established after the introduction of railways. As a result of this limited industrialisation, plantations and railways there emerged a new social class—the working class. Initially this exploited class had no means to organise itself or raise its voice in an effective manner. But soon the workers started resisting their exploitation by British capitalists and European planters. The unit also deals with some of these initial efforts made by the workers towards organisation and thereby raising them against exploitation.

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Before beginning our discussion on the popular movements of peasants, tribals, artisans and workers in the 1850-1900 period, a few things may be clearly stated. Any discussion of the theme we have chosen should take into account the colonial context. This period roughly coincides with the second phase of British imperialism i.e. the industrial capital phase. The earlier phase — normally characterised as the commercial phase of British imperialism was based on trade and commerce. This phase saw the development of industrial, capitalist exploitation of India.

# 7.2 COLONIAL IMPACT

One has to bear in mind the impact of British imperialism on Indian agriculture and the traditional handicraft industry.

- i) As for agriculture, the land settlements (Permanent, Raiyatwari and Mahalwari) created certain new elements like a market economy and did away with some customary rights like forest and pasturage rights. The agrarian policies coupled with other developments encouraged moneylending particularly in the context of cash payments of land revenue. In the context of sharpening social differentiation, moneylending got associated with a complete control of the rural economy and society by a few moneylenders. And, if it was a tribal tract, this interaction also implied the process of peasantisation i.e. conversion of tribals into peasants.
- ii) Secondly, social differentiation was not a new feature but colonialism accentuated the differences and created a sharper polarisation between those who owned lands; had acquired wealth, and through their new ownership rights, had access to the courts to defend themselves and their property, and those whose customary rights got undermined. This differentiation had certain implications. Besides strengthening and polarising, these differences centred around class (rich-poor), differences around caste and religion also got strained for example if in a particular area the landowner belonged to a particular caste or religion and the peasants were of another caste or religion then the caste/religious differences got strained on account of class differentiation we have noted above. Tribal areas saw the emergence of 'outsiders' who were moneylenders and landlords, and who ruthlessly exploited the population.
- iii) Another major aspect of colonial policy was to forcibly commercialise agriculture, with the obvious idea of providing raw material for British industries. This proved hazardous for the peasants who were forced to grow commercial crops (like indigo and cotton) instead of food grains, even in years of scarcity.
- iv) As for the artisans, colonialism spelt doom for them. The colonisation of India implied that India was to be a market for British goods. These were factory-made goods—cheaper and finer than the products of the India artisans. This led to the wiping out of the traditional Indian industries like cotton and salt. Besides throwing a large section of the artisans out of employment, it increased the pressure on land as the artisans tried to turn to agriculture.

# 7.3 PEASANTS, TRIBALS AND ARTISANS

Before we proceed further it would be useful to mention at this juncture a few things about the peasants, tribals and the artisans:

- i) When one talks of peasants one is referring to all those people who directly participate in agricultural production. Some of these were poor and some others were comparatively more affluent. This differentiation increased in the colonial period. Besides, the peasant's position sank vis-a-vis the owners of lands since colonialism recognised the property rights of only the landlords, the peasant's having been reduced to mere tenants-at-will. The new laws implied that the peasants could be evicted any time by their landlords.
- ii) As for the tribals, there were different tribal groups like Khonds, Savaras, Santhals, Mundas, Koyas, Kols, etc. When we speak of tribals we are not talking of the classic food gatherers and hunters, but tribal peasants, who had settled down as agriculturists. Of course, they combined agriculture with hunting and food gathering as well as manufactures from forest-based products like canes etc. Their relative isolation coupled with closer ethnic bonds perhaps differentiated them from peasants.

iii) The artisans were those people who were engaged in the manufacture of traditional handicrafts like cotton products, salt, iron goods etc. In most cases these were persued as caste professions. As already discussed, the unequal competition with the British industrial products ruined the artisans. Historical evidence about them is extremely limited. They were often clubbed with the peasants and tribals.

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#### **Check Your Progress 1**

- Which of the following statements are right or wrong? Mark  $(\sqrt{\ })$  for correct, or  $(\times)$  for incorrect as the case might be:
  - i) The agrarian policies of the British encouraged moneylending.
  - ii) The customary rights of the tribals were encroached upon as a result of British policies.
  - iii) The induction of British goods in the Indian markets helped the Indian artisans.
  - iv) By peasants we mean all those who directly participate in agricultural production.

2	Write in about five lines how colonialism accentuated social differentiation in Indian society.
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	<i>´</i>

# 7.4 POPULAR MOVEMENTS UP TO 1857

We can now begin our discussion by taking up some of the major popular movements among the peasants, tribals and artisans in the 1850-1900 phase — known as *fituris*, *melis*, *hools* and *ulgulan*.

#### **7.4.1** Orissa

In the early 1850's we come across some tribal movements in Orissa. There were popular movements among the Khonds of Ghumsar and Baud (1854-56) and the Savaras of Parliakhemedi.

These popular movements were attributed to Chakra Bisoi who, since 1837, had resisted all attempts to arrest him. The specific problem among the Khonds centred around the determination of the colonial administration to stop the human sacrifices associated with the 'meriah' sacrifice. What is worth noting is that the new pressures and uncertainties forced the Khonds to appease their gods for good harvests of turmeric, but the colonial administration tried to stop this practice. Some colonial officials hoped that the improvement of material conditions of the Khonds would serve to liquidate the 'meriah' sacrifice.

Very little is known about Chakra Bisoi and the early tribal movements. Bisoi took up the cause of a young boy whom the Khonds 'believed' was the Raja of Ghumsar.

We get references to Khonds 'attacking' some villages in Ghumsar (1854) and how they refused to betray Chakra. In a desperate attempt to crush the rebellion the police arrested a mendicant by mistake, thinking that he was Chakra Bisoi. It seems some landholders and ruling chiefs (i.e. of Patana and Kalahandi) who felt threatened by colonial rule maintained links with Chakra.

In 1856-57 there was the Savara rebellion in Parliakhemedi led by one Radhakrishna Dandasena. The colonial administration saw links between this movement and Chakra Bisoi, who could never be arrested. Nothing was heard of him after October 1856. He seems to have faded into popular memory after the Savara rising was crushed with Dandasena's hanging in 1857. However, there are doubts whether Chakra Bisoi was behind all these popular movements, or whether his name came to be associated as a symbol of popular tribal protest.

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# 7.4.2 Santhal Rebellion

Yet another major tribal rebellion was among the Santhals (1855-57) of Birbhum, Bankura, Singhbhum, Hazaribagh, Bhagalpur and Monghyr. The colonial character of the regime contributed to the precipitation of this conflict. We get references to some merchants and moneylenders from Northern and Eastern India, completely controlling the existence of Santhals through interests on loans, with rates ranging from 50% to 500%. These exploitative people used two types of measures, a big one (Bara Ban) to receive things and a small measure (Chota Ban) to give things to the Santhals. They also grabbed lands of the Santhals.

Some of the intermediaries of the Zamindars were also ruthlessly exploitative. We also get references to recruitments of forced labour and the sexual exploitation of tribal women at the railway sites.

When the movement started it was not ostensibly anti-British, but was directed chiefly against the *mahajans* and traders. The Santhals declared that their new God had directed them to collect and pay their revenue to the state at the rate of two annas on every buffalo plough and half anna on each cow-plough. They also fixed interest rates on loans which were to be on the lower side. The Santhals were punished for night 'attacks' on *mahajans*, whereas their oppressors were not even admonished. Rebellion burst forth in 1854, with an increase in the number of 'dacoities', 'burglaries', 'thefts' of *mahajans*, whose wealth was ill-earned.

It was in such a context that two Santhals—Sido and Kanhu offered the spark which resulted in conflagration. They received the 'Command' of their God (Thakur) to stand up and defy their exploiters. On June 30, 1855 ten thousand Santhals assembled at Bhaghadihi where the 'divine order' that the Santhals should get out of the control of their oppressors was announced by Sido and Kanhu. The idea that their God would himself fight along with them gave the rebellion a legitimacy, and in popular tribal perception labelled it as a struggle of 'good' against 'evil'.



As the movement gathered momentum the way in which the context determined its form is indeed interesting. From an essentially anti-mahajan and anti-trader movement it incorporated a new element — the Santhals made no secret of their opposition to the police, white planters, railway engineers and the officials, thereby revealing their opposition to the colonial order as well.

The movement lasted for six months. Many villages were 'attacked' by the Santhals after being given prior notice. A lot of pressure was exerted on the zamindars and the Government by the rebels. In many areas the zamindars helped in the suppression of the rebellion.

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2 Fort of Pakur where British Soldiers took Refuge after defeat from Santhals.

# 7.4.3 1857

After this we can say a few things about the 1857 Rebellion, without going into details of the Rebellion itself. There is a controversy among historians regarding the level of popular participation in the revolt. Some scholars like Eric Stokes (*Peasant and the Raj*, Cambridge, 1978) point out how the rural elite whose interests had been threatened by colonialism led, the peasants and artisans who followed them 'tamely'. Others, like S.B. Chaudhuri (*Theories of the Indian Mutiny* 1857-59, Calcutta, 1965) and Rudranshu Mukherjee (*Awadh in Revolt*, Delhi 1984) feel that although landed elements provided the leadership there were some exceptions, and, more importantly, the strength of the Rebellion was based on the

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The common resentment against the oppression of the moneylender united the peasants and the artisans. British rule was identified as 'Bania Ka Raj' and the Rebellion marked an opposition to the moneylenders as well as the British. Along with this was the erosion of customary rights and privileges of the peasants.

The forms of popular protest reflect the combination of the twin currents of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism which had emerged at that particular juncture. Symbols of foreign rule such as police stations, railway lines and telegraph wires were destroyed. As for the popular movements which converge with the 1857 Rebellion, we get evidence of the destruction of records. In fact, we are told of the 'debris' of accounts books, which reflect the obvious opposition to the new taxation system. Although the Europeans were the first targets, they were followed by attacks on their Indian supporters like moneylenders, auction purchasers, bankers and traders in some regions.

In this phase we also get reference to the dismantling of factories in Shahjehanpur, Shahibabad, Gaya and Palamau. Although our evidence is severely limited this indicates typical reactions of artisans in early industrial societies, who saw a threat posed by the arrival of new machines. This trend can be seen in early industrial England (1830) as well.

With the disappearance of British authority, the concept of freedom drove the peasants and artisans to seize the lands and 'plunder' the houses of the affluent landed sections. Their property deeds and government records were also destroyed. This situation altered the nature of the Rebellion. Thus, people like Kunwar Singh, a big landlord who led the Rebellion in Bihar, stopped his followers from indulging in such acts, as, otherwise after the British withdraw there would be no proof of the rights of people and no evidence to determine the amount due from one party to another.

#### **Check Your Progress 2**

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Match the leaders with the movement	ents they were connected with.
i) Chakra Bisoi	a) Savara Rebellion
ii) Sido and Kanhu	b) Khonds of Ghumsar
iii) Radhakrishna Dandasena	c) Santhal Rebellion
Discuss in about five lines the prob	plems faced by the Santhals.
,,	
Which of the following statements	are right $()$ or wrong $(\times)$
i) The Khonds appeased their go	ods for good harvests by offering sacrifices. ( )
ii) Radhakrishna Dandasena was	s rewarded by the British. ( )
iii) Zamindars helped the British	in suppressing the Santhal rebellion. ( )
iv) The e is no controversy amore the Revolt of 1857.	ng historians as to the level of popular participation in
v) Artisans welcomed the comin	ng of machines. ( )

# 7.5 POPULAR MOVEMENTS AFTER 1857

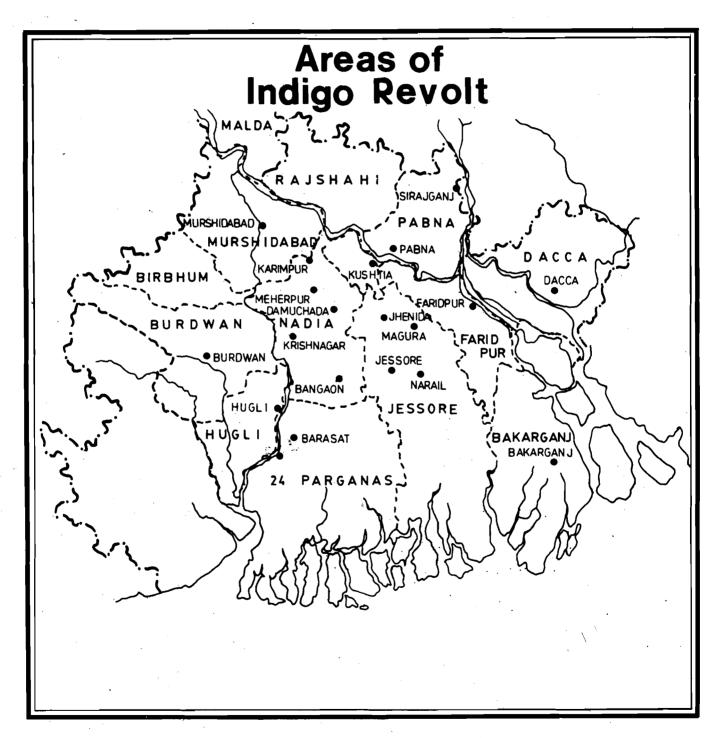
Popular protest did not end with the suppression of the 1857 uprising. We find a number of movements taking place after this and shall discuss a few of them.

#### 7.5.1 Indigo Riots

The indigo riots of 1859 in Bengal is the next popular movement we shall examine. Indigo plantations had been set up as early as 1770 by the East India Company. The planters relied on physical coercion and legal manipulation to force the peasants to grow indigo at a loss

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This created a lot of discontent since the peasants could not grow foodgrains which they needed for survival. By 1859 thousands of peasants had withdrawn their labour, formed organisations all over the indigo plantation districts and resisted the repression of the planters and their armed retainers. The contemporary newspapers like THE BENGALEE gave due coverage to the movement and reported how it was marked with success. Dinabandhu Mitra wrote *Nildarpan* in Bengali which highlighted the plight of the peasants.



3 Districts Effected by Indigo Revolt in Bengal

The indigo riots forced the Government to set up an official enquiry (1860). The movement also knocked down the plantation system in lower Bengal, forcing the planters to shift to



4 Dinabandhu Mitra

# 7.5.2 Moplah Uprising

In the 1850-1900 period we also witness a series of Moplah Uprisings in Malabar. As the Jenmi landlords backed by the police, law courts and revenue officials tightened their grip over the Moplah peasants the latter rebelled against the landlords and the British, it is not surprising to see how, what was essentially a rich-poor conflict between the Jenmi landlords and the Moplah peasants was given distinct communal colouring by the colonial state since the landlords were Hindus and the peasants were Muslims.

The landlords resorted with repression, which continued unabated till 1880. In their attempts to smother the peasant movement they also burnt the bodies of the rebels in order to produce a demoralising effect. Scholars like D.N. Dhanagare (*Peasant Movement in India* 1920-50, Delhi 1983) have pointed out how these acts made the peasants retaliate.

In 1875 an anonymous petition of the Moplah peasant was submitted to the Madras Government, which led to an enquiry. However between 1882 and 1885 there was a renewal of hostilities with the peasants 'looting' the property and burning the houses of landlords, as well as defiling Hindu temples. These acts gave an anti-Hindu turn to what was essentially a class conflict between peasants and the landlords. By 1896 the Moplah peasants' struggle assumed an aggressively communal orientation.

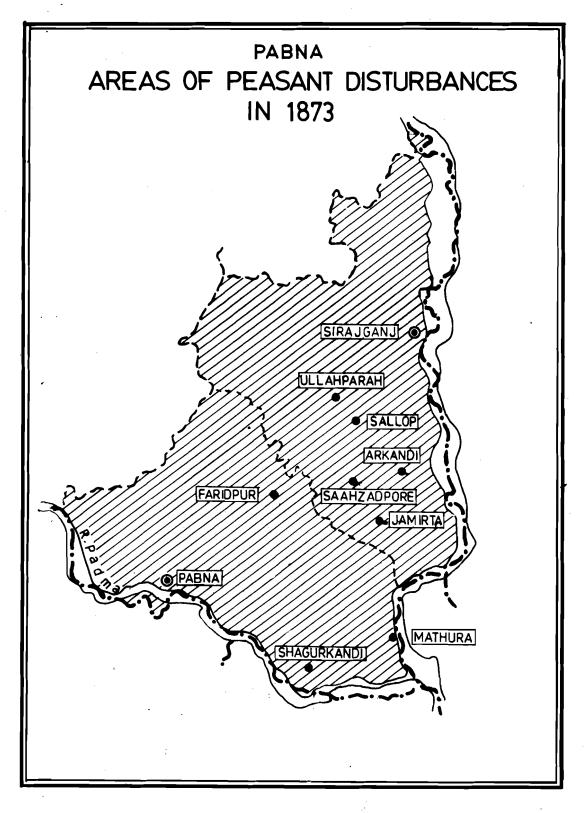
#### 7.5.3 Pabna

Another important movement was the Pabna (in Bengal) peasants' movement of 1873-1885. The peasants of Pabna did not object to rent hikes, and, in fact between 1858 and 1873 they met the rent demands of their landlords without any resistance. At the root of the movement was the tendency of the zamindars to annihilate the tenants' newly acquired occupancy right. Occupancy tenants were being converted into tenants-at-will through forcible written agreements.

The peasants growing knowledge of the new laws made them aware of their plight. Then there was the problem of illegal dues in some places like Tripura. In 1873 the Pabna peasants formed an agrarian league which spread out the entire district very soon. Most of the newspapers which were pre-landlord (like Amrita Bazar Patrika) opposed the league. What is worth noting is that the peasants did not defy the colonial authority and declared that their goal was to become the ryots of the 'Queen of England'. They were opposed to the harassment and not to the payment of dues. They wanted to be the 'Queen's Ryots' for securing redressal of their grievances.

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In fact, in the initial stages we get references to a sympathetic colonial administration supporting the peasants in cases against their landlords. As the movement developed popular forms of mobilisation — i.e. blasts from conch-shell, drumbeats, etc. brought people together to resist the illegal demands of the landlords. By 'night shouts' all the people in villages expressed their solidarity with the movement. Kalyan Kumar Sengupta (*Pabna Disturbances and the Politics of Rent 1873-1885*, New Delhi 1974) has stressed the 'Legalistic Character' of the movement, with instances of violence being very rare as the peasants were primarily interested in defending their property and holdings.



5 Areas Effected by Pabna Uprising

As the movement gathered momentum the oppressors tried to hit back. Given the fact that a majority of the peasant activists were Muslims (more than 2/3rds of the peasants, and about

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70% of Pabna's population were Muslims) they painted it as a communal movement. What is worth noting here is that two prominent leaders of the Pabna peasants — Kesab Chandra Roy and Sambhunath Pal were Hindus.

For nearly a decade, from 1873 the Pabna peasants' movement undermined the landlord's perception of their right to fleece the peasants. Besides, the movement also spread to other areas like Dacca, Rajshahi, Bakergunje, Faridpur, Tripura and Bogra, etc.

#### 7.5.4 Deccan Riots

The basis of the Deccan Riots, which erupted in 1875, lay in the evolution of the ryotwari system itself. We come across the emergence of a class of moneylenders who fleeced the peasants through high interest on loans (25% to 50%). The decline of the collective system of tax collection implied that unlike in the earlier days the moneylender was not subject to the executive and judicial authority of the village. The courts and the new laws polarised the caste differences between the Vanis (village moneylenders) and the Kunbis (cultivator caste) by favouring the former. This implied an increase in the transfer of holding from peasants to moneylenders. The immovable property of the Kunbi could also be sold to recover loans. Along with these problems was an increase of the population, the dislocation of the economy and an ill-conceived attempt to enhance rents by the colonial administration.

It was in this situation that things took an explosive turn. The young Brahmin leaders of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha and the dominant landed families which faced decline took up the cause of the peasants.

The Kunbis rose against the Vanis in order to dispossess them of their title deeds and mortgage bonds which were looked upon as instruments of oppression.

The Deccan Riots resulted in the breakdown of the link that held the Kunbis and Vanis together. Like the pattern we have noticed earlier, class conflict was given the form of a caste conflict.

# 7.5.5 Kova Rebellion

In 1879-1880 there occurred the Koya rebellion in the eastern Godavari tract of present+day Andhra Pradesh which also affected some portions of the Malkangiri region of Koraput district in Orissa. It was led by Tomma Dora, the Koya leader. The movement reflected the problems faced by the tribals like the erosion of customary rights over forests, the exploitation by moneylenders who began to control the life of the Koyas through loans and land transfers.

Tomma Dora was hailed by the Koyas as the 'King' of Malkangiri. We find references to the taking over of a police station at Motu by the rebels. However, very soon after this Dora was shot dead by the police and the movement collapsed.

#### 7.5.6 Birsa Munda Revolt

The last popular movement that we shall discuss developed between 1874 and 1901, and was led by Birsa Munda from about 1895. A tribal movement, it affected an area of about 400 square miles in the Chotanagpur region of South Bihar. Born out of the basic problems affecting the tribals in the colonial period — erosion of customary rights forced labour, colonial laws etc. it had a distinct connection with Christianity in the early phase. As K.S. Singh (Birsa Munda and his Movement 1874-1901, Delhi 1983) notes, the Mundas, in fact, accepted Christianity with the belief that the German missionaries would set things right by checking the malpractices of the zamindars. In fact, around 1857 some zamindars attacked the German mission at Ranchi, as it sympathised with the Mundas. From around 1858 we get references to Christian tribals resisting oppressive zamindars. This trend became quite pronounced between 1862 and 1888. In 1867 as many as 14,000 'Christians' filed a petition against the Raja of Chotanagpur and the local police, and submitted it to the colonial authorities. Some steps were taken to restore lands of some of the dispossessed Mundas.

In March 1879 the Mundas claimed that Chotanagpur belonged to them. In 1881 some sardars led by one John the Baptist set up a kingdom at Doesa. After this the movement went through some major changes. Dissatisfaction with the German missionaries made the Mundas severe their links with them. Instead, they turned to the Catholic mission. The colonial officials and the zamindars came closer to each other in order to smoothen the movement. What developed was a struggle which united the 'rebels' against all Europeans including Christian missionaries and officials as well as the dikus and the landed elements.

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It was in this context that the Mundas were led by Birsa Munda—whose initial popularity was based on his medicinal and healing powers. The Mundas envisaged an ideal and just order which would be free from the internal as well as European exploiters. Their search for invincibility against their powerful oppressors made them look upon 'forest water' as something which would make them invincible. There was active participation of women in this movement. On some occasions there was violence also. However the movement lacked animosity vis-a-vis the economically subordinate non-tribal people.

The movement of Birsa Munda was ruthlessly suppressed. Birsa was handed and the repressive machinery directed against the rebels to break the rebellion.

On the basis of the above discussion certain conclusions can be drawn. The popular movements we have discussed were directed against colonialism as well as the Indian rich (i.e. moneylenders and the zamindars) often identified as dikus or outsiders. What needs to be emphasised is that the opposition to these dikus was based on the exploitation perpetrated by them and not because they were non-tribals.

# 7.6 CHARACTERISTICS OF MOVEMENTS

The movements had certain characteristics:

i) Inherent in most of them was the attempt to look back into the past when 'life was much better'. This included the fury directed against machines during the 1857 Rebellion. This was the reason for the struggle for a better present. A tendency existed in some of the movements to attack the established order of the sahukar, zamindar and the British colonial administration. For example, Sido and Kanho tried to replace rent

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7 Arrest of Birsa's Followers

with an annual tribute to them. Another feature, linked to the question of looking back into the past and attacking the established order, was the 'restorative' character of some of these popular movements. Thus, on occasions they were led by the traditionally affluent sections whose privileges had been undermined as a result of the colonisation of India.

- ii) Conversely, in some cases we observe an association with imperialism in a struggle against the landlords and the sahukars. On occasions the people learnt through their experience to identify anti-imperialism as a necessary component of their struggle, like the Mundas. However, on occasions the illusions of British rule affected popular perceptions as in the case of the Pabna peasants who wanted to be the 'Queen's ryots'. This obviously undermined the struggle against imperialism. What is, however, striking is how some of these popular struggles identified their friends and their enemies. Beginning as an anti-imperialist movement the popular movement which converged with the 1857 Rebellion gravitated towards anti-feudalism, posing problems for the feudal landed sections as we have seen. The anti-feudal and pro-Christian Birsaite Mundas also turned anti-imperialists in course of time.
- iii) The popular movements we have discussed envisaged a fair and just order without exploitation where everybody would be equal and live happily. This reflected a popular peasant utopia and in many cases was associated with the hopes of their dawning of 'new age' as well as the emergence of 'messiahs' (like Sido, Kanho and Birsa).
- iv) Another noticeable feature was the association of these popular movements with religion and caste. Given the conditions as well as the multiplicity of both religion and caste in our country we have seen how on occasions some of these popular movements, although they were centred around class conflict, got affected by communal and caste politics. Our evidence also points to how, when their position was threatened, the landed feudal sections tried to divert the popular movements along communal lines. Here one can cite the cases of Malabar and Pabna peasants struggles which were projected as a communal movement by the landlords.

While discussing the question of religion and popular movements we have seen how it also united the popular masses in their struggle with their oppressors, as in Malabar or in Chotanagpur region. The way in which Christianity, a product of British imperialism itself, became an instrument to fight the feudal as well as the imperialist order obviously indicates how its role changed in a colony like India. Thus this dual nature of the role of religion should be grasped.

v) Another important facet of these popular movements was their close association with 'lootings' and 'crime' directed against the affluent classes. Although reduced to simple criminality in official records, what needs to be stressed is that these were very much a

part of popular movements. The idea of hitting at their exploiters was conditioned by the rationality of setting things right! Consequently these acts had a popular sanction and on occasions were collective acts.

- vi) The sense of solidarity exhibited by peasants, tribals and artisans is another characteristic feature. It is worth noting here how territorial boundaries and ethnic bonds transcended in some of the popular movements. For example, while the Pabna movement percolated to other areas outside the district the Birsa Movement united the Mundas and the Kols, along with the absence of any animosity vis-a-vis economically subordinate non-tribal groups.
- vii) And, finally, these popular movements served to considerably narrow the gap between a section of the Indian Intelligentsia and the popular masses. We have seen this tendency especially in Bengal. The pro-peasant sympathies were expressed in some newspapers and in contemporary literary works like *Nil Darpan* (1860).

#### **Check Your Progress 3**

- 1 Which of the following statements are true ( $\sqrt{\phantom{0}}$ ) or false (×).
  - i) The planters coerced the peasants to grow indigo.
  - ii) The indigo revolt did not get any coverage in the newspapers.
  - iii) The Moplah uprising was given a communal colour by the colonial government.
  - iv) The Kinbis had cordial relations with the Vains.
  - v) Mundas attacked economically subordinate non-tribal groups.
- Match the leaders with the movements. They lead.

  i) Tomma Dora Pabna uprising

  ii) Sambhunath Pal Munda revolt

  iii) Birsa Munda Koya rebellion

  Discuss in about ten lines the basic characteristics of the popular movements during this period.

# 7.7 WORKING CLASS MOVEMENTS

in Bombay and Ahmedabad.

After discussing the popular movements among peasants, tribals and artisans we now take up the role of industrial workers between 1850 and 1900. Who were these industrial workers? Given the overall conditions we have discussed in our general introduction, they were composed primarily of the dispossessed peasants and artisans who had been thrown out of their occupations with the advent of colonialism. These workers became associated with the 'modern' industrial sector which developed out of the interaction of British colonialism with India. This sector was originally an exclusive preserve of British capitalists and evolved from about the 1840's. The abundance of raw material and cheap labour attracted British capitalists to invest in the tea plantations (from 1839), jute, coal, mining and railways (early 1850's) and by the turn of the century major recruitments also took place in the ports. The only industry with which the Indian business class was associated was the textile industry. The Indian business class dominated it. Born around 1850's it was located chiefly

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What needs to be emphasised is that this 'modern' sector did not lead to full-fledged capitalist development as it was based on the archaic foundations of a predominantly feudal economy deliberately preserved by the colonial regime. Moreover, it was not meant to foster the development of India. These features had certain implications. Thus, the workers in the 'modern' sector were left in semi-servile conditions. Besides having to work for long hours 15 to 16 hours a day, with low wages and miserable working conditions, they (including women and children) were even beaten and tortured. Their diet was normally worse than what was served to criminals in jails.

There is ample evidence in the Municipal reports which points out deaths due to illness amongst plantation workers. Given these conditions the workers were in no position to organise themselves, and what we come across are mostly spontaneous movements aimed at redressing their adverse conditions.

# 7.7.1 Efforts of the Educated Gentry

The 1850-1900 phase saw scattered and unorganised struggles among the workers. There have been characterised as elementary struggles by Sukomal Sen (Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1970, Calcutta, 1979). In this phase we come across sections of the educated gentry coming forward to focus on the problems of the workers. In 1870 Sasipada Banerjee, a Brahmo Samajist, founded the 'Working Men's Club' and published a journal from Baranagar (near Calcutta) in 1874. The Calcutta-Brahmo Samaj founded in 1878 the 'Working Men's Mission' to propagate religious morality, etc. among the workers.

By 1878 we come across Sorabjee Saprujee Bengalee and Narayan Meghajee Lokhundy working amidst cotton mill labourers in Bombay. These attempts led to the drafting of a memorandum in 1884 which incorporated demands for a rest day on every Sunday, a half-an-hour break at noon; a 6.30 a.m. to sunset working day; wages to the workers be paid by the 15th of the month following the month they have worked and that in case of injury they should receive full wages till they recovered and if they got maimed they should get pension. This memorandum was signed by about 5,000 workers and was submitted to the commission of 1884 appointed by the Government of Bombay. It left its imprint of the first Indian Factories Act of 1891.

In 1890 (April 24) Lokhundy convened another meeting attended by about 10,000 workers. Two woman workers spoke at this meeting. A memorial asking for a weekly holiday was drawn up and sent to the Bombay Mill Owners' Association. This request was granted on June 10, 1890, and although perceived as a victory by the workers, it was without any legal sanction and hence it could not be enforced. The demand for a rest day in a week became a popular demand in almost all the industrial centres.

#### 7.7.2 Strikes

Whereas these efforts sought to organise the workers, this phase was marked by spontaneous workers movements. We get references to a strike by the river transport porters of Bengal in 1853, a coachmen's strike in Calcutta in 1862 etc. The first big strike occurred in 1862 when about 1,200 labourers of Howrah railway station went on a strike demanding an 8 hours working day. What is worth noting is that this action preceded the historic May Day Movement of the Chicago workers by about 24 years, and the strike occurred in a sector which had begun from 1853.

This was followed by a number of strike actions. Thus, a big strike took place in the Nagpur Empress Mills in 1877 on the issue of wage rates.

Between 1882-1890 there were 25 strikes in the Bombay and Madras presidencies. What is striking is that in Bombay presidency a large number of strikes occurred in factories owned by Indians i.e. textile factories. Bengal also witnessed spontaneous strikes centred around higher wage demands and the dismissal of workers.

# 7.7.3 Characteristics

While surveying these popular struggles a few points should be mentioned.

1 They served to narrow the gap between the workers and the intelligentsia. The latter got attracted to the workers due to humanitarian notions triggered off by the socio-reform movements (like the Brahmo Samai) and contemporary developments in other parts of

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	টাকার দ্রব্য দেওয়া হইবে।	25
5	সম্প্রতি ছাবড়ার রেইলওয়ে ষ্টেননে প্রায়	भार
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8 An article about Rail Workers Strike in Somprakash by Dwarka Nath Vidhyabhusan

the world which were taking place along similar lines (e.g. England). This trend continued in the early twentieth century—Gandhi's attempts to reach the Ahmedabad Mill Workers and Anusaya Ben's efforts to open-up night schools to educate them in 1918 were the manifestations of the same spirit.

2 In many cases the workers were led by 'jobbers' (Sirdars) who recruited them and who normally belonged to the same region and caste of the workers. In such cases the workers' demands were sidetracked as the central focus lay on the struggle between the 'jobbers' and the employers. On other occasions the workers were led by the intelligentsia. Taken all in all it appears that the workers in this stage had to look up to 'outsiders' for leadership.

Given the fact that the workers were composed of the disposed sections of the rural population, and that the colonisation of India prevented any attack on the old, feudal values dominated the minds of the workers. Here, even the leadership provided by the intelligentsia (which was influenced by the old feudal values) failed to produce any serious impact on the workers' organisation or their consciousness. The degrading condition of women and child labourers remained completely ignored due to the dominating feudal values. Consequently, most of these popular struggles concentrated on immediate problems faced by workers like wages, retrenchments and a rest day in a week.

Nevertheless, despite their shortcomings we have to acknowledge the heroism of the workers in a period when there were no organised trade unions to come to their rescue.

	heck Your Progress 4  Discuss in about ten lines the emergence of the working class in India.																																																																									
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odern India 1857 - 19 <del>6</del> 4	2 Discuss in about five lines the problems of the working classes.	
	3 Match the year with the strikes in which they took place.	
	i) 1853 Nagpur Empress Mills	
	ii) 1862 River Transporters	
	iii) 1877 Railway.	
	Which of the following statements are right or wrong? Mark (√) or (×) for correct incorrect statements respectively:	t and
	i) Popular struggles narrowed the gap between the workers and intelligentsia. (	
	ii) The 'jobbers' never sidetracked the workers' demands ( )	
	iii) The degrading condition of women and child labourers remained ignored duthis period ( )	ring
	iv) Coachmen's strike took place in Calcutta (1862) ( )	

# 7.8 LET US SUM UP

The colonial policies adversely affected the peasants, tribals and artisans. They were now subjected to dual oppression i.e. oppression by the colonial state and the internal exploiters of Indian society (like landlords and moneylenders). Very often opposition to this oppression resulted in popular uprisings. However, in official language these uprisings were described as dacoities, riots, rebellion and so on. But in reality these uprisings were manifestations of protest by the exploited sections of Indian Society. These uprisings came up at different intervals of time and in different regions. At times, due to the complex character of Indian society, the colonial state as well as the internal exploiters both labelled those uprisings as manifestations of communalism or casteism. Basically, however, these were the struggles waged by the havenots against the haves. These uprisings failed, but they did create an anti-British feeling and prepared the ground for the mass struggles at the national level.

Another impact of the British rule was the creation of a new class in Indian Society—the working class. Although this class was not organised, we find a number of isolated strikers towards the end of the 19th century. These strikes attempted to gain better working conditions and wages. Many of these strikes took place in factories owned by the Indians. This suggested that the workers were exploited by both the British and the Indian factory owners. In fact the ground for work major working class movements was laid during this phase. In due course these economic struggles by the working class gave added strength to the political struggle during the national movement.

#### 7.9 KEY WORDS

Class differentiation: The process by which in objective terms one class economically begins to differ from another class and also begins to see itself as such.

Customary rights: Rights which have come up because of certain historical factors and so are accepted as a part of tradition like right to use pasture lands.

**Dual role of religion in popular movements**: The process by which in a popular movement religion enabled people to come together but also on the other hand because of its own limited world view restricted the scope of the movement.

Forced labour: The use of force rather than legal or traditional right to extract labour.

**Jobbers** (Sardars): Traditionally people who recruit workers in a mill.

Occupancy right: Right to particular piece of land.

Peasant utopia: The ideal belief in a future society amongst peasants.

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**Peasant movement:** A peasant is a cultivator or owner cultivator of land (the size of this land can vary). Historically peasants have rebelled against established authority of landlords and state. The basis of their coming together has been religion or religious symbols because of this their scope was limited.

Polarisation: Clear difference.

**Popular movements:** Movements in which people cutting cross tribal, peasant, working class or middle class barriers participated.

Sexual exploitation of women: Discrimination and harassment of women on the basis of sex.

Social differentiation: Process by which the peasant society was differentiated along economic and social line.

**Tenants-at-will**: After the British gave right of property to landlords which they did not have legally earlier the tenants were at the mercy of the landlords.

**Tribal movements**: Tribe is a group of people tied together by blood relationship. Tribal movements are collective protests of these units against established authority.

Uprising: Upheaval.

# 7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

# **Check Your Progress 1**

- 1 i) 1
  - ii) v
  - iii) ×
  - iv) √
- 2 See section 7.2

# **Check Your Progress 2**

- 1 i) t
  - ii) c
  - iii) a
- 2 See Sub-sec. 7.4.2
- 3 i) √
  - ii) ×
  - iii) v
  - iv) x
  - v) >

#### **Check Your Progress 3**

- 1 i) √
  - ii) ×
  - iii) √
  - iv) ×
  - $\mathbf{v}) \times$
- 2 i) c
  - ii) a
  - iii) b

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# **Check Your Progress 4**

- 1 See Section 7.7
- See Section 7.7 and Sub-section. 7.7.1
- i) b
  - ii)
  - iii) a
- i)
  - ii)
  - iii)
  - iv)