

## Early British Tribal Policy In India With Special Reference To North East Frontier Region

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### Abstract

*The British colonial era in India, beginning in the 17th century, brought about categorization of the population into distinct groups for targeted development through laws and policies. Tribals, living with intricate custodial practices, faced disruption as the British exploited forest resources, altering their traditional territories. Introduction of foreign concepts like private property and altered forest governance eroded tribal rights. Uprisings like the Kherwar and Birsa Munda movements arose against this oppression. British policies ranged from isolation to integration, exemplified by the "National Parks" proposal for tribal protection. Region-specific policies like the Inner Line Permit and Scheduled Tracts Act in North-East India accommodated unique tribal justice systems. These policies aimed to govern tribal areas distinctively due to their customs. In essence, the colonial period shaped tribal dynamics with varied policies, impacting traditional structures and the connection between tribes and territories. This intricate interplay between preservation and change continues to influence modern tribal communities in India.*

**Keywords:** *British colonial era, tribal communities, forest resources, traditional territories, policies, categorization, targeted development, custodial practices, uprisings, preservation.*

The colonial period in India started with the English colonizers entering India in the seventeenth hundred for exchange and business ventures. They noticed financial and social variety and heterogeneousness in livelihood. Hence, they categorized the Indian populace into specific dwelling and related gatherings and began carrying out different regulations, acts and arrangements for the change and progress of these sections of people. Over hundreds of years, the tribals have developed a mind boggling custodial mode of living. Tribals have an intricate connection with their regions, which are the quintessence of their reality. In the past, the tribals were active self-overseeing 'first countries'. As they evolved over many centuries the tribals have developed a close knitted complex way of life. In the pre-colonial period they were part of the so called 'unknown frontier'. In fact the tribals represented themselves beyond the impact of any central area or outer element. The arrival of Europeans and ensuing colonization changed the connection between the standard networks and ancestral networks. They were dependent on forest resources like woods produces for their livelihood and trees were chopped down for lumber. Forestland was utilized for tea, rubber and coffee plantations. As the British rule extended, railways and roads were built and consequently affected the forest areas and the underlying woodland regions connecting to the coastal ports making it easier for the merchandise ships in bringing about greatest exploitation of the tribal natural resources in their ancestral regions.

The development of the outsider idea of private property started with the implementation of the policy of Permanent Settlement by the British in 1793 and the establishment of the Zamindari system. It gave command over huge regions, including ancestral domains, to medieval rulers with the end goal of generating maximum revenue realization by the

English. This began the constrained rebuilding of the relationship of tribals to their regions as well as the power connection among tribals and 'others'. The Christian missionaries, with the support of the imperial authority, spread Christianity among the tribals and assisted them with medical services and education. In contrast to Hinduism and Islam, Christianity spread broadly in the tribal areas with the support of the English and laid out a firm ground. The resulting outcome was a sense of discontent and turmoil among the tribals.

During this stage, various tribal developments occurred. They raised their discontent against the exploitative and oppressive nature of the British and the conniving landlords who by and large, remained by the side of the British. Some of the noteworthy tribal movements at this juncture were the Kherwar Movement (1871 - 80), the Birsa Munda Movement (1874-1901), the Bhil Rebellion (1879-80), the Sardari Movement (1881-95), the Bastar Uprising (1910-11), and the Tana Bhagat Movement (1920-35). The historical backdrop of the tribal policies that interest the colonial rulers in forestry was witness as far back as 1806 with the monopoly of teak forest in Malabar during the colonial period. In particular, the British established the Forest Department in 1864. In 1865, the Forest Act was passed that enabled the free movement of tribal forest dwellers on the forest areas.

The then Forest Department made new regulations and rules to assist the British authority with controlling the forest lands. The Forest Department felt that the forests should be safeguarded from individuals living in or close to the forests land. With these new rules and regulations, the tribals lost the privileges they had for centuries over the forests lands. They were henceforth not allowed to cut wood, graze cattle, collect medicinal plants and natural product and hunting was banned. As a result, in 1878, the British authorities enacted another new forest regulation to prevent the tribals to use forest resources freely. Under this regulation, woodlands were partitioned into two classes: 1. Reserved forest - in which people were not allowed to enter. 2. Protected forests - from which individuals could take small amount of wood and limited forest produce for their own usage and could also graze their animals. However, here there were numerous restrictions, for example, - "You can't cut trees," "You can't burn grass," "You can't graze the animals for over two days or, more than likely you have to pay a fine."

In 1878 another forest act was made which was especially disturbing with eliminating vulnerability about "Irrefutably the Restrictive Right of the State." This Act was intended to make more easily accessible by the British to take a firm control over the rich natural forest products. These arrangements conflicted with the interest of the tribal as well as non-tribal people. The resulting deprivation of forest rights of the tribals and the subsequent loss of hold over the natural forest resources compelled the forest dwellers to rise in defiance and eventually in bringing about revolts in ancestral forest regions of the tribals and also they didn't cooperate with the newly formed Forest Department. This led to a shift in the policy making and as a result the Indian forest Act of 1927 was passed which finally gave recognition to the rights and privileges of the tribal people and laborers such as cultivation rights, to collect firewood, lumbers for family, utilization of forest raw materials for craft production etc.

The British followed an exceptionally cognizant strategy to manage the different parts of tribals living in different locale of India. This incorporates the approach of isolation, policy of assimilation and the policy of integration. The approach of isolation is well known as "National Park theory", advocated by Dr. Verrier Elwin. Verrier Elwin proposed the making of "National Parks" where the tribal individuals could reside securely without being victims of what Elwin calls an "over-hasty and unregulated process of belief and civilization". Verrier Elwin in his book, *The Baiga* (1939), advocates setting up of a kind of 'National Park' in a wild and to a great extent uninhabited virgin tracts of the country under direct control of a tribal commissioner. Inside this area, the official ought to permit tribesmen to experience their life with most extreme conceivable satisfaction and opportunity. Wide power would be given to old tribal council and authority of village headman would be laid out. In case of non tribals settlements in this area it would be expected to take out permit. And importantly any form of missionary activities of any religion would be allowed to break up the cultural life of the tribals. All that could be within reach would be done for the advancement of tribals inside this region, provided the nature of tribal life wouldn't be disturbed. Ancestral culture wouldn't be obliterated and tribal rights and freedom would be re-established and kept up with. Again, the tribals interaction with the outsiders ought to be minimal. Economic advancement would be given a greater importance. Basic and need base form of education would be given to the tribal in the region. Fishing and hunting would be uninhibitedly allowed and authoritarianism of subordinate authorities inside the area ought to be absent. In India tribal population has a varied degree in terms of social and cultural advancement. Verrier Elwin in his book *'The Aborigines'* (1943) classifies Indian tribals into four classes as per their phase of social and cultural advancement. In the first category or Class I is the most pristine and pure tribal kinds which constitutes about 2 to 3 million people. Elwin and

a large section of missionaries and anthropologists develop a great liking over the hearty, energetic and solid existence of this Class I tribals.

As per Elwin, these highlanders don't simply exist like such countless residents, they truly live. Their religion is trademark and alive, their ancestral association is un-impeded, their creative and choreographic customs are whole, their folklore actually vitalises solid association of tribal life. Their topographical locations have contributed to a great extent in shielded them from degrading contacts of the plains. It is said that the hoot of the engine horn would sound the end of the native tribes. A part of this category of tribals has been encountering contact with plain and thus going through a mark change. This class of tribals is going under class II of Elwin's order.

However such gathering hold its ancestral method of living it might show many standing out qualities from the principal bunch. Rather than public daily routine this gathering experiences a town life which has become individualistic. Their mutual life and customs are just saved through their town quarters. They don't impart or share things to each other. The Traditional way of living has stopped being a lifestyle for them. Individuals from these tribes are more defiled by outside way of life. They interact with groups of people living on bordering areas who more or less contaminated by the modern ways of living. Individuals from these tribes are less basic and more corrupt than individuals from tribes having a place in class I. Tribals who are having a place with class III constitutes the largest part of all the tribal populace, around four-fifth of it, for example almost twenty millions. Individuals from this class of tribal groups are in a particular stage of progress. They are barely tribal in name and in reality have become more like as Hindus who have a place with lower rung of Hindu society. One segment of this class has changed over into Christianity. This category of tribals has been obviously impacted by outer contacts. They have been opened to impact by the economic and socio-cultural ethos of Hindu society. They have likewise exposed to missionary impacts. In any case, most importantly, they have been most negatively impacted by the new economic and political systems of the English which brought about their being dragged into the exploitative capitalist framework in India. Individuals having a place with this class of tribal groups were evacuated from their traditional way of life method in same manner as were a huge number of cultivators and craftsman residing in the vast number of absolutistic towns of pre-British India from their self-sufficient village units in rural India. During the British period under the impact of new financial and politico-authoritative measures these tribesmen lost their hold from their economy, social association and social life. A huge segment of this populace was diminished to status of forced slaves or rural serfs of Ijaradars, Zamindars and Money-lenders in particular who became a powerful class due to the political and economic policies sought after by the British.

In this process of change one more section was lower down to classification of close to slave worker dealing with plantation works, mines, rail route or road developments or other similar venture. They were evacuated from their natural surroundings and sentenced to a pitiful reality. Some of these tribals were forced to be identified as criminal tribes as their survival could endure exclusively by criminal means. They lost their property and occupation and had no elective means to resource due to monetary and political abuse of English. Class IV tribals comprises of old gentry of nation, addressed today by incredible Bhil and Naga Tribal leaders, Gond Rajas, and some Binshevar and Bhuyia landowners, Korku aristocrats, rich Santal and Uraon pioneers and a few exceptionally refined Mundas.

They hold their own ancestral names, clan and emblem rules. They still retain components of ancestral religion notwithstanding of taking on full Hindu religion and live in current or even European style. As per Elwin, tribals of this class have won the clash of social contacts. It appears to be that they have procured noble customs, monetary strength, riches, outside consolation, a certain egotism and fearlessness, a characteristic of the same old families and present day undertaking. This class of tribals in fact has reaped the advantage of civilisation without losing their identity. Elwin states that the entire aboriginal issue is to how to empower tribesmen of the first and second classes to progress direct into the fourth class without experiencing the gloom and debasement of the third.

For this reason Elwin advocates a strategy of isolation. He feels it is vital to give a security to the tribals on the transitional phase during which they should figure out how to remain on their own feet and become sufficiently able to oppose the people who exploit them. In his book 'A Way of thinking of NEFA' he advocates for improvement of the tribals living in distant areas of North-East Frontiers and recommends for investing a huge financial aid to free them from poverty, destitution, debasement and misery. This approach however is not followed for long haul.

In view of the lenses of the third world, Indian policy of tribal progress and development, disregarding its impediments, is depicted as an exceptional trial. During the English rule a large portion of the tribal population in India stayed disengaged from the standard of public life. Ancestral regions were kept detached and cut off from the other individuals

The strategy of the English government was exclusively coordinated and overwhelmed by the colonial interests and in light of isolation and abuse of the tribals and this approach of segregation and disregard supported the personal stakes specifically property managers, workers for hire and moneylenders to take advantage of and usurp the ancestral land and forest areas, thus the tribesmen were helpless before the authorities vested interests, for example emergence of non-tribal landlords, thus workers for hire and moneylenders claimed the tribal land, yet in addition brought the tribals in never-ending subjugation. Furthermore, some individuals who had a thoughtful comprehension of the tribal issues went to certain lengths for the preservation and protection of tribal interests.

In the context of North-East India, historically it was never a part of mainland India. The colonial exploration and conquest of north-east India occurred much later than the remainder of the Indian subcontinent. Assam came under East India Company control in 1826, in this context the Regulation X of 1822 was the primary guideline, implemented by the English for overseeing the Tribal areas of North east India. The Company officials observed that the regulations and guidelines which were applied for the Hindus and Muslims overall couldn't be relevant in the tribal regions particularly in the North East Frontier.

As such the Regulation X of 1822 was a well thought out plan for administration of Justice applicable to unique traditions and justice of the tribals inhabiting the region. One more move toward this approach was made in 1873 with the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations famously known as Internal Line Permit (ILP) was authorized by which the plain individuals and any foreigners cannot enter tribal areas without authorization of power. Consequently Chief Commissioner Province of Assam was made by rearranging the geographical area of Bengal in 1784 where ILP was implemented in the 9 Hill districts to be specific, Kamrup, Darang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Garo hills, Khasi hills, Jaintia hills, Naga hills and Cachar. Again in 1896 Jawline Slopes Guidelines was upheld in Lushai Slopes and Jaw Slopes.

The Planned Lots Act 1870, Booked Locale Act 1874, Chin Hills Regulations 1896 and the Montague-Chelmsford reforms 1919 were some of the important policies taken up by the colonial rulers to administer the Eastern Bengal Frontier Region. And for the first time the term ' Backward Tracts ' were presented with the Government of India Act 1919 and The Government of India Act 1935 further changed and accommodated the creation of 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded' regions with separate political administration for the tribals.

The ultimate purpose for such policies implemented by the colonial government was to isolate the tribals from the general population and form a separate tribal region .The British government was to a great extent affected by their conscious endeavours not to establish regular contacts in the tribal regions and only a few individuals in particular contractors, government authorities and a few money lenders could enter the secluded tribal regions. The Christian missionaries, who went there to serve the enduring humankind, before long began converting the tribals whose essential objective of this missionaries was conversion into Christendom and seemingly the establishment of schools, hospitals and other government welfare activities which were used as a means in their effort to aid the conversion.

The British administrators understood the hardships in organization and control for far and wide tribal regions regardless of the acknowledgment of strategy of segregation or isolation. English rulers soon realized that a conscious policy of isolation would safeguard the tribals against the hostility and abuse, which they encountered, was slowing increasingly on the rise against the tribals. Going by the isolationist policy, the colonial administrators in place affirmed specific adjoining and thickly populated tribal regions as 'Excluded' and 'partially excluded regions. This approach of isolation was upheld by the then nonconformist anthropologists who pushed for reserved tribal areas. Following the policy of 'isolation', Elwin in 1939 proposed for the establishment of the 'National Park theory' inside the structure of strategy of isolation and the making of excluded and partially excluded areas,. In this connection some regulations was passed and enacted by the colonial administrators.

The core idea behind the approach of isolation was to safeguard tribals away from individuals coming from further developed regions and the insurance and protection of tribal life and culture were ensured by the 'Scheduled District Act of 1875 that accommodated separate administration for the tribals. This excluded the tribals from the implementation of the common laws of the British India. This removal from the purview of common provincial government was additionally recommended by Montague-Chelmsford report of 1918. As indicated by Government of India act, 1919 the tribal regions were separated into 'completely excluded regions' and area of 'modified exclusion'. After India's Independence in 1947 it was decided that all the tribal areas were to be put under a separate schedule in the constitution and were incorporated in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Schedules of the Constitution. And hence, the terms "Excluded" and "Partially Excluded: areas came into force. Consequently, the regions inhabited by the Scheduled Tribes were named as Scheduled Areas. These regions are

uniquely characterized in Para 6 of the part C of the fifth scheduled of the Indian constitution. The states with the exception of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram are managed under 5<sup>th</sup> schedule of the constitution and the remaining states comes were under 6th schedule. Articles 244[2] and 275[1] are extraordinarily implied for 6th schedule areas that were later on improved as 'scheduled regions'.

Thus, the British policy focused on political expansion and consolidation which affected the tribal understanding of life. Tribal customs and more importantly their societal dynamics regarding tribal structure and livelihood means were altered greatly. Since the British were weary of a nomadic lifestyle especially in regards to tribal cultivation and forest rights, they sought to rework these fundamental forces to greatly alter these societies. Subsequently, hierarchies were altered and land rights were turned into economic incentives, i.e. villages' setup to ensure labor for the forest department. The reaction was generally reactionary in terms of rallying against these policies. To cite an example, the Munda revolt is an interesting case where the Munda tribes were able to focus on community building initiatives by doing away with "social evils": leaving liquor, cultivating in forests. These among other rebellions such as the Santhals had a common theme of uniting against a common enemy: the outsiders. These were in the form of the British and oppressive landlords who worked in tandem to subvert the tribal way of life. These rebellions were an influential part of the freedom struggle. Thus, the British emphasis especially in North- East Frontier was on structural de-tribalization while encouraging the retention of tribal life at a superficial level.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the British colonial period in India brought about significant transformations in tribal communities and their relationship with their traditional territories. The implementation of various policies, ranging from categorization and targeted development to the exploitation of forest resources, deeply impacted the social, cultural, and economic fabric of tribal life. The introduction of foreign concepts like private property and altered forest governance disrupted long-standing tribal practices and rights.

Uprisings such as the Kherwar and Birsa Munda movements reflected the discontent and resistance of tribal communities against oppression and exploitation. The nuanced policy approaches, including isolationist measures and integration efforts like the "National Parks" concept, showcased the complexity of the British approach to tribal dynamics.

Region-specific policies, exemplified by the Inner Line Permit and Scheduled Tracts Act in North-East India, underscored the colonial government's recognition of distinct tribal justice systems. This acknowledgment demonstrated the intention to govern tribal areas in ways that respected their unique customs.

Ultimately, the colonial period's legacy continues to influence contemporary tribal communities in India. The interplay between efforts at preservation and the inevitable changes brought about by colonial policies underscores the resilience and adaptability of tribal cultures over time.

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