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Santhal Rebellion

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Why in News:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted about Hul Diwas on June 30, remembering the sacrifice of Adivasis in their fight against British colonial authorities.

A Brief about Santhals

The Santal people – or Santalis – were not the original inhabitants of modern day Santhal Pargana – which includes the six districts of Dumka, Pakur, Godda, Sahibganj, Deoghar and parts of Jamtara. They had migrated from the Birbhum and Manbhum regions (present-day Bengal), starting around the late 18th century.

The 1770 famine in Bengal caused the Santals to begin moving and soon, the British turned to them for help. With the enactment of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1790, the East India Company was desperate to bring an ever-increasing area in its control under settled agriculture.

They, thus, chose the area of Damin-i-Koh, at the time heavily forested, to be settled by the Santals, in order to collect a steady stream of revenue.

However, once settled, the Santals bore the brunt of colonial oppression. The Santal migration was “forced” by the British merely to collect more revenue. Predatory money-lenders and the police were a byproduct of this system.

Today, the Santal community is the third largest tribal community in India, spread across Jharkhand-Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal.

Causes of Santhal Rebellion

British colonial policies: The oppressive policies of the British colonial administration played a significant role in fueling the Santhal Rebellion. The British East India Company introduced various land settlement policies that disrupted the traditional land rights and livelihoods of the Santhal people. The imposition of heavy taxation, exploitation by moneylenders, and forced labor exacerbated their grievances.

Land alienation and displacement: The Santhal community faced widespread land alienation as their fertile lands were being taken away by colonial authorities, zamindars (landlords), and other settlers. Large-scale acquisitions for commercial agriculture, railways, and other infrastructure projects further displaced the Santhals from their ancestral lands, leading to economic distress and loss of cultural identity.

Social and cultural marginalization: The Santhal people were subjected to social and cultural marginalization by the dominant Bengali and Bihari communities. They faced discrimination, exploitation, and abuse from local landlords, moneylenders, and traders. Their cultural practices, customs, and traditions were often disregarded and suppressed, leading to a growing sense of resentment.

Exploitation and indebtedness: The Santhals were heavily exploited by moneylenders who charged exorbitant interest rates on loans. Many Santhal villagers fell into cycles of debt, leading to further economic distress and

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dependence on the dominant communities. The British legal system often favored moneylenders, making it difficult for the Santhals to escape from their indebtedness.

Tribal identity and autonomy: The Santhals, as an indigenous tribal group, had a strong sense of community and autonomy. They resisted the encroachment on their lands and way of life, desiring to maintain their own governance and cultural practices. The British colonial administration's policies threatened their tribal identity and autonomy, leading to a desire for resistance.

Leadership and organization: The Santhal Rebellion was sparked by the charismatic leadership of two brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu, who mobilized the Santhal community against the injustices they faced. They organized the Santhals into a formidable force and instigated a widespread uprising against the British and their allies.

Impact of Santhal Rebellion

The British introduced the Santal Parganas Tenancy Act in 1859, which provided some protection to the rights of the Santhals over their lands.

The Santhal Rebellion played a role in raising awareness about the plight of indigenous communities and contributed to the gradual development of policies and legislation aimed at safeguarding their land rights and cultural identity.

The British authorities started to acknowledge the traditional land tenure systems of tribal communities and introduced measures to prevent the indiscriminate acquisition of tribal lands.

The Santhal Rebellion served as an inspiration for future tribal movements and uprisings in India.

Conclusion

Santhal Rebellion left a lasting impact on the social, cultural, and political landscape of India. It contributed to the recognition of tribal rights, prompted changes in land policies, and inspired future movements for indigenous rights and autonomy. The rebellion remains an important chapter in India's history of resistance against colonial oppression.