

JHARKHAND: A MOVEMENT FROM ETHNICITY TO EMPOWERMENT OF AUTONOMY

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Introduction

The word Jharkhand means a forest track. The thick forest area includes the South Bihar and a few adjoining districts of nearby states. The original settlers in Jharkhand have adapted themselves to the forest ecology. Drawn into the forces of modernization, their desire for an autonomous state within the Indian Union was officially raised in 1955. But the spirit of the liberative movement goes back to 1769 when the natives fought against the British. Began as a peoples' movement, their philosophy of liberation has become an ongoing struggle, facing many ups and downs. Here the focus is restricted to the emergence of tribal movements in general; against this background the Jharkhand movement is highlighted with its unique features and phases of development.

Jharkhand versus Uttarakhand

The Prime Minister's Independence Day message aroused the hopes of carving out a separate Uttarakhand state. It opened a Pandora's box. The dormant demands for smaller states gained an added momentum. Foremost among them is the decades long efforts of the Jharkhandis for a separate state. The rank and file felt that the cause of Jharkhand is being blatantly betrayed again and again by their leaders and successive gov-

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ernments both at the center and the state. The oldest surviving leader, N.E.Horo, remarked, "Jharkhand has far better claims to statehood than Uttarakhand. If benign neglect is to be the criterion for creating separate states, then there cannot be more classical example than Jharkhand."¹ In fact the utter neglect and disregard for the tribals is a characteristic feature of the non-tribals. It has become more pronounced because of the cast complexities and perpetuation of prejudices. The dominant society silences or ignores them. When the domination becomes unbearable, the victims fight for their survival resulting in the emergence of various tribal movements.

Emergence of Tribal Movements

From pre-historic to the present times, the tribes form a significant segment of the Indian society. According to the 1991 census, they are about 7.95% of the total population. In their struggle for co-existence, they had receded to the interior jungles and hilly terrains in the past. Unlike the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes are concentrated in certain pockets. Thus the tribals occupy about 20% of the total geographic area. However, these areas proved to be highly rich in minerals and forest resources. About 70% of the mineral sources, bulk of the forests water and hydel power stations are located in tribal regions. Bastar and Jharkhand are clear examples of such a naturally enriched area. Therefore, the immigrant population did not allow the tribals to live their life peacefully. When their very existence is being threatened there arose a number of rebellions and revolts.

Struggle for Freedom

Imposing of taxes on land, restrictions on the forest, superimposition of the written tradition upon that oral tradition of the tribals have made them to protest against the injustice. The series of such struggles for freedom are described by Srivastava.² These uprisings can be summarized as follows: From 1769 onwards, there were a number of revolts in Chotanagpur in 1794, 1807, 1820, 1832, 1855, 1858, 1869,

¹ N.E. Horo, "Jharkhand leaders yet to recover from shock," *The Times of India*, Mumbai, 21 Aug. 1996, p.11

² A.R.N.Srivastava, *Tribal Freedom Fighters of India*. Reprint (New Delhi: Publication Division, 1988), pp. 52-55.

1871, 1874, 1880, 1884, 1889, 1890. In central India the Koya tribal revolts started in 1862 and surfaced again in 1879. The Rampa rebellion and the Gond and Kolam agitations were in 1922 and 1941. Incursions occurred in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Orissa in 1850, 1858, 1880, 1911, 1942 and 1951. While in the North East the rebellions were in 1824, 1835, 1839, 1864, 1871, 1879, 1917 and 1932 the tribals took to agitations mainly because their very survival was in jeopardy due to the introduction of alien systems of administrations. Hence they were the first freedom fighters of India. Innumerable members of tribal community have sacrificed their lives in defending their fellowmen and protecting their freedom. Unlike the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes have a high esteem about their freedom. Whenever their freedom is in danger, they have organized liberation struggles and upheld their human dignity. In such liberative movements the whole community is involved. Though they have fought tooth and nail against their exploiters, recognition has never been given to them by non-tribals.

Vivisection of Tribals

Tribals in various parts of the country express their anguish over the division of their cultural areas into different states. Members of the same clan are spread out into different states when the reorganization took place. This is true in central, Southern and Eastern parts of the country. Moreover, the tribal languages are not recognized by the Government. Hence, tribals are not eligible for a state on the basis of language. The fruits of Independence and development are still denied to the tribals. At various forums, they are demanding more participation and sharing of political power. The Lok Sabha speaker, P.A. Sangma, "came out strongly in support of the demand for bringing tribal dominated areas under the purview of sixth schedule of the constitution."³ Going a step further the President of the All India Adivasi Development Council, Somjibai Damor, has highlighted the need to form eight tribal states in India by the turn of the century. "They are Uttarakhand, Bodo Pradesh, Matsya Pradesh, Bhilistan, Gondwana, Jharkhand, Dandakaranya and Dakshinakhand."⁴

³ P.A. Sangma, "Demand 6th Schedule Cover, Sagma to Tribals", *Indian Express*, Nagpur, 9 September, 1996, p1

⁴ Somjibai Damor, *Nai Duniya* (Hindi Daily), Bhopal, Feb. 28, 1991, p.4.

The Jharkhand movement is to be analysed from the over all set up of the tribals in India. The struggle of the Jharkhandis is unique in many ways. Initiated by the tribals themselves, the movement for a separate state was articulated in January 1955. But the spirit of the movement was already there in 1769 when the natives fought against the British. The aspirations of the people have faced many ups and downs in course of time; while the movement itself has undergone changes. From a tribal nucleus, it has developed into a pan-tribal, non-tribal and pan-Indian dimensions. The specific features of the Jharkhand movement are presented below.

In Search of the Homeland

The history of the Chotangapur tribals indicate that they were wandering in search of suitable homeland for them. It was after a long sojourn that they got settled in Chotangapur. It is the last habitat of the tribals like Munda, Oraon, Ho and Santal. Both the Munda and Oraon have cleared the original dense forests for cultivation. As the first clearers of the land they were known as *khuntkattidars* or *Buinhars*. The headman of the village was called *Munda and Mahato*, and the village priest was known as *Pahan* and *Naiga* among the Munda and Oraon communities respectively. All the leaders were from the original land clearers lineage. Putting the heads together of the elder of the household, they developed a democratic system of administration through village panchayat. A confederation of several villages known as the *Parha* or *patti panchayat* handle the inter village disputes. The Munda *Parha* head is called as the *Manki* and the Oraon as *Parha-raj*. Thus the entire Chotanagpur region was comprised of administrative units headed by their respective tribal chieftains.

Immigration of the Outsiders

About 6th century A.D. the Munda and the Oraon jointly selected a common leader just for defense operations. A descendent of this leader made a tributary of the Mughals in 1585. Another one was taken as prisoner into the Gwalior jail. This Raja surrounded by Hindu courtiers granted them the *Jagirs* of the Munda and Oraon villages. The immigrant

Jagirdars introduced land rent which was unknown to the locals. The new revenue to the system changed the fundamental nature of the tribal chief's power in relation to the land. The Raja acquired more economic rights over the land; the council of the clan elders was superseded by the council of Raja. The collection of rent was supplemented by forced labour. This growth of landlordism of Rajas and his zamindars was responsible for the agrarian unrest in the region. The seeds of agrarian discontent had thus been sown long before the coming of the British in Chotanagpur. The colonial system of land settlement and revenue collocation only further intensified the movement of the tribals. The outsiders who come to the interior forest tracks found the natives as innocent and honest. They looked down upon the tribals as the life styles were markedly different and distinguished. By hook or crook the outsiders wanted to further their economic interests; they amassed as much as land as possible from the natives.

Administrative Unity

The Jharkhand area had an administrative unity of its own, even before the coming of the British. It was ruled by the powerful Raja of Nagpore. The British added a prefix-chutia. Thereafter the entire area came to be known as Chutianagpore, and later changed to be Chotanagpur. In fact Chotanagpur was never an administrative unit of Bihar till 1912. In 1912 Bihar was separated from Bengal. And then Bihar included Orissa and Chotanagpur. In 1930 Orissa was separated and Chotanagpur remained with Bihar. Even when the administrators divided other states, they were quite conscious about the uniqueness of Jharkhand. "In 1912 when the Government of India separated the areas of Bihar, Chotanagpur and Orissa from Bengal (Presidency) it expressed the view that the highlands of Chotanagpur containing a large aboriginal elements with historical and ancestral uniqueness had a claim for separate treatment in various respects."⁵ 90% of the tribals in Bihar are concentrated in Jharkhand. They are the Munda, Oraon, Ho, Santal, Paharia, Chero, Kharia, Birhor, Kharwar, Korwa, Parhaiya, Birjia, Asur, Karmali, Kisan, Mahali, Chick-

⁵ K.L.Sharma, *Caste, Clan and Social Movement* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications 1986), p.191.

Baraik. They are of average height, dark brown in colour. Their language belongs to Austric and Dravidian family, while Kurukh of the Oraons and Matto of the Maler belong to the Dravidian family of languages.

Apart from the tribals who form about 34% of the population of Bihar, there are semi-tribals in Jharkhand. They are mainly the Mahatos and Bagals. There are semicastes like Kumors, Kamars and Tantis who were residing in this area for long. All the tribals, semi-tribals and semi-castes are interdependent in the village interaction and economic exchanges. All of them taken together will constitute the vast majority of the population in the Jharkhand region.

The Proposed Jharkhand Area

The area of the proposed Jharkhand today consists the Chotanagpur and Santal Pargana areas of South Bihar. Other contiguous areas are spread out in three neighboring states. These are Bankura, Purulia and Midnapur districts of W.Bengal; Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Sundergarh and Sambalpur districts of Orissa; Raigargh and Surguja districts of Madhya Pradesh. This is the generally accepted boundaries of the proposed Jharkhand state. In the adjoining states, the Jharkhand movement has gained strength through the political activities and public awareness. Although at present the tribals are separated, their ethos and cultural expressions are the same. Fairs and festivals give the tribals rare occasions to meet the relatives and clan members.

Many festivals are celebrated across the borders: tribals flock together on such occasions. Encounter with the clan member gives an opportunity to share their experiences, solve their problems, enquire about the suitable life partners. Thus the distances and artificial dissections are coming in the way of their natural collaboration and cohesion.

The cultural contiguity of the areas and their interconnections can be expressed through the study of the fairs and festivals common to the borders. Bhowmick⁶ has presented the number of fairs that are held in the Bengal-Bihar-Orissa border.

⁶ P.C.Bhowmick "The Jharkhand Movements of the West Bengal" in K.S.Singh(ed) *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol.2 (New Delhi: Manohar Publications 1982), p.54

Table-1
Annual Fairs held on Bengal-Bihar-Orissa Border

Location		Occasion
01. Sonagara	Singbhum	Makar (January)
02. Hichapara	Midnapur	Akhanpuja (January)
03. Pandua	Hoogly	2nd Magh (January)
04. Ramchandrapur Pebindha	Midnapur	Phalguni Purnima(Feb)
05. Khakri	Midnapur	Baisakh(April)
06. Phalkusma	Bankura	-do-
07. Kanaisar	Singhbhum	Asarh(July)
08. Pitalkanthi	Midnapur	Aswin:Durgapuja(Oct.)
09. Simlan	Burdwan	2nd Aswin(Oct)
10. Diksui Bhagaddi	Hoogly	Vijaya Dasmi(Oct)
11. Khoyer Pahari	Bankura	Sidhu-Kanu Day
12. Dhachati	Midnapur	Kalipuja (Oct) .
13. Baramesia	Midnapur	Bhratri Devitla(Oct)
14. Palaibazar	Burdwan	-do-
15. Khannan	Hoogly	-do-
16. Dhapaspara	Burdwan	Rasjatra (Oct-Nov.)

The above festivals bring together tribals from far and near. They renew and cement the kinship relations. Celebrations, singing, dancing and drinking dissolve interethnic feuds and distances. Thus the traditional festivals serve as a means of cultural unification among the tribals in Jharkhand belt. Any movement initiated in any part of this region, spreads like wild fire into the other areas. The organization of people into the supporting political parties of the Jharkhand movement help in rallying them around a cause.

Land Alienation

One of the major causes of the agitation of the tribals is the land alienation. The concept of land prevalent among the tribals is different from the non-tribals. The land is not seen as a commodity for transaction, but as a sacred arena of ancestors, fostering a spiritual communion with the past. The land is sacred. Hence it was not possessed by the individual; it was held by the community; the labour was cooperative and

the produce was shared among the kinsmen. Land has become very source of the sustenance. There were no written documents to prove the possession of the land, since the land was a community property. And it was cleared by their own ancestors. Their *Khuntekatti and Buinhari* rights were thrown to the winds as the outsiders acquired land of the tribals by using fair or foul means. Money lenders came up who gave loan against the security of land. When the tribals were unable to pay the high rate of interest, they were dispossessed of the land. Devoid of land, they became rootless and migrated to other parts of the country as cheap laborers in tea gardens.

The Government has acquired a lot of tribal land for housing the mushrooming industries in the area. A large number of tribals became landless by this process. Displacement has given rise to the uprising of the tribals. But they were all suppressed at gun point. People were looking for a liberator in a person who can regain their lost land. Constant Lievens fulfilled this aspiration of a large number of tribals as he took up their land cases and regained their lost paradise. According to Philip Ekka, "The legal petitions of the tribal leaders asking for an enquiry into the land alienation problem and for the return of alienated *Khuntekatti and Buinhari* lands, were rejected by the British Government. Instead the immigrant land lords were recognized as the owners of the ill gotten lands."⁷

The forest track which is the meaning of Jharkhand had a very large forest cover. And the tribals have learnt to cope up with the challenges of the ecosystem. Their meagre agricultural items were supplemented by the forest resources like the roots, tubers, barks and branches of different plants. The knowledge of which was handed down from generation to generation. The forest had religiously significant and practically useful trees like the sal, mahua, kusum, karanj, neem, piyasal, gamar, kendand palash. A number of bushes and shrubs served as medicinal plants. Plates and cups of daily use were made out of the sal leaves. The rights of the

⁷Philip Ekka, "Revivalist movements among the tribals of Chotanagpur" in K.S.Singh (ed.) *The Tribal of Jarkhand: Victims of Development* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1972), p.55.

tribals were taken away or restricted by the reservation of forests and the enactment of laws and regulations. Thus in the name of scientific management, the tribals were driven out their forest tracks.

Victims of Development

The Jharkhand is one of the richest areas of minerals in the country. Recently gold reserves have been found in Singhbhum by the Geological Survey of India. A comparative study can be made between Jharkhand region and the rest of Bihar in terms of the mineral wealth. Table-11 indicates the mineral wealth of both the areas:

Table-II
Mineral Wealth of Jharkhand⁸

Items	Jharkhand(%)	Rest of Bihar
01. Bauxite	32.4	nil
02. Chinaclay	28.7	nil
03. Iron ore	22.4	nil
04. Limestone	03.7	07.5
05. Manganese ore	00.6	nil
06. Pyrite	nil	100
07. Kyanite	100	nil
08. Quartzite	85.0	nil
09. Mica	60.5	05.3
10. Asbestos	58.5	nil
11. Coal	44.5	nil
12. Sand	37.5	nil
13. Fireclay	33.0	nil
14. Apatite	48.6	nil

The Jharkhand area account for only a fortieth part of the total geographic area of the country. But more then one fourth of the total of mining in the country takes place here. Nearly one fifth of India's total public sector investments in industrial activities is located in this region. In the privet sector, there are several big, medium and small units. The number

⁸ *Indian Minerals Yearbook*, 1970.

of towns in Chotanagpur area has increased by leaps and bounds. Yet the tribals of South Bihar remain poor and deprived. Chaudhuri states that "the present and former rulers of Bihar are upset because the state's economic health will go from bad to worse in case of bifurcation. According to a estimate, a Bihar without the southern districts will lose nearly Rs.2000 crores annually."⁹ It is the economic interest that gets higher priority to the enslavement of the people. According to Areeparampil, "Poverty and underdevelopment of the indigenous people of Jharkhand are not due to lack of economic growth but due to the exploitation and oppression resulting from the unjust system existing in this area."¹⁰ Internal colonialism prevails and persists in this region. On the one hand, most modern industries exist in Jharkhand, on the other hand, there exists a backward agriculture. Bereft of irrigation, there are only rain fed crops. Hence, the tribals have to depend upon casual jobs in the mines and in the industries. Their labour is the cheapest in the eyes of the contractors. The main beneficiaries of the factories and foundries are the outsiders, whom the tribals call as *Dikus*. Areeparampil states that "the immigrants who account for about 10 to 15 per cent of the total population of Jharkhand have appropriated most of the employment opportunities opened up in the region by the large scale development activities of the last few decades."¹¹

The Concept of Dikus

The concept of Dikus is central to the understanding of the tribal world of Jharkhand. The word Diku is derived from the Mundari 'ko' or 'di-ku' which means 'the other' or the 'aliens'. The connotation of the term has changed from time to time. According to Singh, "Diku is a territorial and ethnic concept applicable to the categories of land grabbers and money leaders belonging to both Hindu and Muslim communities, who came from outside identifiable culture area."¹² Many of the ini-

⁹ K. Chaudhuri, "Rallying Forces", *Frontline*, Madras, Oct.9, 1993, p. 17.

¹⁰ M. Areeparampil, *Tribals of Jharkhand: Victims of Development* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1995), p. 55.

¹¹ M. Areeparampil, *ibid.*, p. 55.

¹² K.S. Singh "Agrarian Issues in Chotanagpur" in K.S. Singh (ed.), *The Tribal Situation in India*, *ibid.*, p.377.

tial struggles of the tribals were against the Dikus. The clear instance is that of the Hos and Mundas when the new land system was introduced by the British. Dixit says, "the smouldering fire was fanned into a flame, when twelve villages were farmed out to a non-tribal (i.e. Diku). the arrows of war were passed. The strategy was seven cuts to each oppressor signifying their dissatisfaction with seven taxes- *hauria, dwak, bats, salami, begari, jirmana and opium*"¹³ The anthropological Survey of India undertook a study as to who are the Dikus. Sen states that "Originally it was used to mean the zamindar or his employees who were non-tribals. Later at the beginning of the movement it was meant for non-tribals of the upper class. At present it is used to mean the people of N.Bihar."¹⁴ Diku also means the embodiment of inhumanness and exploitation expressed on others. As the contact with outsiders have increased, there are significant changes in the interaction of the tribals as well as the non-tribals. However, the concept of Diku had firmly cemented the internal solidarity of the tribals for a long time in the past. Besides, the education beginning from 1845 onwards had changed the prejudiced perspectives of people at large. The educated could critically examine the forces of patterns of exploitation and take up measures to ameliorate them. To a large extent the leadership of the Jharkhand movement was in the hand of the educated people. The various phases of the movement are presented below with some modifications of a scheme of Ram Dayal Munda and Keshari.¹⁵

The Phases of Jharkhand Movement

1. The Golden Age: The tribals turn back to their Golden Age they were alone in the forest track. And their own system of administration, community ownership of land, equality among all, higher status of women, meeting of the challenges of ecology, enjoyment of music and dance etc.

¹³ P. Dixit "Tribal Uprisings in Chotanagpur" *HOW*, Vol. 2, No. 11. Nov. 1979, pp. 13-15.

¹⁴ Jyoti Sen, "The Jharkhand Movement", in K. S. Singh (ed), *The Tribal situation in India*, *ibid.*, p. 434.

¹⁵ Ram Dayal Munda and B. P. Keshari. "Recent development in the Jharkhand movement", *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 19. No. 3. Monsoon 1992, pp. 72-76.

still becomes a reference point for them upto the coming of the outsiders into their territory. 2. *The Phase of Muslim Invasion 1199-1769*: The Chotanagpur plateau remained undisturbed upto the Muslim Invasion in 1199-1200 by Bakhtiyar Khilji. The Mughals did not interfere, Except for the revenue collection from tribal chieftains. 3. *The Phase of Resistance: 1769-93*: When the British came to Chatanagpur area there was a passive resistance from the local population. The Chieftains surrendered one after another and agreed to pay revenue to the British. 4. *The Phase of Initial Revolts: 1793-1820*: Through the Bengal Permanent Settlement Regulation in Act 1793 the land was taxed systematically, resulting in a series of uprisings of the Santals, Bhumij, Chero and Munda. 5. *The Phase of Major Rrebellions: 1820-1915*: The Kol rebllion of 1833, the second Bhumij and Santal revolts, the Birse and Tana Bhagat movement were the salient features of this phase. 6. *The Phase of Reformation : 1915-36*: The Chotanagapur Unnati Samaj was founded in 1915 by the educated tribals. It had two main objectives: The first was to uplift Chotanagapur from its backwardness and the second was to improve the social, political and economic conditions of the Adivasis. Schools, hospitals and co-operatives were started which stood in good stead in the years to come. 7. *The Phase of Political consolidation: 1938-50*: Under the leadership of Jaipal Singh the Unnati Samaj was restructred into a political organization called the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938. It had two saliat objectives: Statehood for Jharkhand and Protection of the Adivasis against the exploitative tactics of the Dikus. 8. *The Phase of Emergence of Regional Political Movement: 1950-57*: The Adivasi Mahasabha was reconstituted in 1950 as the Jharkhand Party. The Party fought 1952 general elections and won 32 seats and became the major opposition in the Bihar legislature. They put up a united demand of a separate State before the State Reorganisation Commission in 1955. 9. *The Phase of Decline and Merger: 1957-67*: The denial of Staehood by the commission led to confusions. So the leadership wanted to get a separate State by merging with the Congress in 1963. 10. *The Phase of Renaissance: 1967-73*: The merger did not yield the desired results. Hence many factions arose. Birsa Seva Dal emerged in 1967 and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha was formed in 1973 under the leadership of Shibu Soren. 11. *The Phase of Expansion:*

1973-80: With the coming of the Janata government in 1977, all political parties had their own Jharkhand cell to appeal to the pro-Jharkhand cause.

12. *The Phase of Self-search: 1980-86:* A Department of Tribal and Regional Languages was opened in Ranchi University in 1981. In the general elections of 1985, the Jharkhand Munkti Morcha (JMM) won 14 seats and once again became the major opposition in the Bihar legislature. People began to make a search for themselves, held discussions and seminars.

13. *The Phase of Reconstruction: 1986-1994:* The Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU) was formed in 1986 to combine the efforts of all to the Jharkhand cause. It was followed by the Jharkhand Coordination Committee (JCC) in 1987. 53 different organization comprising intellectuals, labourers, women, teachers and students became members of JCC and abided by 23 point joint declaration on the cause of Jharkhand.

14. *The Phase of Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council (JAAC): 1994-Present:* After a series of agitations and discussions at the State and central levels, the Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council (JAAC) bill was passed in the Bihar Assembly. The Governor endorsed the Act on December 24, 1994. The JAAC has a total of 180 elected council members headed by a Chairman who will be a tribal. The Council has no powers. Ekka raises the question, "After examining what JAAC is all about, one still asks whether JAAC is one step forward or two step backward on its way to full Statehood."¹⁶ Opinions are divided. However, the creation of JAAC is a landmark in the history of the Jharkhand movement.

Empowerment of Autonomy

A glance though the various phases of the Jharkhand movement shows that it has weathered many a storm; faced many challenges, ups and downs. Began as a spontaneous liberation struggle by the tribals against the British, it gathered strength and momentum in course of time. From its ethnic considerations, the movements has grown and developed into an inter-tribals and pan-tribal phase. With the extension of the movements'

¹⁶ Alex Ekka, "Wither Jharkhand", *Social Action*, Vol. 46, No. 2, April-June 1996, p. 152.

membership to non-tribals and the demand for a political self-rule, the needs and aspirations of all Jharkhandis have been incorporated. Hence, it is not the movement of the tribals alone, but of the Jharkhandis living in the area. It is not an antinational movement but a national issue to be resolved within the framework of the Indian Constitution. As a peoples' movement the Jharkhandis will continue their struggle until the empowerment of autonomy.