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## Shifting Cultivation - A Tribal Land Management in Colonial India

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### ABSTRACT

The history of Colonial forest management is one of the main currents of Subaltern Studies in India. India's vast forest region is diverse, and the inter relationship between it and its people remains a subject of ongoing investigation, with the Tribal Community being an essential component. Therefore, a detailed analysis of the tribal agriculture - dependent livelihood is necessary. Jhum cultivation (Shifting Cultivation) is the main element of livelihood for the ethnic groups in the hilly or heavily forest regions. Jhum cultivation is a method of shifting agriculture, where farming is primarily done by cutting and burning the jungle. When the fertility of that land decreases, the cultivated area is shifted from the previous location to another, where a new farm is established, especially on the slopes of hills and in other regions. During the colonial period, this jhum cultivation was practiced in the forest and hilly areas of the eastern provinces of India- Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and in the north eastern provinces - Manipur, Meghalaya, Assam etc. However, the British government intervened in India's largest forest areas by applying the policy of Commercial Agriculture and enforced multiple forest laws. As a result, Jhum cultivation or shifting agriculture disrupted, impacting the livelihoods of forest dwellers. However, the harmful effects of Jhum cultivation cannot be denied. One of the main objectives of this article is to discuss how the British initiatives for forest preservation throughout the entire 19th and 20th centuries affected the Adivasi village society.

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**Introduction:**

The traditional practice of land management and crop cultivation by Adivasi people is shifting cultivation. Since the past, the main element of livelihood for the Adivasi people has been Jhum cultivation. The British government took initiatives for forest preservation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries. This led to a conflict between Adivasi people and the British government over Jhum cultivation. In this article, we aim to gain an understanding of the agricultural practices of the Adivasi communities in the eastern and north-eastern region of India. We also investigate the reasons why the British enacted laws to ban Jhum cultivation. We emphasize the reasons for the revolts of Adivasi communities. Additionally, we assess the Current relevance or impact of colonial forest laws in the Hill and Plateau regions today.

**Method** - The study adopts a Descriptive Research Design to provide a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings data has been aggregated from both primary and secondary sources.

**Primary sources** : The core data was collected through field surveys, analysis of existing records and review of relevant papers. The sources provided direct insight into the study's objectives.

**Secondary sources** : To support the primary findings and establish a theoretical frame work, various secondary sources were consulted, including subject related books, academic journals and articles.

**Result :**

The Forest Act 1865, 1878 and 1927 had a significant impact on the lives of the indigenous people, restricting their traditional practice and forcing them to adopt new methods of agriculture. As a result their right to a mobile life was taken away and their existence was endangered. The colonial government failed to take any positive role in this regard. As a result the indigenous community staged rebellion one after another and resisted.

**Discussion:**

Shifting cultivation also known as Jhum Cultivation is a type of agriculture practiced in the north eastern states of India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur, as well as in parts of Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal. In this method a patch of forest land is cleared and burned and the ashes are mixed with the soil. Seeds are then sown in the ashes and crops are



grown for three or four years. After the soil's fertility decreases, the land is abandoned, and a new patch of forest is cleared and burned for cultivation.

The colonial government's imperialistic policies and desire for resource extraction led to the curtailment of the indigenous people's traditional rights to the forest. The British government passed the forest Act in 1865, 1878 and 1927, which restricted the indigenous people's access to the forest and forced them to adopt settled agriculture. The Act divided the forest into three categories :

1) Reserved Forest, (2) Protected Forest and (3) Unclassified Forest. The indigenous people were allowed to enter only in the Unclassified Forest areas.

Soil pollution, soil erosion and wind erosion are some of the major problems caused by shifting cultivation. The government tried to stop Jhum cultivation because this farming method was considered to be a carrier of the interests of primitive nature and the destruction of forest resources. After the eighteenth century, the commercialization of agriculture was played a vital role in British trade policy. The colonial government's imperialist vision and desire for wealth growth had deprived the Adivasi people (indigenous people) of their inherent forest rights. They considered it unprofitable to keep the vast forests of India under the control of the indigenous people - something that India needed to do in a commercial way. According to them, the indigenous people were illegally cultivating the land, causing damage to the land and the forests. The first forest Act was passed in 1865.

During the colonial rule in India, after the eighteenth century, the Santal, a forest dwelling tribal group, was deprived of their rights and economic dependence on the forest. In the late nineteenth century, the tribal Mundas, were rebelled against the British officials. These rebellions were intense and spontaneous in the eastern part of the country, the foot hills of the Himalayas, the plateau regions of Bihar and Jharkhand, the outskirts of Orissa and Bengal - Bankura, Medinipur, Dinajpur, Pabna etc. The people of these tribal people put the British government under strong pressure and resistance. Of course, the British government suppressed it with a strong hand. But when this resistance developed again and again, it put tremendous pressure on the British power. In 1899-1900, the Munda Revolt in Ranchi and Sinvum areas, in 1920 Midnapore Revolt in Bengal had a significant role in Advasi rebellion.

Against the government's initiative to stop Jhum cultivation, various forms of resistance emerged. The Baiga tribe also resisted. They would often move to neighboring areas, causing a shortage of labor required by the government. Sometimes they refused to pay taxes and definitely cultivated Jhum in prohibited areas. In the Ganjam region, the Sheora tribe often clashed with the government, clearing



reserved forests and cultivating Jhum. They would even face imprisonment for violating the law. In 1860, 1907, 1911 and 1914, the Bhils rebelled against the colonial government's local representatives, destroying records, vandalizing forest offices and setting fire to the forests. Forest guards were also attacked.

The local rulers of the native states also tried to enforce restriction to stop shifting or Jhum Cultivation. The tribal farmers, as usual, resisted these efforts. In 1910 the Maria and Muria Tribes of the Baster region attacked police stations and killed outsiders. Eventually, British troops were called in the control the situation.

The tribal farmers on the fringes of agriculturally prosper our areas were equally affected by the Forest laws. This was particularly true in areas where terrace farming was already practiced, and animal husbandry was an alternative source of income. The peripheral farmers were deprived of this type of income, leading to resistance against this deprivation. In the Jungle Mahals of Midnapore district in Bengal, the Santhal farmers looted village markets and fish ponds in Protest.

The impact of British forest laws on the tribal communities of Odisha and Chotonagpur, particularly the Munda and Oraon tribes were restricted their traditional practices of shifting cultivation (Jhum) and forest produce collection, severely affecting their livelihoods. This led to widespread discontent among the Oraon and Munda tribes. In 1914, Oraon leader Jatra Bhagat initiated a movement, urging people to abstain from alcohol, meat and tribal dances and to return to Jhum cultivation. A rumor spread that savior would arrive to liberate the Oraons from their suffering. This imagined savior was sometimes identified as Birsa, a German or even the Kaiser. The movement was brutally suppressed by the state, using extreme force. Though the militant phase ended, the Oraons continued a peaceful Tana Bhagat movement, which later aligned with Gandhian movement.

The colonial forest conservation had the most severe impact on the practice of Jhum Cultivation. Stebbing wrote about Jhum cultivation, "A pernicious system which is probably as destructive to forests as any other act of man. "For the British Jhum cultivation was " the most destructive of all practices for forests." Stopping Jhum cultivation had a profitable business aspect; often valuable and large trees were found in jhum cultivation areas, making it very lucrative. However this goal couldn't be achieved without establishing territorial rights.

The decision to stop this practice left the indigenous people economically severely affected, turning their habitual practice into a hindrance - Sensing the growing discontent and unrest among the



indigenous people, the colonial government started thinking in their favour. The forest Act of 1856 underwent change in 1894 when Voelcker's Official Report on the improvement at Indian Agriculture 1893 was presented. India's forests were categorized into four types reserved forests, protected forests, private forests and village forest. Although some rights were mentioned for the latter category, in reality, they remained under government control, leading to social and economic exploitation of the people.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of the discussion, it is worth noting how the forest laws enacted during the British era. Such as the Indian Forest Act of 1927, have influenced current forest management, indigenous rights and environmental policies. This Act classified forests into reserved, protected and village forests and thereby limiting the rights of local communities. The Act limited the traditional rights of indigenous and local communities living in forest areas, affecting their livelihoods and way of life. But the Act empowered the government to conserve forest areas, which has helped in wildlife and environmental conservation. The Act provided a framework for forest management, promoting the sustainable management of forest resources. In the current context, the impact of this Act is still evident. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 recognizes the rights of indigenous and local communities, addressing some of the limitations imposed by the earlier forest laws. The extensive depletion of forests has been a cause of concern. Curse for forest-dependent tribes. This has led to great resentment among various tribal societies over forest rights and they have become more organized in demanding forest rights. Although the Forest Conservation Act has strengthened the rights of Tribes over forests, it has not been able to alleviate the accumulated anger in some cases, leading to organized movements in many regions.

Despite this, the harmful effects of Jhum cultivation cannot be denied, such as soil fertility reduction, land slides, deforestation and destruction of wildlife habitats. This led the British Government to ban it and entrust the Forest Department with conserving forest areas. Now various scientific methods have been developed, including SALT (Sloping Agricultural Land Technology) by Nepal and Bangladesh jointly and MATH (Modern Agricultural Technology in the Hill). However, these technologies haven't gained acceptance among Jhum cultivators. Jhum cultivation remains prevalent in hills and increasing population is leading to more areas being brought under Jhum. Awareness and family planning initiatives are necessary, along with promoting modern, eco-friendly methods. This can help conserve forests, wildlife and biodiversity.

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