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Tribal Revolts in India with Reference to Salem and Baramahal Districts of Madras Presidency During the Late 18th Century*

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This paper examines the simmering discontent and the underlying reasons behind the tribal revolts against the colonial administration in Salem and Baramahal regions of Madras Presidency at the end of eighteenth century. It reveals that colonial intervention into the traditional tribal administrative boundaries was responsible for their revolt. The colonial government disregarded the tribal revolts with contempt and suppressed them by brute force. Further, this article attempts to reconstruct the historiography of tribal revolts with the help of subaltern literature.

I The Problem

The nature and extent of the peasant revolts for the colonial period had not been explored extensively in Indian historiography literature (Panikkar, 1979, p.601; Arnold, 1982, p.89). Existing historiographical literature have mainly focussed 'on national or regional leaders, patriotic ideology, elite pressure of factioned manouveres by patron-client linkages' (Sarkar, 1983, p.1). In recent years (since 1980s), the historiography shifted to focus on the 'popular and particularly peasant initiative and "self-mobilisation"', in other words 'history from below' or 'subaltern studies' (Sarkar, 1983, p.1). These studies critised 'the key and overriding role of the nationalist ideology and leadership in allegedly giving for a sporadic discontent, the other at times perhaps overstressing or romanticizing peasant spontaneity, initiative and rebelliousness through a theory of a fundamentally distinct "peasant nationalism"' (Sarkar, 1983, pp.2-3).

There were two kinds of resistance during the colonial period viz., primary and secondary. The first type was witnessed during the early colonial period were generally led by traditional elements (princes, tribal chiefs, zamindars and religious leaders) mainly for the restorative objective (Sarkar, 1983, p.5). Several studies were emphatic that after the emergence of the nationalist movement the rural masses in different regions joined these upsurges for reasons of their own - reasons which did not coincide with the [ideology of the nationalist movement] (Guha, 1985, pp.55-56). These type of movements were usually against the immediate Indian oppressor and not anti-imperialist. According to Sarkar: 'The popular movements were directed usually against the immediate Indian oppressor rather than the distant white superior, and so were often not consciously or subjectively anti-imperialist' (Guha, 1985, p.33). Such movements had declined after the first war of independence. The secondary resistance characterised by a

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