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Q7(a)

Elucidate the shifting terrains of India's tribal policies in colonial and post-colonial periods.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 marks · The concept of ethnicity

7.3 The concept of ethnicity; Ethnic conflicts and political developments; Unrest among tribal communities; Regionalism and demand for autonomy; Pseudo-tribalism. Social change among the tribes during colonial and post-Independent India.

Core demand of the question

- Elucidate the shifting terrains of India's tribal policies in colonial and post-colonial periods
- Periodise isolation, assimilation, and integration
- Name laws, officers, and critics
- Show what shifted and what did not

Revision summary

Colonial tribal policy combined military pacification, Forest Acts, Inner Line, and excluded areas.

Santal Hul and Birsa's movement show the cost of that terrain.

Post-colonial policy began with Fifth and Sixth Schedules and **Nehru**-Elwin Panchsheel.

ITDPs and dams made development the new terrain, often without consent.

PESA, FRA, Samata, and Xaxa mark a rights language that still fights the older forest estate.

Introduction

Tribal policy in India is the state's method of ruling forest and hill peoples. Colonial policy moved from conquest and forest reservation to scheduled districts. Post-colonial policy moved from **Nehru**-Elwin protection toward integration, development, and then rights law. The terrain shifts; land pressure does not vanish.

Body

Colonial terrains

- Early Company rule treated many hills as military frontiers (Bhils, Santhals, Nagas). Rebellions - **Santal Hul (1855)**, **Birsa Munda (1899-1900)**, **Rampa** - were answered with troops and then special laws.
- **Scheduled Districts Act, 1874**, **Inner Line (1873)**, and later **Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas** under the **Government of India Act, 1935**, created a separate administrative terrain: the officer, not the ordinary province, as the hinge.
- **Indian Forest Act, 1878 and 1927**, made forest a state estate. Jhum and hunting became offences. This was the deepest economic shift.
- **Ethnography served the handbook: Risley, Hutton, Mills, Gurdon. Verrier Elwin** as a late colonial and early independent adviser already argued against sudden assimilation.

- **G. S. Ghurye** in the 1940s opposed isolation and wanted absorption as backward Hindus.

Post-colonial terrains

- **Constitution:** Fifth and Sixth Schedules, **Articles 15, 16, 46, 244, 275, 330-342**, Inner Line retained. **Nehru's tribal Panchsheel** and Elwin's **NEFA philosophy** were the protective idiom.
- **Development decades:** community development, ITDPs after the **Dhebar Commission**, Tribal Sub-Plan, Ashram schools. The terrain became the project and the hostel.
- **Displacement:** dams, mines, and industry treated tribal land as empty. This contradicted Panchsheel in practice.
- **Rights turn:** **PESA 1996, FRA 2006, Samata 1997, Niyamgiri, Xaxa Committee 2014, PoA Act** for ST. Policy language shifted from welfare to consent and title.
- **Security turn** in some belts: AFSPA, camps, and surrender policies sit beside FRA, a split terrain.

What shifted

- From superintendent's discretion to constitutional lists and courts.
- **From isolation versus assimilation as a binary to a mixed toolkit:** Schedule plus school plus mine.

What did not

- Forest and mineral hunger. **Xaxa** said the colonial forest estate still structures the post-colonial project.

Flow diagram

Colonial -> Forest Act excluded areas
 Colonial -> Rebellion then schedule
 Post-colonial -> Panchsheel Schedules
 Post-colonial -> ITDP dams mines
 Post-colonial -> PESA FRA courts
 ITDP dams mines -> Dispossession continues

Conclusion

Colonial policy scheduled the hills and reserved the forest. Post-colonial policy added citizenship, Panchsheel, then PESA and FRA. The shift is from subject to rights-bearing ST. The continuing terrain is dispossession unless Gram Sabha power is real.

Facts & figures

Scheduled Districts Act 1874

Allowed special administration of hill and forest tracts, an ancestor of later excluded areas.

Forest Act 1927

Consolidated state control of forests and criminalised much tribal subsistence use.

Nehru Panchsheel

Five principles: own genius, land and forest rights, tribal teams, no over-administration, human quality over money.

PESA 1996

Gram Sabha-centred extension of panchayats to **Fifth Schedule** areas.

FRA 2006

Recognises individual and community forest rights, including PVTG habitat rights in principle.

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