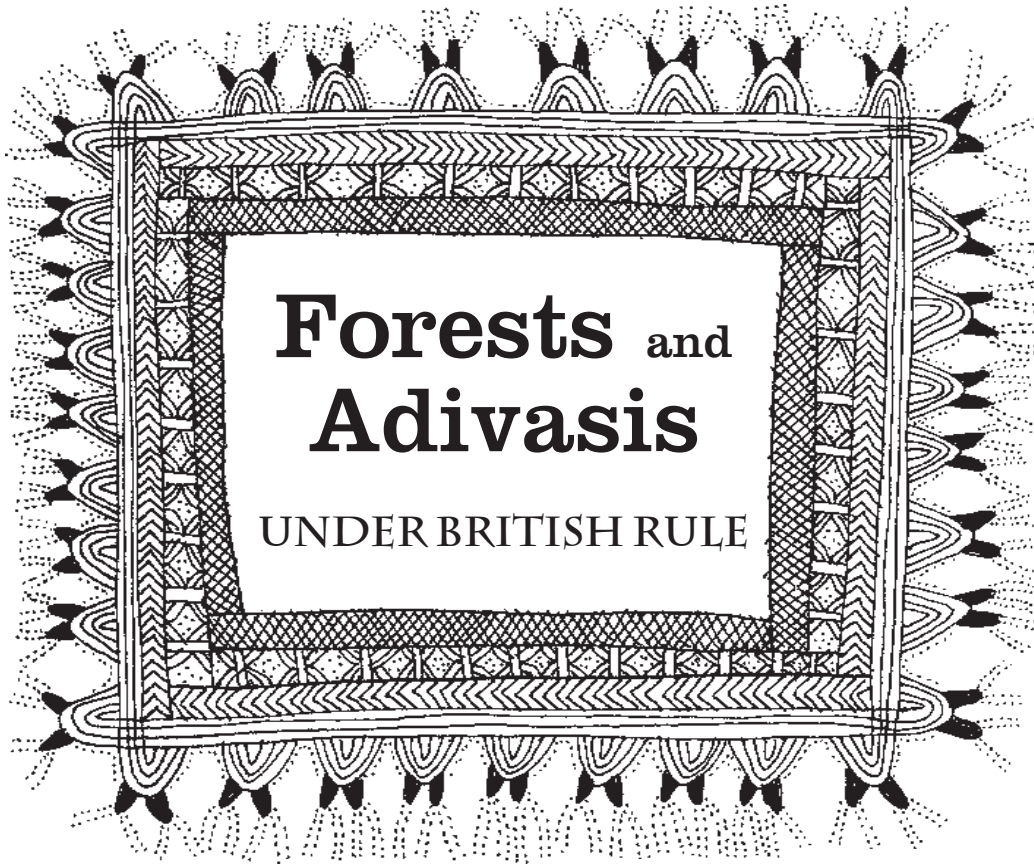


CHAPTER 4



How Forests Were Used Before British Rule



From time immemorial, adivasis and villagers living in and near forests got many things they needed for their daily lives from the forests. In a way, they were the owners of the forests. They used the forests for hunting, gathering tubers, fruits, flowers and herbs and for grazing their cattle. In some places, they cut down and burnt the trees and cleared the land to cultivate crops. They cut wood to build their homes and to make implements. They took things for their personal use. If they had to sell some forest produce, it was only to buy other things they needed from the market, such as salt and iron. They did not sell the wood and other things they got from the forest to earn a profit.

Although large tracts of forests were cleared for making fields, and there were tensions between farmers and tribal people, large areas of land continued to remain under forest cover. The farmers and adivasis who used these forests also protected them. When they needed wood, they took care to cut only old trees and allowed new trees to grow. They did not blindly cut large tracts of forest, but only small patches so that the forest would not be destroyed.

From time to time, the people living in forests gave valuable gifts of ivory, animal skins and honey to the kings and emperors. Those who cultivated land in the forests sometimes also paid taxes. Many

adivasis farmed by shifting cultivation also known as *jhum* agriculture. As long as the forest dwellers did not threaten the security of the kingdoms, the kings and emperors left them alone and did not make laws or rules to control how they used the forests. So for many centuries, the adivasis lived in harmony with their forests, getting many of their daily needs from them and looking after them carefully.



Underline four sentences that represent the situation of adivasis and their use of forests before British rule.

How Forests Were Used During British Rule

The situation changed during British rule. At that time, large cities like Kolkata and Mumbai were coming up and the government was laying thousands of kilometres of railway lines all across the country. Huge ships were also being built and mines were being opened. Large quantities of wood were needed for all this, so the trade in timber increased rapidly.



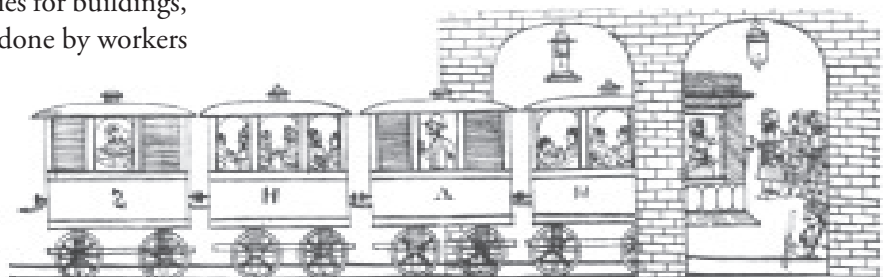
1890s: Cutting sleepers from Himalayan forests to make new railway lines

Sleepers for Railway Lines

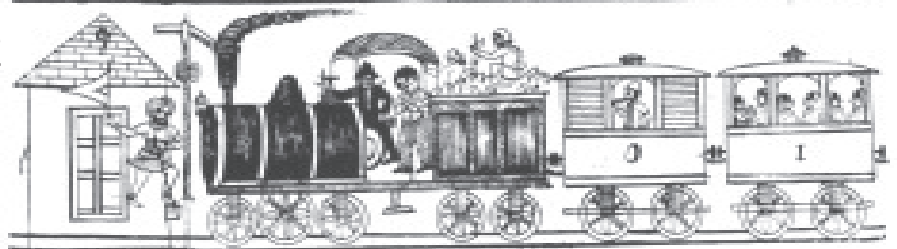
In 1879, there were almost 8,000 kilometers of railway lines in India. By 1910 more than 50,000 kilometers of railway lines had been laid. Each year, almost one crore wooden sleepers were needed to lay these new railway lines.

The wood for these sleepers was cut from the forests in the Himalayan and Terai regions. Wood was also cut and sold in huge quantities for buildings, mines and ships. This work was done by workers hired by timber traders and forest contractors.

The British government and British companies made large profits from this trade. The government would hold auctions to sell the contracts for cutting forests. The contractors paid large sums of money to win the contracts, so the government earned a lot of money through these auctions.



Indians were not allowed to use the coaches reserved for the British. In this picture from those days can you tell which coaches are for Indians and which are for the British?



Why did the use of forests change under British rule?

Have you seen old wooden sleepers used in railway tracks? What are they being replaced with today? Discuss why this replacement is taking place.

Forests in Danger and the Need to Plant New Trees

As the trade in timber increased, the British government was worried. Where would it get wood for its future railways, ships and houses if the forests were cut down so rapidly? The government felt that it should do something to ensure a regular supply of wood.



Neem or teak?
Which should be planted?



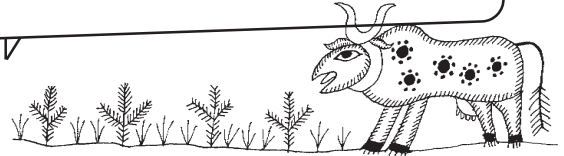
So it decided to plant new trees to replace the forests that were being cut down. But the government was not interested in planting trees that were useful to the common people, such as mango, mahua, neem, etc. It wanted to plant only trees that provided the timber that was in great demand in the market. So it began to have trees like teak and pine planted in place of the forests that were being cut down.

The Government sets up a Forest Department

Most importantly, the government set up a Forest Department in 1864. The Forest Department made new laws and rules to protect the new forests it was planting. Through these rules it also tried to ensure that the old forests did not vanish completely but were cut more carefully. These rules and laws helped the government to control the forests. The Forest Department felt the forests needed to be protected from the people living in or near them.

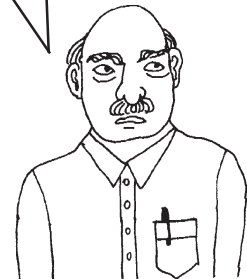
Here are some of the concerns of the forests officers:

When we plant new saplings to replace the trees that have been cut, the cattle from the villages feed on them and destroy them. Villagers must be prevented from coming to the forest.



The village people burn the grass in the forest in summer so that grass for grazing can grow after the monsoon. This fire does not affect the big trees, but the saplings we plant are burnt. There should be a ban on burning grass like this.

The village people damage valuable trees like teak by chopping off their branches and twigs. Because of this we do not get a good price for the timber. The village people must be stopped from chopping branches like this.



So, in 1878, the government enacted a new forest law to stop people from using forests freely. Under this law, forests were divided into two categories:

1. Reserved forests - in which no one could enter.
2. Protected forests - from which people could take head-loads of wood and small forest produce for their own use and could graze their cattle. But here, too, there were many restrictions such as - "You cannot cut trees," "You cannot burn grass," "You cannot graze for more than two days or else you will have to pay a fine."

With these rules and laws, the forest people lost the rights they had always enjoyed over the forests. They were no longer so free to cut wood, graze cattle, gather flowers and fruit or hunt in the forests.

Why did the Forest Department feel the need to plant new trees?

Why did the Forest Department feel the need to put restrictions on villagers?

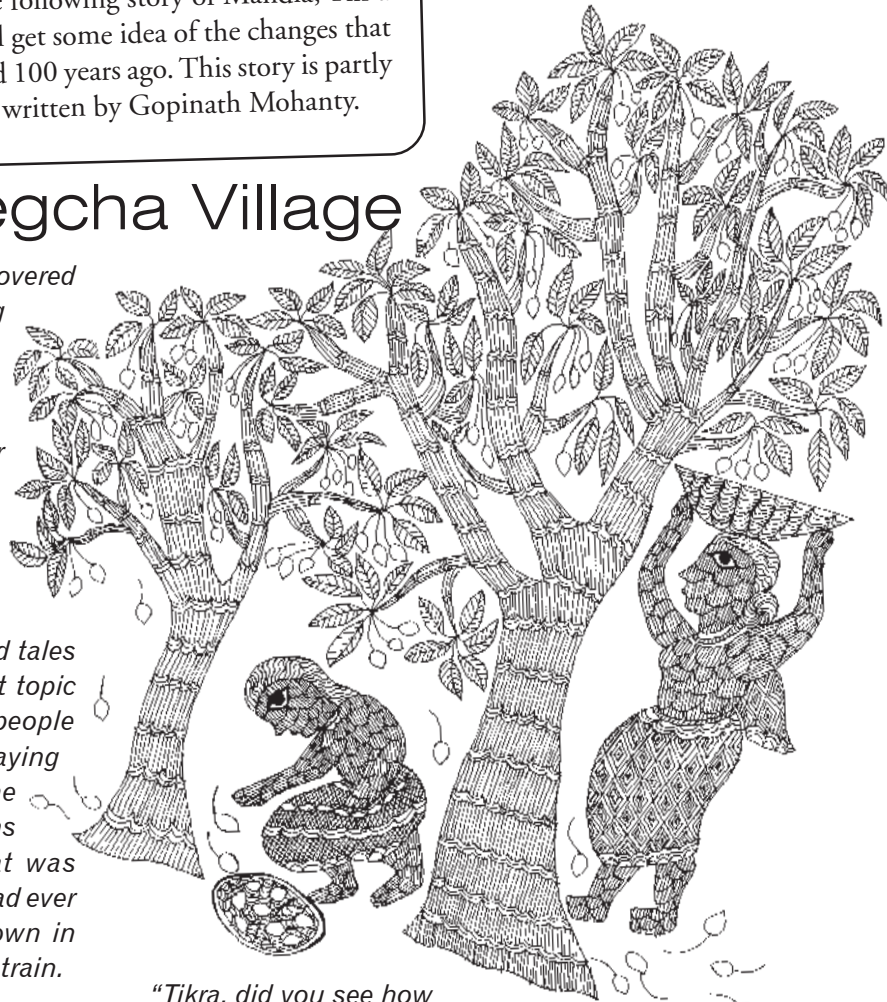
How did the new British laws affect the lives of the people who lived in or depended on the forests? Through the following story of Mandia, Tikra and Kajodi in the hills of Orissa, you will get some idea of the changes that came in the lives of forest dwellers around 100 years ago. This story is partly based on a famous novel called **Paraja**, written by Gopinath Mohanty.

The Story of Degcha Village

Degcha village was situated on a hill covered with forests. The adivasis had been using the jhum method to cultivate land on the forested hills and valleys surrounding their village. They also hunted and gathered forest products for their needs. Some of the things they collected in the forests were taken to a nearby market and exchanged for cloth, salt, iron, oil etc.

The people of Degcha village often heard tales of the British at the market. The hottest topic of discussion was the railway. Some people had seen a white saheb directing the laying of railway tracks. One day a train came chugging over these tracks and for months on end there was no other topic that was discussed. This was the first train they had ever seen! People were eager to visit the town in the hope that they could get to see the train.

After returning from the market, the two brothers, Mandia and Tikra, often sat together talking about how everything around was changing.

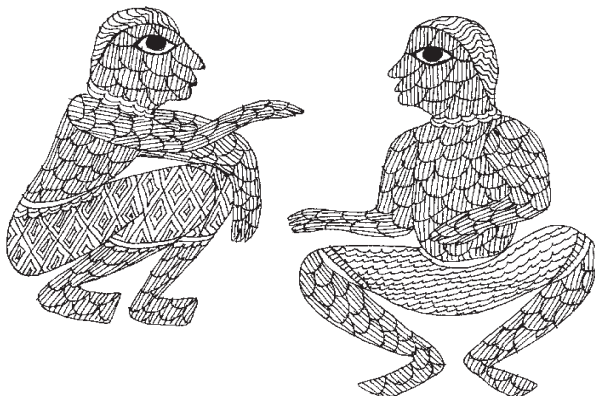


“Tikra, did you see how many new people have come to live in the town?” Mandia would say.

“Yes,” Tikra would reply, adding, “But what is disturbing is that all the forests in the lower plain are being felled.”

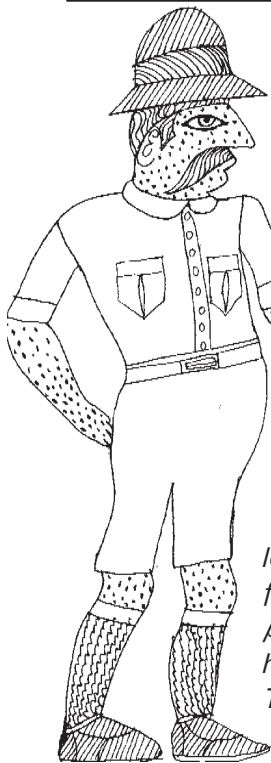
“Yes, yes. People who farm with ploughs and bullocks have settled down there. Entire new villages have come up in the plains.”

The government was auctioning land in the plains in order to attract farmers and zamindars. People would buy land in the



auction, register it to their names and settle there. The government was doing this in order to expand cultivation so that it could collect regular tax from the region. But Mandia, Tikra and the other adivasis had absolutely no idea that such auctions of land were taking place.

What changes did the people of Degcha village see in the town and around it?



The land is registered in the names of the villagers

One day, a white sahib dressed in shorts and wearing a topi rode into Degcha village on a horse. He looked at the forests and the fields and asked the pradhan (प्रधान : the headman) a lot of questions. This year the people were cultivating on the slopes of Dumka Hill. The whole village gathered around to take care of the guest. Who knew what might happen - he might just get angry over something or the other and do God knows what! This was what everyone was worried about.

The white sahib left that very day. After a few days, a group of Indian officials came to the village. The tehsildar sahib and the revenue inspector were with them. They began measuring each field on Dumka Hill and noting it in their register. On getting to Mandia's field they asked him, "From where to where is your field?"

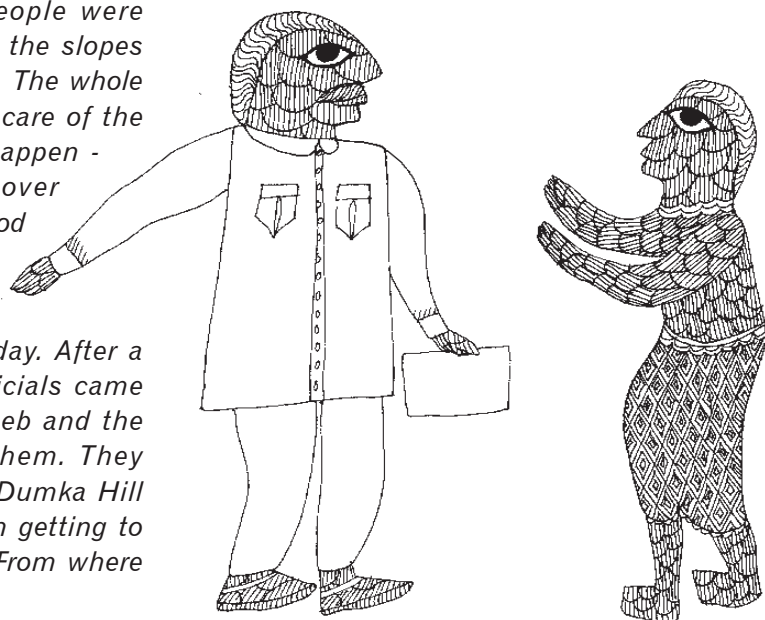
Mandia showed them the area he had cultivated this year. Having measured it the inspector said, "I am registering these two bighas of land in your name. From now on do your farming only in this plot. Don't cut the jungle anywhere else. The rest of the jungle belongs to the government."

"What are they saying?" Mandia thought to himself. "Each year we cut a new part of the jungle for cultivation! We leave the old fields so that the forest can regrow. How can we keep growing crops on the same land year after year? The land would get worn out!" He was right - the soil in that region would not stay fertile if it was used for crops year after year. But there was such fear in him that he dared not say anything.

Having registered the fields made on Dumka Hill in the names of the villagers, the revenue inspector left.

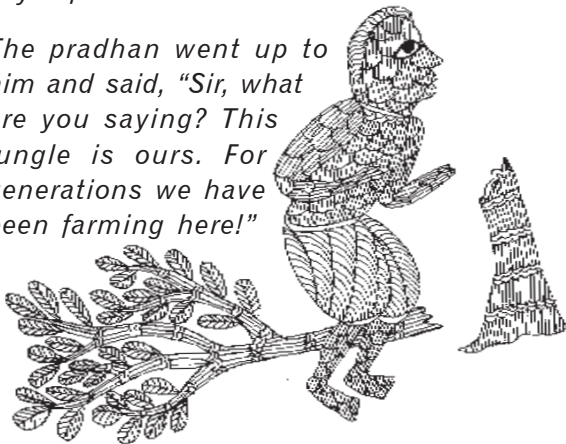
This jungle belongs to the government

Next year it was the Dhanuka Hill's turn to be cultivated. The pradhan of the village took everyone there and distributed the fields as usual. Thud-thud, thud-thud! The work of cutting the trees began.



For many days the work continued. Then suddenly one day a man in a khaki uniform was seen climbing the hill. He was the forest guard. He shouted, "Hey you, what are you doing? This jungle belongs to the government. It is forbidden to cut trees here. Anyone who cuts trees will have to pay a fine."

The pradhan went up to him and said, "Sir, what are you saying? This jungle is ours. For generations we have been farming here!"



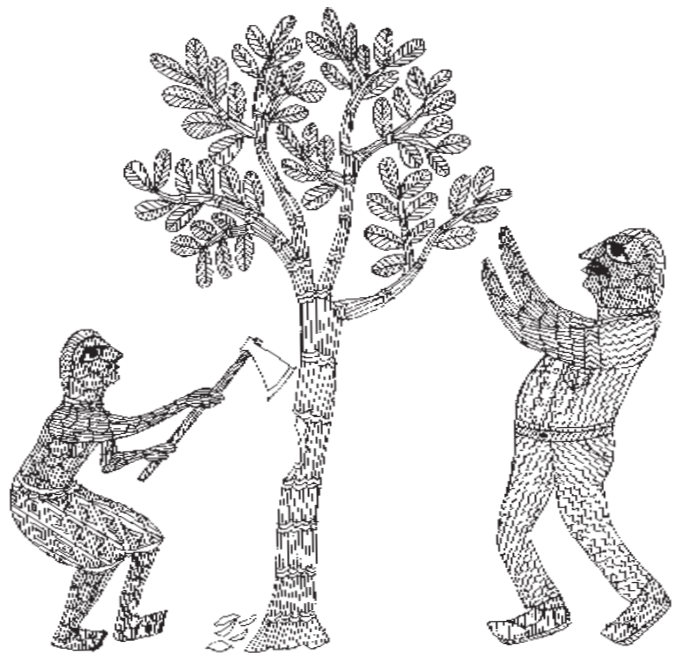
The guard said, "Your land is registered on Dumka Hill. The jungle here has been taken by the government. It is not yours. You better come to the chowki and pay the fine. Each of you will have to pay 20 rupees. Follow me."

The villagers were stunned. The pradhan called everyone and had a hurried consultation. Everyone ran to their homes and brought all sorts of things and presented them before the forest guard - eggs, chickens, pumpkins, turmeric. With folded hands they said, "Please keep all these things, sir, and please let us cultivate our lands. Otherwise where will we go, and what will we eat?"

With the helpless people before him, the forest guard's greed got the better of him. "All right, all right - put all this down! But one thing you better understand - I am doing something very dangerous. If I let you cut the government forest, what will happen to my job?"

The pradhan said, "You are everything to us. Whatever you say we will do. But please let us do our farming!"

The forest guard looked left and right, then taking the pradhan aside he said, "All of you



give five rupees each. Then I will take this risk for you. Think it over. I will come again the day after tomorrow." Saying this, he left.

The pradhan told everyone what the forest guard had said. A great deal of thinking and discussion took place. But in the end, somehow or the other, the people managed to collect the money and give it to the guard. Those who did not have the money borrowed from the moneylender in the nearby town. This was what Mandia also did.

Why did people of Degcha village not see that it was wrong to farm on Dhanuka Hill? And why did the forest guard find it wrong?

The government believed that it had a right over the jungle. The people of Degcha village believed that they had a right over the jungle. In your opinion, whose claim was more justified?

Debt and Bonded Labour

Giving the forest guard gifts and money in order to continue farming in the jungle came to be a routine thing. People resented it because they had to go grovelling before others for what they considered to be their own right. They also had to keep on borrowing from moneylenders again and again.

Mulling over all this, and muttering to himself in anger, Tikra was on his way back from the jungle. He was carrying a deer on his shoulder that he had just killed. Suddenly he saw the forest guard coming towards him. The guard pounced on Tikra and frowning at him, said, "So this is what you do, always hunting on the sly in the jungle! And I don't say anything! You want to go to the chowki and pay a fine or what?"

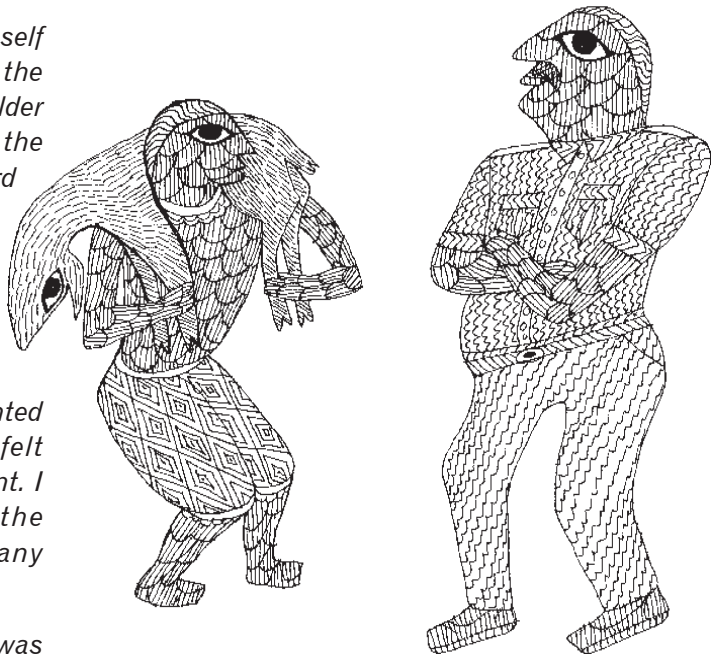
Tikra understood that the guard saheb wanted a gift. But for some reason, today he felt defiant. Boldly, he said, "Do what you want. I can't give you anything more. Even the moneylender doesn't lend me money any more!"

Defying the guard saheb in this manner was bound to have dire consequences. And it did, too. Tikra was caught by the guards and locked up in the check-post.

Mandia was desperate, and went to the moneylender, "Sethji, please lend me some more money. Tikra has been locked up, I have to get him released."

Ramchand Bisoi, the moneylender, smiled to himself. Many a dream floated before his eyes. He could see the days were now taking a turn for the better. The time seemed near when the tribal people would be left with nothing. Earlier they moved around all over the jungle, farming wherever they wanted. But now they kept coming to him to borrow money for all sorts of reasons. Even the jungle had slipped out of their hands.

Ramchand Bisoi had bought some land on the plain below. It was good land, but the problem was: who was to plough it? He could have had the land ploughed by other farmers or labourers, but now a better solution occurred to him. Stroking his moustache, he said, "Look here, Mandia, your earlier debts are already so



much. And you haven't yet paid them back."

Mandia beseeched him, "No, sethji, please don't refuse."

The moneylender said, "All right then, listen. Of the two of you brothers, one of you will have to become my bonded labourer."

This stunned Mandia. He retreated a step, turning pale.

After a while, the money-lender said, "You will have to work in my fields. I will give you food to eat. Every year I will write off two rupees from the debt. Every year I will add an interest of 8 annas per rupee. You will have to work for me for as many years as it takes to repay the loan. If you accept, you can take the money. Otherwise, go somewhere else."

What other option did Mandia have but to submit? He became the moneylender's bonded labourer. This was the only way that he could get Tikra released from the check post.

Why were the people of Degcha village forced to take more and more loans from the moneylender?

Why were the people not able to repay their debts?

What were the terms of bonded labour that Mandia accepted?

Do you think there was any way in which Mandia could have saved himself from bonded labour?

Do you know of any bonded labourers in these days? Who are they, what do they do, and whom do they work for? Find out with the help of your teacher.

Auctioning the land

A number of years had passed. Now, with the rest of the villagers, Tikra is walking down to a forest below the ghat. This is the year to farm the land below the ghat. This is the best land of the village. It is not too hilly. It has good soil. They had farmed below the ghat 22 years ago. Now a good, thick forest has sprung up there.

There is an axe on Tikra's shoulder, but within his chest his heart is sad. How much land can he break on his own? Who knows when Mandia will be able to return home!

Once they reached the forest below the ghat, the pradhan allotted the fields and everyone began cutting trees.

Within a few weeks the rainy season arrived and the fields were sown. Soon the crop was coming up.

Harvest time arrived. People went to the fields with their sickles, singing along the way. They were about to begin cutting the crop when they saw a stockily built man approach them with some police officers. The hands holding the sickles stopped in mid air. Anxious eyes stared at the man. They knew he was a big farmer from a village in the plain. He owned many a pair of bullocks and large tracts of land. People had sometimes seen him sitting at

Ramchand Bisoi's house. He was obviously good friends with the moneylender.

Nearing them, the man said to the police, "Look at this! Didn't I tell you? These people are farming on my land! They are encroaching! Arrest them."

Turning his face towards the people, the man shouted, "What are you doing standing there gaping with your mouth open like that? Drop your sickles and come to the thana. I've bought this land in the auction. It belongs to me."

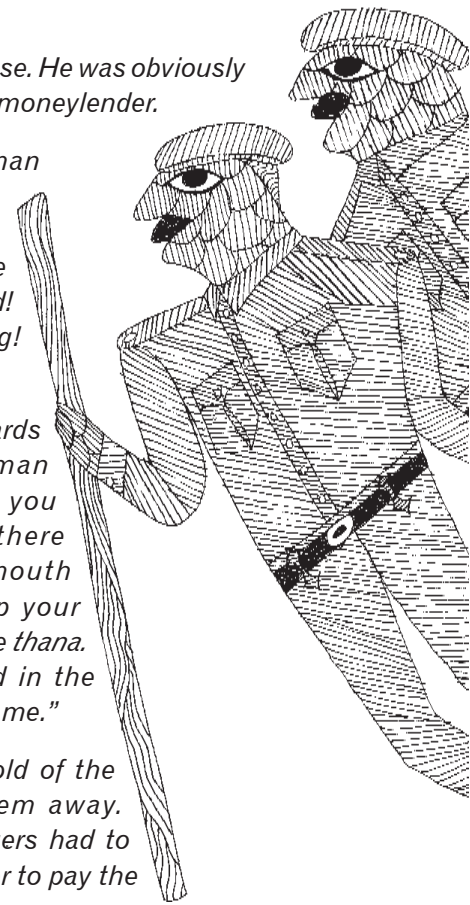
The police caught hold of the people and took them away. Once again the villagers had to borrow heavily in order to pay the fine.

Then they went to meet the forest guard. They said, "You had said we can farm in the jungle. What is this business about the auction of the land?"

The guard said, "Arrey, that land isn't a part of the government forest. It has been auctioned off by the government for farming. I don't have anything to do with it. You go and meet the tehsildar."

The people went and met the tehsildar. Now they were losing control over their tempers. Angrily, they said, "This land is our ancestors' land. We have been farming there all along. How could you put it up for auction just like that?"

The tehsildar retorted in a harsh voice, "Who says it's your ancestors' land? The land at Dumka Hill is registered in your name. For so many years this land below the ghat lay untilled. It was just jungle. No one was doing any farming over it. So we have auctioned it



off so that it can be farmed properly and we can get tax each year. The kind of farming you do can't go on any more. Why can't you understand this?"

The people shouted, "But no one even spoke to us! How could it be auctioned?"

The *tehsildar* said, "You think I will come all the way to your houses to tell you? There was a notice about the auction in the office. But you people, you are simply not aware of anything! What can I do? Now I don't want to see you here any more, get out!"

Before the auction, who owned the land

below the ghat?

Why was there a jungle on the land at the time of the auction?

Why did the government auction this land?

something written on a paper in the presence of two other men and had Tikra put his thumb print over it. Tikra brought the grain home. He was just getting his breath back when his wife Kajodi came running and said, "Listen, let's leave this place! We can't possibly stay here any more!"

"Go? But where? What are you saying?" Tikra asked.

Kajodi told him that a contractor had come. "He is building a road for the Forest Department. He says he needs labourers. He will pay 2 rupees every month. Let's both of us work on building roads," Kajodi pleaded.

Tikra thought it over, "What Kajodi says is true. What is there here for us any more? The jungle is no longer ours, nor is the land. Our debt with the moneylender is impossible to pay. And if he wants the land on the Dumka hillock - well, let him have it!"

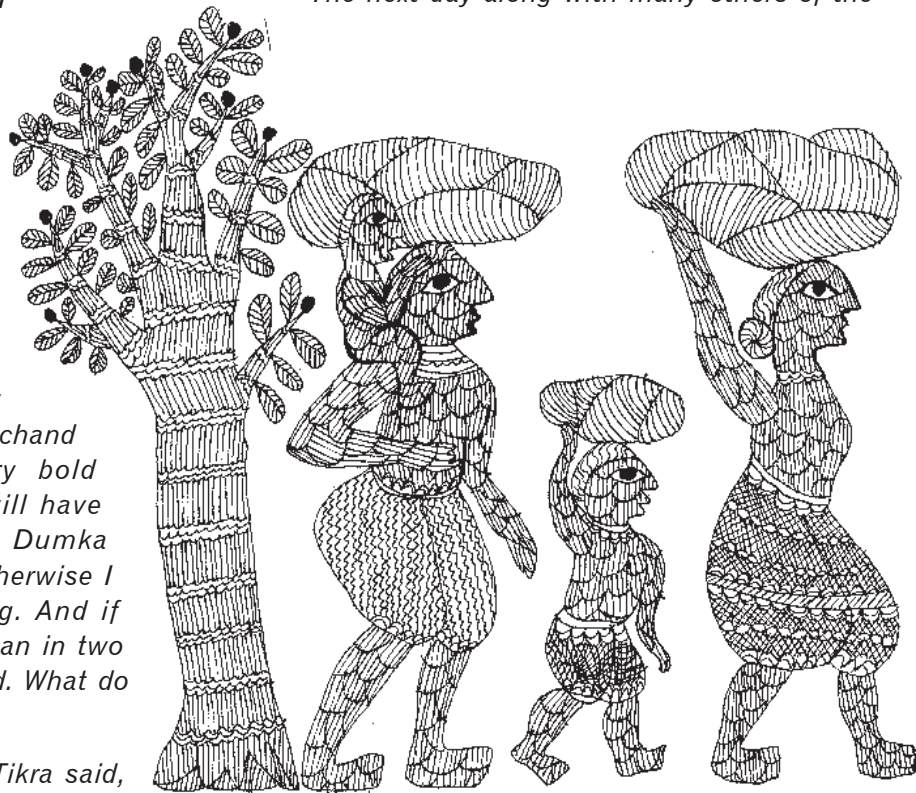
The life of a labourer

So it came to pass that someone else took away the crop the Degcha villagers had grown on this land below the ghat.

Thus, this year there was nothing to eat. Tikra went to the moneylender to borrow some grain. By now Ramchand Bisoi had become very bold indeed. He said, "You will have to mortgage the land at Dumka that is in your name. Otherwise I won't lend you anything. And if you can't pay back the loan in two years, I will keep the land. What do you say?"

What was there to say? Tikra said, "Yes," and the moneylender had

The next day along with many others of the



village, Tikra and Kajodi left to work as labourers on the road.

In the following months and years, their life was spent in heavy labour. At times they worked for wood contractors, cutting down the trees of the very forests where they once farmed. These trees were now being sold by contractors and used to build railway lines.

The villagers felt that they were no longer in control of their own lives. Their minds were filled with the anger that comes when everything you once had has been taken away from you, bit by bit.



One day they were working on a road near the town when a fakir passed by. He was singing as he went along:

“It will come, that day will also come. All of them will run away, all of them -

the British, the moneylenders, the zamindars. Arrey, the Santhals have defeated them and driven them away,.. the Mundas are driving them away..”

Adivasi Revolts

We have seen how the conditions of the adivasi farmers who lived in the jungle worsened in British times. The Baiga, Muria, Gond and Bhil tribes of Madhya Pradesh, the Koya, Reddy, and Kolam tribes of Andhra Pradesh and the Saora adivasis of Orissa, were all no longer able to practice their old form of cultivation. They were having to become labourers for either the Forest Department or for contractors. Or they were becoming bonded labourers in the fields of moneylenders or farmers who had come from outside.

The places where roads and railway lines had reached became easy for people from outside to settle down and seize land. The power of the Forest Department also increased. Fining and beating up people at the smallest pretext, forcibly entering into people's homes to take away their things, ill-treating women, taking bribes, getting *begar* done by people - all this became common.

Against such adverse circumstances, the adivasis protested in many places. During the protests they would burn down many police stations, posts of the Forest Department and houses of the moneylenders. In many places they would set fire to the entire jungle. Such protests were made by the Santhal adivasis in Bihar in 1856, by the Koya adivasis of Andhra in 1880 and 1922, by the Maria and Muria adivasis of Bastar in 1910, and by the Gond and Kolam adivasis in 1940.



The Santhal Revolt

From the beginning, the Santhals of Bihar had been resisting and protesting against British rule. In 1855-56 there was a massive revolt in which the Santhals began looting and killing the zamindars and moneylenders. The Santhals declared that British rule had come to an end and they were making a free state of the Santhals. But the Santhals were armed only with bows and arrows, and they could not hold their own against the gun-bearing British army. By the end of a fierce battle, 15,000 Santhals were killed and their revolt was finally suppressed.

The Revolt Led by Birsa Munda

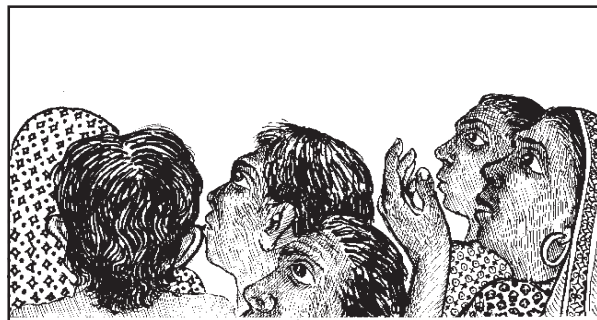
Between 1874 and 1901, the Munda adivasis of the Chhotanagpur Plateau, which is now in the state of Jharkhand, came together under the leadership of a young man named Birsa to do away with British rule. Birsa was thought of as *bhagwaan* - god - and people were willing to follow his every word. They wanted to do away with the foreign government that protected the zamindars, the moneylenders and the courts of law that had deprived the Mundas of their lands and their rights over their forests. In the end, the Munda rebellion was suppressed by arresting the leaders and putting them behind bars. Birsa Munda died in prison in 1900. However, the government then felt compelled to make laws to protect the rights of the adivasis of Chhotanagpur.

Birsa Munda captured by the British police.



Sita Ram Raju and the Koya Adivasis

In Andhra Pradesh, the Forest Department made adivasis do forced labour for making roads. The Koya adivasis revolted in protest against this. They formed their own army and fought against the British for two years. Their leader was Alluri Sita Ram Raju. In the end Sita Ram Raju was arrested and killed, and the revolt was suppressed in 1924.



Forest revolt in Kumaon (1921-22)

In the Kumaon region of Uttar Pradesh, the peasants refused to cooperate with the Forest Department in protest against the fact that their rights over the forest were being taken away by the government. They openly broke the rules of the Forest Department. Attempts were made to burn the jungles used by contractors. The people refused to do forced labour for the Forest Department.

Because of these movements the British government had to change its policies. In many places they made their rules less strict. In some areas they made new laws saying that people from outside could not purchase the land of the adivasis.



Women in the Chipko Movement (1973-74) preventing trees from being cut.

Rights over the Forests after Independence

After independence the Government of India has continued the policy of reserving forests and restricting their use by the people. We have read how this policy is considered necessary to preserve forests for industrial use. But these restrictions cause a lot of problems for adivasi villagers who also depend on the forests.

Forests need to be used for fulfilling people's daily needs as well as the needs of industry. Problems arising from these overlapping and conflicting demands have still not been resolved.

After independence, many new industries that use wood have been set up. Factories use wood to make paper, sports goods, packaging, furniture etc. Thus the amount of forested land is rapidly decreasing.

Besides the social and economic effects we have been discussing, deforestation has also had far reaching effects on our environment. It has contributed to a number of problems related to water resources, soil quality, wildlife and climate.

In your area, where do people get wood for cooking and how do they get it?

Nowadays what are the obstacles that people face in obtaining things from the jungle and how does it compare with the situation during British times?

Find out how and why deforestation affects our environment.

Exercises

- 1(a) **How did people use the forests before the rule of the British? Why was there less danger of the forests being fully destroyed in those days?**
- 1(b) **When and why did the danger of the destruction of forests arise?**
2. **What impact did the rules of the Forest Department have on the use of forest by the adivasis?**
3. **Why did the British government want to spread agriculture and what steps did it take to do this? How did it affect the farming practices of the adivasis?**
4. **Explain why adivasis were forced to take loans from moneylenders in British times.**
5. **What kind of labour did the tribal people have to do to earn their livelihood after they were forced to give up their rights over forests?**
- 6(a) **Against whom did the adivasis revolt? In what ways did they demonstrate their anger and protest? Give some examples.**
- 6(b) **How were the revolts of the adivasis suppressed by the British?**
7. **Make a timeline to show when adivasi protests occurred in different parts of India. Find out where each of these adivasi struggles took place, and mark their locations on a map of India.**
8. **Debate in class what a suitable forest policy would be for India at present. Try to suggest some ways that forests could be preserved and wisely used by both industries and local people.**

