

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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Lecture17

Lecture 17: Tribal Uprisings during Colonial Rule in the Chota Nagpur Region

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. Today, we are going to discuss the tribal uprisings during the colonial rule in the Chotanagpur region. So critics Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah, in their work on tribal insurgency in India, which is entitled as 'Savage Attack'—a work that came out in 2017—write that the mid-19th century marked the start of routine caste-tribe distinction by colonial officials.

Introduction

- Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah in their work on tribal insurgency in India, *Savage Attack* (2017) write that mid-nineteenth century marked the start of routine caste-tribe distinction by colonial officials.
- Regardless of the significant differences among the people classified as 'tribal', they were collectively viewed by society as a race fundamentally different from the Indian mainstream.
- Worldwide, indigenous resistance has seen a resurgence in recent years. In India, the spotlight has turned towards the 'Adivasi' communities, officially designated as Scheduled Tribes, who are now at the forefront of various forms of resistance.



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Regardless of the significant differences among the people classified as tribal, they were collectively viewed by the larger society as a race fundamentally different from the Indian mainstream. We see that worldwide, indigenous resistance has seen a resurgence in recent years. In India, the spotlight has turned toward the Adivasi communities, officially designated as the Scheduled Tribes, who are now at the forefront of various forms of resistance. So across India, we see that from the colonial period to the present

time, conflicts concerning forest access and control have been a dominant expression—a dominant reason that provokes, that stimulates tribal resistance.

In Middle India, tribal societies were systematically integrated into the colonial system, encompassing its economic and administrative components, which contrasts with the experience of those in the Northeast. So we see that the experience of the tribes, the struggles, or the difficulties they face are not really pan-Indian in nature. It's not something homogeneous across all parts of India. You know, the northeastern tribes, the tribes from central or south India, have their own struggles and difficulties to reckon with.

Despite challenges, the major tribal communities demonstrate high literacy rates and active participation in democratic processes, which leads them to strongly advocate for land and forest rights, crucial for their livelihoods. One of the four reasons given by K.S. Singh for Chhota Nagpur becoming the center of a dynamic separatist movement is due to a tradition of militant and organized struggles going back over a hundred years. Struggles that are organized around land and forest resources. Other reasons that make Chotanagpur particularly a hub for separatist movements include the area being the most advanced in terms of literacy.

Chota Nagpur Region

- One of the four reasons given by K. S. Singh (1983) for Chota Nagpur to become “the centre of a dynamic separatist movement” is due to a “tradition of militant and organised struggles going back over a hundred years; **struggles organised around land**” (2) and forests, apart from being the most advanced regions in terms of literacy, political consciousness and industrial progress, and concentration of major tribal communities.
- The colonial period marked a period of exposure for this previously inaccessible region, driven by the construction of roads and railways, which also facilitated an influx of outsiders.



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Chotanagpur is very advanced in terms of literacy, political consciousness, industrial progress, as well as the concentration of major tribal communities. The colonial period marked a period of exposure for this previously inaccessible region of the Chotanagpur plateau, driven by the construction of roads and railways, which also facilitated an influx of outsiders to this plateau. Furthermore, the imposition of the zamindari system and new legal frameworks significantly disrupted the traditional Santal economy in the Chotanagpur region. Scholar and critic P.K.

Sinha notes that the coal uprising of 1831 to 1833 is depicted differently by various historians. L.S.S. O'Malley describes the coal uprising as the coal rebellion, noting the widespread participation of the Mundas and Oraons, who rose en masse alongside the Hos, Cheros, and Kherwars. So although these communities have traditionally been very simple people, they were easily roused and took up weapons and actions against the authority because they also possessed a very strong sense of independence.

So courageous but resistant to external control, these tribal communities fiercely opposed British rule and the imposition of the Bengal Code, which they deemed unsuitable for their region. While it was initiated by some of the Rajas and chiefs, the uprising was fundamentally a mass rebellion. Although immediate events served as a catalyst, we see that the core cause of the coal uprising was the oppressive colonial system, specifically the agrarian policies, the debt laws and revenue regulations, which were perceived as unjust and unfair, both by the zamindars and their landless peasants or tenants, known as ryots. Next, we will look at the Santal Hul that occurred between 1855 and 1856.

Kol Uprising (1831-33)

- These communities, though simple, were easily roused and possessed a strong sense of independence. Courageous but resistant to external control, they fiercely **opposed British rule and the imposition of the Bengal Code**, which they deemed unsuitable for their region.
- While it was initiated by some Rajas and chiefs, the uprising was **fundamentally a mass rebellion**.
- Though immediate events served as a catalyst, the core cause was the **oppressive colonial system**, specifically the **agrarian policies, debt laws, and revenue regulations** that were perceived as unjust by both zamindars and ryots (landless tenant).



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A combination of the Santals' accumulated suffering and the authorities' persistent indifference had finally ignited, transforming years of simmering, seething tension among the tribals into a sudden and violent Santal Hul, or rebellion, in the year 1855. According to scholar and critic Abha Salso, Sidhu and Kanu, in their official declaration or Parvanas, accused both non-tribal outsiders or Dikus as well as the British officials or Sahibs for their transgressions against the Santal people. Sidhu and Kanu had identified both the non-tribal,

Santal Hul (1855-56)

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Source: commons.wikimedia.org



Indian people, who comprised the Dikus, and the British officials or Sahibs, as equal perpetrators against the tribal people, and thus considered both as their enemies. The tribals proclaimed the termination of British rule, demanding their retreat across the Ganges, and they believed they had a divine mandate, so they threatened war. Considering that they had a divine mandate to take up arms against the British, they declared war. They also declared that their deity, whom they call Thakur, had commanded them to eliminate the moneylenders and police officers and to expel the traders, landlords, and wealthy Bengalis from engaging with the tribal cosmos.

Santal Hul (1855-56)

- They proclaimed **the termination of British rule, demanding their retreat across the Ganges**, and believing they had a divine mandate, they threatened war.
- They also declared that their deity, **Thakur, had commanded them to eliminate moneylenders and police officers, expel traders, landlords, and wealthy Bengalis, sever ties with the Damin-i-koh**, and engage in combat against any opposition, assuring their followers that enemy bullets would be turned to water. (Xalxo, 2008).



Source: manorama online



So they demanded that all these people, whom they collectively called the Dikus, should sever ties with Domenico and engage in combat against any opposition, assuring their followers that enemy bullets would turn to water. So, actually, this was a kind of threat that all the non-tribals—comprising the traders, landlords, wealthy Bengalis, and so forth— all the moneylenders should actually quit Dominico, which is the land of the Santhals and part of the Santhal habitation. The movement gradually expanded into regions such as Birbhum, Hazaribagh, and Bhawalpur, with armed Santal rebels advancing towards Calcutta, the center of colonial authority.

Santal Hul (1855-56)

- The movement gradually expanded into regions like Birbhum, Hazaribagh, and Bhagalpur, with armed Santal rebels advancing towards Calcutta, the centre of colonial authority. Labourers, landless farmers, and displaced individuals joined the rebellion, leading to an escalation in the conflict.
- By February 1856, the *Hul* was crushed ruthlessly with a heavy hand, leaving ten thousand dead or in a desolate, desperate condition without food or shelter.



Laborers, landless farmers, and displaced individuals joined the rebellion, leading to an escalation in the conflict. By February 1856, the whole movement was crushed ruthlessly with a heavy hand, leaving 10,000 dead or in a desolate, desperate condition without food or shelter. Next, we will look at the Sardari movement that took place between 1858 and 1895. The Sardari movement's philosophy rested on the idea that the Adivasis, as the initial cultivators of the Chotanagpur region, held an inalienable entitlement to free access to its lands.

There is very little data on the Sardars' social background. However, it is clear that the movement's leaders were mostly Mundas and Christians. A few of the leaders were traditional village officials, and some had suffered in the coal rebellion. Following the rise of the Raja and later the Maharaja of Chhotanagpur, the Adivasis were asked to make voluntary subscriptions to the central authority. However, they rejected this practice because it was foreign to their traditional social structure.

The Sardari movement's initial phase was largely non-violent and marked by peaceful meetings and deference to officials. However, the period between 1885 and 1895 witnessed a gradual erosion of trust in the government and missions. This led to a growing inclination toward more violent and radical protest strategies, which were fully realized in the Birsa movement of 1895 to 1900. So, we see that the taking up of arms and violent protest was enacted between 1895 and 1900, which is known as the Birsa movement.

So, talking about the Birsa movement, Birsa Munda's grassroots Adivasi revolt, which is known as *Ulgulan*, contrasted with the elite petitioning by the Indian National Congress and offered armed resistance to British rule. So, Mahashweta Devi's Sahitya Academy Award-winning novel titled *Aranyer Adhikar*, which came out in 1977, vividly illustrates the *Ulgulan* or the revolt led by Birsa Munda, who was known as the Dharati Abba of the Munda tribe. Joseph Vara observes that though supported by Sardari Ladai, Birsa emerged as a leader in his own right.

Birsa Movement (1895-1900)

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- Joseph Bara (2022) observes that though supported by Sardari Larai, Birsa emerged as a leader in his own right.



Source: outlookindia.com

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So, he went on to become a demigod-like figure among the Munda people, the Mundari tribe. So, we see that during the Birsa movement, Birsa Munda injected new radicalism into the existing protest in three ways. Outrightly declaring all foreigners, including the British colonialists, Christian missionaries, landlords, and other exploiters as decos, as

Adivasi's enemies. Secondly, while the Sardari Ladai or movement, despite its radical claims, remained committed to constitutional agitation during official indifference,

Birsa Munda shifted the strategy to armed resistance, commanding his followers to violently oppose their adversaries. Third, we see that Birsa Munda propounded the idea of a Munda Disum. Munda Disum or free desh, Disum meaning desh, a free desh or a free region, you know, that is not exploited or that is not ruled by the Chotanagpur Maharaja, the British rule, and all other Diku elements. Therefore, Mundadesam should be based on Adivasi self-rule. Despite their immense courage, despite the immense courage that the Mundas exhibited during the Birsa movement,

the Adivasi rebels, using traditional weaponry, were outmatched by the British military's advanced arms. Mirsamunda's capture ended this revolt, but the spirit of Ulgulan and his organizational methods served as a symbolic victory, forcing the British to acknowledge the Adivasi voice. To conclude, we see that the Chotanagpur uprisings, spanning from the Cold Rebellion to Birsa Munda's Ulgulan, were driven by Adivasi resistance against colonial as well as local exploitation, loss of land, oppressive policies, and cultural disruption, all of which fueled these movements. While early uprisings, such as the Sardari Ladai, relied on constitutional methods and protested through peaceful means,

we see that Birsa Munda's leadership marked a shift to armed resistance. So, it was more radical. It actually believed in taking up arms. It actually urged the tribal people to take up arms and demanded complete Adivasi autonomy. Despite military suppression, these uprisings, especially the Ulgulan, demonstrated the Adivasi determination to defend their rights.

Conclusion

- The Chota Nagpur uprisings, spanning from the Kol Rebellion to Birsa Munda's Ulgulan, were driven by Adivasi resistance against colonial and local exploitation. Loss of land, oppressive policies, and cultural disruption fueled these movements.
- While early uprisings like the Sardari Larai relied on constitutional methods, Birsa Munda's leadership marked a shift to armed resistance, demanding complete Adivasi autonomy.
- Despite military suppression, these uprisings, especially the Ulgulan, demonstrated the Adivasi determination to defend their rights and forced the British to acknowledge their grievances, leaving a lasting legacy of resistance.



and forced the British to acknowledge their grievances, thereby leaving a lasting legacy of resistance. So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us meet for further discussion in our next lecture. Thank you.

