

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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Lecture18

Lecture 18: Tribal Uprising During Colonial Rule in Central and Southern India

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies, Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. So today we are going to discuss the tribal uprising during the colonial rule in central and southern parts of India. The British colonial rule introduced policies in India that had very negative or detrimental effects on the indigenous people and reflecting a colonial ambition to bring populations that were deemed as primitive and residing in the forested areas under a centralized bureaucratic control.



So we see that the British policy led to the official classification of the tribal groups And among these classifications, most notable one is the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act, which imposed restrictions on the movement of tribes which were identified as having a history of criminal activity, thereby unjustly targeting the entire community. For maybe some acts committed by a handful of population. So such criminal act, you know, the 1871

Criminal Tribes Act criminalized the entire community, the entire tribe, regardless of individual behavior, thereby causing a widespread stigmatization about this entire group.

So due to their profound ignorance about the Indian social structures, daily life and economic and social systems, the East India Company's early attempts at imposing orders and implementing rules, mainly with the intention of improving taxation, have had very negative, very detrimental effects or consequences. Their errors compounded the difficulties that the weaker sections, the tribal communities were already facing in terms of economic and social setback. So instead of facilitating or uplifting or in a way supporting the tribal communities, the British policies would further imperial or jeopardize their situations. The 1878 Indian Forest Act established the British state as the forest conservator and thereby effectively denying the Adivasis their age-old unrestricted access to extensive forest lands.

Introduction

- The Act criminalized entire tribes, regardless of individual behaviour, causing widespread stigmatization.
- Due to their profound ignorance of Indian social structures, daily life, and economic systems, the East India Company's early attempts to impose order, mainly for improving taxation, were largely detrimental. Their errors compounded the difficulties of an already weak economy.
- The **1878 Indian Forest Act** established the British state as the forest conservator, effectively denying Adivasis their age-old, unrestricted access to extensive forest lands, a restriction that remained in place until the end of the colonial era.



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And this restriction remained intact until the end of the colonial era. The colonial rule triggered widespread indigenous resistance with revolts that occurred routinely, especially in the 19th century. Throughout the 19th century, we see that different tribes were revolting against the British Raj, either passively and peacefully or actively taking up arms and weapons and resorting to battle. A war cry against the administration for very unfairly and unjustly taking away their lands, their natural habitat, and forest resources. Notable examples of such sporadic rebellions occurring throughout the 19th century include the Santhal, the Naikta, Kohli, and Mundari rebellions.

These insurgencies represent only a fraction of the total conflicts, as Ranjit Guha documents that over 110 peasant uprisings happened during this era, during this entire century. British forest control transferred significant power to the moneylenders. Traders and immigrants who were non-tribal in terms of their ethnicity thereby caused further

widespread Adivasi land displacement. This phenomenon of Adivasi land displacement became rampant, widespread, and very conspicuous during this century, thereby enraging the tribal population. Scholar and critic Nandini Sundar contends that the economic and environmental impacts of forest contracting, commercial exploitation of forest resources, and the restrictions on shifting cultivation, grazing, and foraging, particularly severe during the drought, were all, you know, summing up, they were all crucial factors which triggered the 1910 Bhumkal rebellion among the Gonds from the Bastar state. So, the colonial rule marked the first time in Indian history when a government claimed a direct proprietary right over the forests. In this regard, critic Ajay Varghese notes that the tribal conflict in the Bastar region during colonialism rose directly from increased British influence, with three policies particularly inciting the native population. One would be the British control over forests.

Introduction

- Nandani Sundar (2007) contends that the economic and environmental impacts of forest contracting, commercial exploitation of forest resources, and the restrictions on shifting cultivation, grazing, and foraging (particularly severe during drought) were crucial factors that triggered the 1910 'Bhumkal' rebellion among the Gonds of Bastar state.
- The **colonial rule** marked the first time in Indian history when a government **claimed a direct proprietary right over forests**.



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Next, the displacement of tribal communities. And thirdly, the interference in royal succession. So, we see that the way life happened and life went on in pre-colonial times was greatly disrupted by the intervention of the British colonizers. So, talking about the Bhumkar rebellion of 1910, we notice that according to critic and scholar K. Singh, the Bastar rebellions continued between 1876 and 1966. They involved the primitive tribes and centered on the chief, the tribal chief, his projected visit outside his state in the year 1876,

the uncertainty about his succession in 1911, and further his denigration and manipulation in the 1960s. There were supposedly as many as seven rebellions during this period between 1876 and 1966. But this was only an ostensible cause. So, this whole Bastar rebellion, this series of rebellions happening during this time, was not only triggered as a result of the chief. At the root of such provocations, such insurgencies, lay

the forest question. The semi-feudal exactions or exploitations, locally known as *begar*, the maladministration, and further the exploitation of the tribal people.

Bhumkal Rebellion of 1910

- According to K. S. Singh (1983) the Bastar rebellions from 1876 to 1966 involving the primitive tribes revolved around the chief, his projected visit outside his state (1876), the uncertainty about succession (1911), and his denigration and manipulation in the 1960s. There were as many as seven rebellions.
- But this was only an ostensible cause. At the root lay the forest question, semi-feudal exactions (*begar*), maladministration and exploitation of the tribals.



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So, all we need to understand here is that in pre-colonial times, the relation between the tribal and non-tribal might not have been very smooth. And this perception of being different from one another had always been there. However, it was only during colonial rule that monopoly over forest property, over forest resources, was announced by the British Raj, and this happened at the expense of dispossessing and displacing the tribal populace from the forest areas, who had an ancestrally speaking organic connection with these lands. And they were not destroying the forests because they lived off the forests.

They were very, you know, mindful and almost innate among the tribals to use forest resources while also preserving forest areas, as they have a spiritual connection with the flora and fauna there. So, such an exploitative relationship with forest lands had never existed. This came with colonial intervention and was understood as unprecedented. Even the mainstream non-tribal native societies' vices or negative qualities that were percolating into the tribal societies—this entire process of percolation

of usury or moneylenders' influence in the tribal areas—was catalyzed by the presence of the colonizers. So, talking about the Bhumkar rebellion in the year 1910, we see that in February 1910, the tribal inhabitants of the princely state of Bastar in eastern India rebelled against the small British force stationed there. This event, locally known as Bhumkal or earthquake—so Bhumkal, the word Bhumkal means earthquake in English—marked Bastar as a crucial battleground for Adivasi resistance during the colonial period. Next, we will discuss the Rampa Rebellion of 1922.

So, the Rampa Rebellion is synonymous with the name of Aluri Sitaram Raju, a young Kshatriya from the West Godavari district. Raju had quit traditional studies at the age of 18, seeking the life of a hermit, and he spent time meditating and praying in the forest. So, Sitaram Raju adopted a hermit's life, settling in a tribal village, which brought him into direct interaction with the tribal communities. British administrators demanded unpaid labor from the tribals for forest road construction, a task for which the tribals were ill-suited. They were not trained in such activities.

Rampa Rebellion of 1922

- Alluri Sitarama Raju, a young Kshatriya from West Godavari District, quit traditional studies at the age of eighteen, seeking a life of meditation and prayer in the forest.
- He adopted a hermit's life, settling in a tribal village, which brought him into direct interaction with the tribal communities
- **British administrators demanded unpaid labor from tribals for forest road construction**, a task they were ill-suited for, while non-tribal laborers were reluctant to work in malaria-ridden areas.



Source: countercurrents.org

And on the other hand, we see that the non-tribal laborers were reluctant to work in malaria-ridden areas. These forest areas were mosquito-infested, and people were prone to acquiring diseases like malaria. So non-tribals would usually not want to work in these places. And so the tribal people, much against their will, were being forced to work as road construction laborers.

We see that petty British officers compelled the Koya and Konda people, belonging to the Koya and Konda tribal groups, to provide forced labor for road construction, resorting to coercion. The exploitative demands of these road builders triggered outbreaks of unrest in the tribal areas. Determined to end the merciless exploitation of the tribal regions by the outsiders, mainly the British colonizers, Aluri Sitaram Raju decided to lead a tribal rebellion against the British, integrating their struggle into the broader fight for independence.

Rampa Rebellion of 1922

- Petty officers **compelled the Koya and Konda people to provide forced labor** for road construction, resorting to coercion. The exploitative demands of these road-builders **triggered outbreaks of unrest in the tribal areas**.
- Determined to end the merciless exploitation of tribal regions by outsiders, Alluri Sitarama Raju **decided to lead a tribal rebellion** against the British, integrating their struggle into the broader fight for independence.
- For two years, he **employed guerilla warfare**, successfully defeating the local police in numerous engagements and seizing police stations. The British responded by imposing a complete blockade on the Agency tracts, deploying police and troops to encircle the area and cut off all supply routes.



For two whole years, Raju employed guerrilla warfare tactics, successfully defeating the local police in numerous engagements and seizing the police stations. The British responded by imposing a complete blockade on the agency tracks, deploying police and troops to encircle the area, incarcerate the people, and cut off all supply routes. From there, according to case studies, the British officers responded with intensified raids on tribal hamlets, resulting in the abuse of women and destruction of crops. Aluri Sitaram Raju, deeply affected by the plight of the tribals, chose to surrender to the police at Koyyuru. The British executed him by firing squad and buried his body in a place called Krishnadevi Peta.

And then, entire police troops would proceed to capture and kill nearly all of his followers by the end of September 1924. So by this time, we see the entire Rampa rebellion crushed or collapsing to an end. It went on for nearly two years and was very successful. With the assassination of Raju, this entire rebellion collapsed. Next, talking about the uprisings from Central India, we need to discuss the Goan revolt in the year 1940.

Komaram Bhim was a leader with considerable influence among the Goan people. He led the Goan revolt of 1940, which took place in the Babijari village within the Ayphabad taluk of Adilabad district. This revolt was instigated by the forced eviction of Gond and Kolam settlements from the Dhanora state forest, and people, as a result, were enraged. We see that the Gonds, who were otherwise facing relentless exploitation by the non-aboriginal landlords, and there was general official apathy towards their maltreatment and mistreatment,

Gond Revolt of 1940

- Komaram Bhim, a leader with considerable influence among the Gonds, led the **Gond Revolt of 1940**, which took place in Babijhari village within the AEIFabad taluk of Adilabad District.
- The **forced eviction of Gond and Kolam settlements** from the Dhanora state forest **ignited the revolt**. For the first time, the Gonds, **facing relentless exploitation by non-aboriginal landlords and official apathy**, found a leader in Bhim who could unite hundreds of tribesmen for collective action.



Statue of Komaram Bheem

Photo: Praem Kumar Mykala




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were rising against the authorities for the first time. We see that they found a leader in Bhim, who could unite hundreds of tribesmen for collective action against both the landlords and the British officials. K. Singh informs that within the Goan cultural context, where the Bhatkals or seers were known for their trance-like experiences, their spiritual experiences, and divine positions. Bhim's claims of supernatural powers would further boost and bolster his leadership. So Bhim, just like Birsa Munda, would be perceived as a demigod figure, a person who was born within the tribe.

To take the tribe forward, you know, to save the tribe from all kinds of trials and tribulations. So, he was perceived as a savior of the Gonds. So, Bhim was perceived as having the ability to hear and follow divine ordains, divine commands. Here, Bhangya Bhukhya notes that Bhim adopted arms or weapons only when his pleas to get permission for cultivating land were refused or dismissed.

Even before taking up arms, Bhim wrote a letter to the Divisional Forest Officer or DFO, but it did not work. The communication just failed. So, instead of solving the problem amicably, we see that the Divisional Forest Officer sent a force to crush the Gonds. He sent several armed forest guards to enforce the evacuation of the tribals from the forest areas. So, we see that Bheem's establishment of Gondraj included a structured governance system and a tribal army, which was funded by the village contributions.

The rebuilding of Jodhgate symbolized this new order. So, under the auspices of Bheem's leadership, we see a decentralized local governance system being laid out. which would not be in agreement with the British Raj. It would be an autonomous body that was economically sustained through collective village contributions. It was outside the jurisdiction or the juridical system of the British Raj.

Gond Revolt of 1940

- Bhim's establishment of Gond Raj included a structured governance system and a tribal army, funded by village contributions. The rebuilding of Jodeghat symbolized this new order – The village of Jodeghat was burnt-down by the armed forest guards and was reconstructed at the same place by the villagers. Tensions escalated when Gonds assaulted a sub-inspector, leading to increased tribal support for Bhim.
- The Adilabad talukdar, with a significant police and official contingent, responded by marching to Jodeghat.
- Bhim's attempts to rally his followers were met with gunfire, resulting in heavy casualties and a swift suppression of the Gond resistance.



So, talking about the village of Jodhगत in the context of the Gond revolt, We see that the village of Jodhगत was burned down by armed forest guards and later reconstructed at the same site by the villagers. It goes on to show the sharp protests and resistance by the grassroots people against the authorities, and their determination to settle down in the very same place that was burned down by the forest guards. So tensions escalated when the Gonds assaulted a sub-inspector, which led to increased tribal support for their leader Bhim.

However, the Adilabad talukdar, with a significant police and official contingent, responded to this attack and assassination of the sub-inspector by marching to Jodhगत. Bhim's attempts at rallying his followers were met with gunfire, which resulted in heavy casualties and a swift suppression of the Gond resistance. So, following the killing of the sub-inspector, the talukdar and his contingent swiftly crushed the power and force of the local Gond tribal army or tribal warriors. So, to conclude, the tribal uprisings in Central and Southern India during colonial rule, as exemplified by the Bhumkal rebellion by Gundadur, the Gond revolt of 1940 led by Kumarambhim,

and the Rampa Rebellion of 1922 led by Alluri Sitharam Raju, all of these protests and rebellions highlight a consistent pattern of resistance and protest against the unfair British policies centered on forest land and forest resources. These movements, while varying in scale and methods, shared some common grievances. These grievances were encroachment upon traditional land rights, the imposition of exploitative labor practices, and the disruption of established social and economic structures that the tribals had enjoyed for many generations before the British came to this land. So, with this, we stop our lecture here today.

Conclusion

- The tribal uprisings in central and southern India during colonial rule, exemplified by the Bhumkal rebellion by Gunda Dhur, Gond Revolt of 1940 led by Komaram Bhim and the Rampa Rebellion of 1922 led by Alluri Sitarama Raju, highlight a consistent pattern of resistance against British policies.
- These movements, while varying in scale and methods, shared common grievances: the encroachment upon traditional land rights, the imposition of exploitative labor practices, and the disruption of established social and economic structures.



Let us meet for another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.

