



Tribal resistance and Nationalism: The role of tribes in Anti-Colonial movements in India

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Abstract

The involvement of the tribes in the anti-colonial movements in India forms a crucial but frequently neglected aspect of the movement. The paper will discuss the character, extent and importance of tribal resistance to British colonialism, the formation of indigenous resistance to land alienation, economic exploitation and cultural conquest in Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Central India, and Andhra. The paper uses an interdisciplinary methodology of synthesis, mixing historical and sociological analysis, and contextualises the key rebellions such as the Santhal Hul, Kol Rebellion, Munda Ulgulan and Rampa Revolt and the wider context of the emergence of Indian nationalism. It is reasoned that, with early political awareness and shared identity based on their own values of freedom and fairness, tribal wars were not merely acts of individual resistance. The paper concludes that tribal resistance was a core thread of nationalism in India; it should be given more prominence in the national discourse of freedom in India and also in the historiography of postcolonial India.

Keywords: Tribal resistance, Anti-colonial movements, Land alienation, Santhal, British colonialism, Indian nationalism

Introduction

The Indian freedom struggle was not simply a political and ideological movement of the national figures, but the cascading responses of localised and, in most cases, spontaneous resistance by the marginalised communities; the tribal populations were very important but forgotten in the process (Bhadauriya *et al.*, 2025). As the nationalist historiography mainstream has mostly focused on elite-based movements based in urban areas and educated classes, tribal movements in the various parts of the country (including those in Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Central India, and the North-East) have been underrepresented (Vergheese, 2015). These people were an uprising against the British colonialism way before the systematic national movement came into form, protesting against the exploitation, land alienation and cultural intrusion, which was threatening their traditional systems of life (Soren, 2025). Tribalism resistance thus was concurrent to the wider anti-colonial movement, and bore a shape of proto-nationalism which had strong indigenous roots in autonomy, justice and integrity (Panda, 2018). The current work attempts to examine to what extent the uprisings of such tribes could be considered as part and parcel of the Indian nationalist movement and to what degree they reflected political and social awareness on the same level as the mainstream struggle (Rukhaiyar, 2025). The research goals include studying the main tribal uprisings and their socio-political reasons, to understand the connection between tribal identity and nationalism, and to determine how the colonial policies on land and forests triggered the uprisings. The main questions that are central to this inquiry are: What were the major tribal rebellions against British rule, and what were the causes of these rebellions? What were the contributions of these movements to the changing spirit of Indian nationalism? How did tribal resistance contrast and relate to the mainstream nationalist discourse? In discussing these problems, the paper will redefine tribal movements as necessary manifestations of mass opposition and political awakening in the larger movement of India to independence.

This study explores the role of tribal communities in the anti-colonial movement in India, which is frequently ignored, with an interest in highlighting the role of tribal communities in the nationalist movements in general. The research aims at reinventing tribal uprisings not only as a localised performance of local resistance but as an important manifestation of social-political consciousness and new nationalism. The study would go to understand how tribal societies reacted to the colonial exploitation, land alienation and cultural oppression by looking at recent and significant revolts like Santhal Hul (1855-56), the Kol Rebellion (1831-32), the Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900) and the Rampa Rebellion (1922-24). It claims that the tribal resistance movements were primitive manifestations of political consciousness and solidarity based on indigenous principles of independence and fairness. The paper elucidates the ideas through a historical-sociological reading approach of the interrelatedness of tribal struggle and the Indian national struggle, both distinct and at the same time, sharing the anti-colonial spirit. Finally, this study attempts to put tribal histories into the centre of the story of freedom in India and to make nationalism become more inclusive by acknowledging the efforts of the marginalised and subaltern groups in the development of the national cause towards independence.

Research Objectivise

1. To examine the historical background and socio-economic conditions of tribal communities under British colonial rule, and how these conditions contributed to the emergence of resistance movements.
2. To analyse major tribal uprisings—such as the Santhal Hul, Kol Rebellion, Munda Ulgulan, and Rampa Rebellion—in terms of their causes, leadership, organisation, and outcomes.
3. To explore the relationship between tribal identity, cultural autonomy, and the rise of nationalist consciousness, highlighting how traditional values and indigenous institutions shaped their anti-colonial responses.

4. To assess the extent to which tribal resistances can be interpreted as part of the broader Indian nationalist movement, and how they influenced regional and national political developments.
5. To critically evaluate the representation of tribal movements in colonial records and post-independence historiography, and to advocate for their rightful inclusion within the narrative of India's freedom struggle.

Historical Context of Tribal India under Colonial Rule

Tribal societies in India, before the British rule, were mostly independent and self-sustaining communities with their own practised system of governance, land management, and culture. Their socio-political structure was founded on kinship relations, clan powers, and traditional laws that guaranteed the peace of the community and even shared the resources fairly. The basis of tribal life was land and forests, which were not considered commodities but rather as community heritage, which was mandatory to sustain life, in terms of spirituality and identity. It was a subsistence economy that had employed agricultural, hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation as its economic activities, with weak relations with the outside markets. But this balance started to collapse as British colonialism spread into tribal lands at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Joshi, 2019). The introduction of the permanent Settlement and the zamindari system had disturbed the old system of land tenure since it replaced the communal ownership with individual ownership and gave the opportunity to the non-tribal landlords, moneylenders, and merchants to exploit tribal people. The British forest laws also dispossessed the tribes of their ancestral lands by denying them access to the basic forests and criminalised their traditional means of living, as forced labour and the introduction of new taxes increased their economic predicament further (Kulkarni, 2025). The imposition of indigenous beliefs through missionary endeavours in the pretext of social reform established the Western aspects of religious and educational practices that compromised the cultural cohesion of the tribes. The focus on the colonial administration on income-generating and utilising the resources made self-sufficient tribal societies into displaced workers on their lands (Abraham, 2012). Debt and loss of land accumulated, there was forced migration or bonded servitude, and traditional leaders and chiefs who used to be the custodians of tribal welfare were deprived of their powers by the colonialists and the intermediaries. This was the time when tribal socio-economic and cultural systems were broken, and alienation and cultural disintegration were largely introduced and collective resentment against British rule was created. These historical upheavals provided the foundation for organised resistance and revolt as the tribal groups tried to restore their freedom, defend their territory and defend their cultural identity in the onslaught of the colonialists.

Major Tribal Resistance Movements in Colonial India

The history of tribal resistance in colonial India distorts a procession of resolute and extensive outbursts that manifested as positive narratives of independence against British interchanges and socio-economic tumult. Between 1770 and 1830 was the first wave of tribal revolts, in which the tribes opposed British intrusion into their forested lands and trade routes, and the Chuar Rebellion (1798-99) in

Bengal, which was a bitter sense of displacement caused by land loss and unsympathetic revenue policies. In like manner, the Bhil revolts of western and central India went on during this time due to the agitation over British invasion and their displacement of the rights to their ancestral traditional rights. More systematic and extensive, as well as later in the mid-nineteenth century, was a series of movements, such as the Kol Rebellion (1831-32) in Chotanagpur, in response to feudal encroachment, government oppression, and dispossession of common land (Dasgupta, 2013). One of the most remarkable rebellions caused by the tribal groups was the Santhal Hul or Santhal Rebellion (1855-56), when the Santhals of modern-day Jharkhand and Bihar rose in revolt against the expropriating practices of the zamindar, moneylenders, and the British authorities. Similar to this, the Bhil and Koli populations of the western Indian regions also opposed the British taxation and outer subjugation, and it is indicative of the development of unity between the tribes to oppose the influence of the colonialists. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century marked a new period of tribal claims that took the socio-religious reform and political consciousness. The Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900), led by the charismatic Munda leader, Birsa Munda, in Chotanagpur, tried to recover tribal rights to land and forests and combined spiritual revivalism with anti-colonialism. The Rampa Rebellion (1922-24) of the hilly Andhra, led by Alluri Sitarama Raju, merged guerrilla warfare with Gandhian inspiration in the south, the merger between the tribal struggle and the national struggle. Similarly, the Tana Bhagat Movement (1914-1920) of the Oraons of Chotanagpur was a movement towards non-violent campaigning in the Gandhian ideals, a measure of increasing political awareness in the tribal society (Das & Verma, 2022). These movements were and persist, as remarkable in their unity, in Central India in the thick forests, as in the hills of the North-East and the plains of eastern India. They may not have fought in the same way or addressed the same issues, but they all had similar targets, namely opposition to the alienation of the land, cultural identity, and rebellion against colonial rule and, as such, were part of the greater story of the freedom struggle in India.

Nature and Character of Tribal Resistance

The form and content of the tribal resistance in colonial India were complicated and manifested themselves in association with the socio-economic, cultural, and political incentives that could not be identified by a simple classification. There has been a long debate among scholars, and it has been debated whether these rebellions were spontaneous rebellions that had political-economic motives, or whether they were more of the early warning signs of political consciousness and even proto nationalism. Although it is fair to state that the economic exploitation and land alienation during the British rule were the main issues in triggering tribal dissatisfaction, the causes of the problem were much deeper than material deprivation. To the tribal societies, both land and forests were a source of life as well as part of their spiritual, cultural and social existence (Ecka, 2025). This balance was shaken by the coming of colonisers, and in the resistance, it was a necessity of the economy as well as the defence of cultural sovereignty. Most of the movements had some religious and revivalist

overtures that drew the communities together through charismatic leadership. An example is the Ulgulan (1899–1900) of Birsa Munda, which combined spiritual awakening with social-political reform. The Ulgulan described Birsa as a messianic figure and aimed at restoring the lost Munda Raj. Likewise, the Tana Bhagat Movement and other movements also stressed moral reform, self-purification and non-violence as driven by Gandhian ideals, and other movements like Santhal Hul used God as a sanction to rebel against exploitative outsiders. These religious aspects were not some superstitious sentiments, but rather symbolic gestures of tribal independence and solidarity against cultural conquest (Singh, 2024). The expression of resistance took different forms depending on the local contexts; the rebellions were so big in armed wars and guerrilla warfare (Rampa Rebellion and Bhil rebels), or they were passive and moved against the colonial structures and withdrew (Passive resistance). Leaders were instrumental in inspiring the feeling of unity; leaders such as Birsa Munda, Sidhu, Kanhu Murmu, Tanya Bhil and Alluri Sitarama Raju established themselves as timeless icons of bravery, sacrifice and self-governance. They used their leadership to take their localised grievances a step further to express wider horizons of justice and self-determination. The identifying feature of tribal resistance was its collective and egalitarian nature. The revolutions were not those organised by a particular elite but by a people communally claiming the whole community through kinship and tradition and through common lack of freedom (Mallick, 2017). Although it was localised and suppressed, in many cases, with brutality, these movements represented an early version of political nationalism based on local worldviews. There is therefore to be found in tribal resistance an economically determined, *yet also* in totality cultural maintenance, moral regeneration, political unrest: becoming a part of the greater nationalist cause of liberation and pride.

Tribal Resistance and Indian Nationalism

The interplay between the issues of tribal resistance and Indian nationalism is an ambiguous but, at the same time, a very intermingled history of anti-colonialism. Although mainstream nationalist movements, under the direction of the Indian National Congress and urban elites, tended to seize the historical space, tribal uprisings and businesses all over the country had been characterised by parallel outbursts of anti-colonial consciousness grounded in local terms. Although there was little direct interaction between the tribal leadership and the national organisation, they had one similar point of focus, which was termed as opposition to the British domination and an intense feeling of injustice due to the foreign exploitation. The demands by tribal leaders like Birsa Munda, Alluri Sitarama Raju and the Murmu brothers of Santhal Hul were in tune with nationalist ideals of independence and opposition to imperial rule. Nevertheless, tribal nationalism was a much different phenomenon from the mainstream movement. Indeed, unlike in the struggle led by Congress, which was planned in terms of constituent political institutions and an informed leadership, tribal revolts were immediate, community-based, and sometimes even more localised, surfacing out of direct material struggles and cultural rejection (Rukhaiyar, 2025). The inability to have formal education, as well as the network of communications and representation within the political structures of different countries, also segregated

these movements, but they shared the same spirit of self-determination and rebellion. Their input in the freedom movement was enormous- they sparked local revolutions, expressed solidarity and aroused subsequent peasant and rural movements by their boldness and sacrifice. The indigenous systems of governance and solidarity brought about by the tribal paradigm of resistance also focused on community ownership, sharing of decisions and presence of ecological harmony, which were in total contrast to colonial patterns of centralised management (Kumar, 2025). Nevertheless, in spite of the historical importance, the role of the tribal community has been overshadowed in nationalist historiography. Post-independence discourses had, to a great extent, glorified urban and political leaders, forgetting the subaltern voice that defined the grassroots aspects of the Indian struggle towards independence. It has therefore seen to it that the tribal agency has continued to be underrepresented and relegated to footnotes, other than being considered one of the major powers behind the film of anti-colonialism. Revisiting the history of tribal resistance in nationalist terms, we can see that these nationalist movements were not marginal but were indeed central to the Indian struggle for freedom- an indigenous, social justice-based, cultural collective, and environmental protection-based nationalism. The acknowledgement of this interrelatedness also helps in further developing the history of the Indian national movement as a multi-layered, multi-stranded movement that not only included political elites but also the sturdy community of tribes that demanded freedom in their terms.

Sociological Analysis

A sociological study of tribal riots in colonial India demonstrates that they are an effective subaltern politics, the voice of the oppressed population in opposition to the domination systems. In the context of the Subaltern Studies collective, especially in the work of Ranajit Guha, tribal uprisings can be viewed as forms of autonomous political consciousness of the oppressed that were never a part of elite nationalist discourses. These movements were not in themselves spontaneous expressions of desperation but conscious efforts to regain the lost independence and pride. Tribal resistance, thus, is the power of lower strata that revolt against the colonial domination and the inequalities amongst themselves set on by feudal intermediaries and moneylenders. This resistance was also enhanced by the development of a sense of collective identity between tribes, since cultural symbolism, the kinship ties, as well as common myths of creation, formed the ideological base of their organisation. These struggles frequently turned out to be ethnic nationalism in nature, with the maintenance of tribal land, forest and belief systems becoming a feature in their claim of sovereignty (Bhadauriya *et al.*, 2025). Using the Marxian conflict theory, the tribal resistance can be regarded as an answer to the material contradictions of colonial capitalism, such as the expropriation of land, the destruction of subsistence economies, and the reduction of self-reliant producers to dependent workers. This is enhanced by the Weberian view that focused on the resistance of the status groups of tribes governed by honour, prestige, and traditional powers, who went against the bureaucratic rationality and dehumanising authority of the colonial state (Bhukya, 2022). In addition to economic and political aspects, the tribal resistance also assumed cultural

aspects, in which rituals, songs, oral history, and collective memory served as an iconic protest and maintenance of identity. Rebellion became a spiritual and moral campaign through the interests of duplicating the divine personalities, including Birsa Munda as a messiah, and Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu as divine warriors. These cultural expressions not only hold communities together but also give them legitimacy and meaning to their struggles. Such movements therefore blurred the veil regarding religion, politics, as well as culture and made resistance a comprehensive act of social opposition (Prabha, 2025). Tribal resistance has a sociological level, the cross of the conflict of the classes, ethnic insistence and cultural renaissance. It seeks to disrupt the mainstream historical narration by placing tribal masses as busy actors in developing the anti-colonial struggle in India. The tribal resistance through the lenses of the subaltern and war perspectives was not only a struggle to survive in material terms, but it was also an issue of immense assertion of self-worth, identity and social justice.

Conclusion

To sum up, the paper has established that tribal resistance movements did not exist in isolation or as primitive outbursts but as part of a dynamic and ideologically rich aspect of the greater Indian struggle towards independence. Although these revolts were minor and varied in nature, they were indicative of a huge feeling of injustice and a generalised need to have freedom, dignity, and autonomy. Since the first revolt by the Pahariya and Chuar rebels to the largest rebellion, the Santhal Hul, Munda Ulgulan and Rampa Rebellion, the tribal people in India have been portrayed as incredibly brave, well-organised, and united in their struggle against the exploitation and cultural encroachment of the British colonialists. Their immediate action based on the defence of land, forests, and the old institutions was a manifestation of early expression of political consciousness and proto-nationalism based on the worldviews of the indigenous communities. The reconsideration of these movements in terms of a sociological approach grants them significance in establishing subaltern politics and adding to the moral and ideological structuring of Indian nationalism. The history of tribal struggle has an exceptional value in the modern context because it is perceived as the eternal search for justice, equality and differences among the discriminated groups. The knowledge of such movements gives valuable perspectives on the present concerns of tribal empowerment, environmental and socio-political inclusivity in developing India. To continue the study, comparisons between tribal and peasant uprisings and a study of postcolonial tribal politics would help us gain a better understanding of how the struggle against history has transformed into a struggle against identity and rights. Incorporating the tribal agency into the national narrative not only rights the historical record but also strengthens the plural, inclusive and grassroots nature of the Indian freedom movement.

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