



History of Women's Resistance in Colonial Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana

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Abstract

The history of the colonial struggles in eastern India can never be complete without taking into consideration the important but underestimated role of women in Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana. The paper analyses the mobilisation of tribal women in Munda, Oraon, Ho and Santal communities against the British rule, abusive land policies, invasion by missionaries and social unrest. The paper uses the archival sources, district gazetteers, oral traditions, and the existing scholarship to reconstruct the involvement of women in the major uprisings like the Kol Revolt (1831-32), the Santhal Hul (1855-56), the Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900) and in the Tana Bhagat movement. It is an effort to note different types of resistance, which include armed action, social and economic non-cooperation, ritual activism, and everyday defiance, and this has shown women as strategic agents as opposed to passive supporters. The paper states that the gendered violence of colonial rulers and subsequent administrative reactions enhanced the political awareness of women unintentionally. Through anticipating these narratives, the paper advances gendered tribal historiography and gives women a voice in anti-colonial struggles.

Keywords: Women's resistance, Colonial Chotanagpur, Santhal Pargana, tribal women, anti-colonial movements

Introduction

When the British colony was moved into the Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana, they changed the region into a socio-economic and cultural sphere as land laws, system of revenue collection and policing and missionary actions dismantled the tribal institutions (Mallick, 2017; Singh, 2024) ^[1, 2, 7]. The establishment of Permanent Settlement, the thikadari system, restrictions on the forest and surveillance-oriented policing not only deprived the tribal people of their land but also destroyed traditional social structures that enabled them to have collective autonomy (Toppo *et al.*, 2024; Gopal, 2022) ^[3, 4, 14]. Under these unstable conditions, women of the Munda, Oraon, Ho, and Santal communities had very important but quite unsung roles in resistance (Mishra & Tripathi, 2024) ^[5]. Although their roles cannot be ignored in revolts, daily resistance, and community organisation, the role of women has not been given proper documentation as a result of the patriarchal inclination in colonial accounts, paucity of scholarly interest, and marginalisation of oral literature by popular historiography (Mallick, 2017; Toppo *et al.*, 2024) ^[1, 3, 14]. Current dissection of tribal resistance is largely dominated by leaders of the male gender and the military aspect, and this leaves a big gap in comprehension of the gendered nature of struggling against colonisation (Gopal, 2022; Singh, 2024) ^[2, 4, 7]. The given research will, thus, attempt to tackle the major issue of how tribal women opposed the colonial rule and the elevated levels of social oppression imposed by foreigners (Mishra & Tripathi, 2024; Mallick, 2017) ^[1, 5]. It questions those negotiations and challenges, and subversions of colonial power structures in which women negotiated and challenged them, and still managed to sustain their communities in resilience (Toppo *et al.*, 2024; Gopal, 2022) ^[3, 4, 14]. The main research questions that will inform this research inquiry are: What types of resistance were practised by women during the significant uprisings and localised conflicts, armed, social, economic, symbolic, and everyday? What were the socio-economic factors, including

dispossession of land, forced labour, cultural disruption, and gendered violence, that initiated their mobilisation? And what did the convergence of gender, tribal identity, and colonial rule make them experience and their resistance mechanisms? The questions addressed in the study will be considered critically to presuppose the agency of women, broaden the concept of tribal resistance analysis, and make the vision of anti-colonial movements in eastern India more inclusive and sensitive (Mallick, 2017; Singh, 2024; Toppo *et al.*, 2024; Gopal, 2022; Mishra & Tripathi, 2024) ^[1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 14].

The paper will discuss the historical significance of tribal women in the anti-colonial struggles of Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana that have been neglected throughout history. Whereas colonial archives and dominant understanding have conventionally anticipated machismo heads and militarised confrontations, the role of women has remained mostly unnoticed, with scarce references having been taken within both oral histories and local recollections. The paper attempts to fill that gap in the scholarly literature by rewriting the experiences, activities, and agency of women in big rebellions like the Kol Revolt, the Santhal Hul, the Munda Ulgulan and the Tana Bhagat movement. Through both lies the paper sheds light on various forms of women's resistance, such as armed participation, symbolic/ritual resistance, resource protection, social organising, and simple non-cooperation trends regarding women. It also explores the socio-economic and cultural tensions or pressures such as land misappropriation, forest regulations, forced labour, patriarchal colonial legislation and missionary interferences that pushed the women towards becoming on the offensive. The article claims that these gendered ways of struggle are better determiners of the tribal resistance and denies the traditional discourse in which women are considered only peripherally. At the end of the day, the given study is expected to reinstate women at the centre of historical anti-colonialism in the region and help create a more inclusive tribal historiography.

Tribal Worlds and Colonial Transformations

The historical context of Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana was a rich tribal demography that consisted of Munda, Oraon, Ho, Santal, and Kharia, and other Indigenous groups whose lives were deeply connected to their forests and their land and village structures (Shekhar Sinha, 2024) ^[6, 8]. These groups existed in a cohesive socio-cultural system which was based on land ownership (community owned), governance based on kinship and rituals that strengthened the society (Singh, 2024) ^[2, 7]. This balance was thrown off by colonial infiltration into this region between the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Sinha, 2024) ^[8]. The introduction of exploitative land revenue systems, including the Permanent Settlement, zamindari intermediaries, and the thikadari tenure, turned land into a tradable commodity; land so acquired was easily alienated to become the property of large landlords, who could sell their lands in bulk (Dasgupta, 1999) ^[9]. These policies weakened customary rights and transformed normal life as they were accompanied by compulsory labour, whereby both begari was practised, intrusive policing and forced evictions, which were extreme measures of control against customary rights (Barwar & Minj, 2025) ^[10]. In the ancient community, the traditional tribal society gave women great socio-economic and cultural roles. They made a lot of contributions in agriculture, forest harvesting, family economy, and food safety. They had a recognised but informal social authority because they were involved in festivals, rituals and decision-making by their clans. The state of gender relations within these communities was more egalitarian than the patriarchal legal and administrative system, which was imposed by the British, and which aimed at regulating marriage, hereditary as well as community lives, in a manner that reduced the autonomy of women. The first signs of dissatisfaction were shown when the displacement became larger, and land alienation was settled, and the missionary activity tried to convert tribal faith systems. Women were directly impacted by the undermining of sacred groves, ritual space and practices common to the community, especially as they are the ones who keep the culture alive. These upheavals formed the basis of systematic and daily kinds of resistance, where women have a key but undocumented role. This is the background upon which women's mobilisation during the further anti-colonial uprisings can be understood (Shekhar Sinha, 2024; Singh, 2024; Sinha, 2024; Dasgupta, 1999; Barwar & Minj, 2025) ^[2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10].

Women's Participation in Tribal Uprisings

a. Early Rebellions

The involvement of women in the initial tribal rebellions of Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana is a tradition of tribal solidarity. Most importantly, during the late eighteenth century Paharia-Company wars, women fulfilled essential supportive roles in guerrilla warfare, through supply lines, food supply, shelter and look-outs in the mountainous terrain (Shekhar Sinha, 2024) ^[6, 8]. Their familiarity with forests was very crucial that they were necessary during the process of maintaining resistance against the British forces (Singh, 2024). Women worked actively in mobilisation in the Kol Revolt of 1831-32, where they assembled communities, sent messages through the villages and practised rituals that called upon the protection of the ancestors (Sinha, 2024) ^[8]. A large number of refugee rebel

combatants-maintained spies on colonial activities, which allowed the planning. Even greater observable participation of Santal women is to be found in the Santhal Hul (1855-56), where they not only fought with men and had weapons at hand, but also ensured that their main grain stores were not demolished by the enemy (Dasgupta, 1999) ^[9]. The history of the people still remembers the efforts of legendary female warriors like Phulo and Jhano Murmu, who are revered for their courage in taking the female warriors to war (Barwar & Minj, 2025) ^[10]. Women are always referred to as messengers, resource protectors, and some of the most essential sources of morale in oral traditions, songs, and community stories. These prehistoric rebellions prove that women were not marginal players but key figures with whom women contributed their labour, bravery and organisational abilities, which kept the struggle going on various fronts (Shekhar Sinha, 2024; Singh, 2024) ^[6, 8].

b. Munda Ulgulan (Birsa Movement, 1899–1900)

Another important point of women engaged in anti-colonial movements was the Munda Ulgulan led by Birsa Munda. Women of the Munda community, dissatisfied with the position of their male counterparts, joined the mobilisation process initiated by Birsa extensively and participated in meetings, disseminated his ideas of socio-religious change and prevented the intrusion of the colonial power into their land (Sinha, 2024) ^[8]. Women also took part in the social boycott movements that were part of the strategy of the movement, as they did not even want to work or cooperate with dikus (outsiders), missionaries, and ruthless landlords (Dasgupta, 1999) ^[9]. Through their participation, the collective discipline rose, and the vision of Birsa returned to get back dharti (land) and maintain jal-jangal-zameen (water, forest, land) (Barwar & Minj, 2025) ^[10]. Women were custodians of village resources, guardians of sacred groves, and guaranteed the supply of food to rebel groups. The arrests of the women suspected of harbouring rebels or taking part in meetings were often pasted on the reports on the administration made by the colonial administrations, showing how far they went in the political sphere (Shekhar Sinha, 2024) ^[6, 8]. Numerous women were beaten, imprisoned, or questioned, which in part shows that the British appreciated the impact that they had on the movement. They were also not used only in support roles; women also became leaders in village protests and had a significant role in maintaining moral unity. Thus, the Ulgulan emphasises a feminist side of tribal opposition, when women became the advocates of land ownership and became proactive participants in the struggle with the colonial regime (Singh, 2024) ^[2, 7].

c. Other Localised Movements

On top of large-scale uprisings, the resistance of women was also in the form of smaller movements which spanned into the early twenties of the twentieth century (Sinha, 2024) ^[8]. In the period called the Tana Bhagat Movement (1914-1920s), the women shared the ideology of ahimsa and socio-religious reform and took part in protests, fasting and mass prayers targeting colonial taxes and police atrocities (Dasgupta, 1999) ^[9]. Their activities regarding civil disobedience, like refusal to pay taxes, resistance against forced labour requirements and defying the directives of the colonial intermediaries, were of key interest in broadening the scope of the movement (Barwar & Minj, 2025) ^[10]. The

women were usually at the frontline of peaceful protests, singing and symbolising religion to give hope of unity among the populace (Shekhar Sinha, 2024) ^[6, 8]. Women challenged the forest guards and police in forest satyagrahas organised in Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana, who tried to limit access to vital forest resources. They defended firewood, foliage, mahua flowers, lac and other items that were at the heart of the tribal economy and domestic duties of women (Singh, 2024) ^[2, 7]. Their collective action by demonstrating great courage and leadership when they organised their opposition to the criminalisation of their traditional gathering practices was impressive (Sinha, 2024) ^[8]. These localised movements indicate that the resistance of women was not a one-off act but a constant act and rather small negotiations with the colonial power (Dasgupta, 1999) ^[9]. Their unrelenting resistance cemented livelihood rights and cultural independence more than establishing the irreplaceable status of the women in the direction of setting the course of tribal resistance (Barwar & Minj, 2025) ^[10].

Forms and Strategies of Women's Resistance

In Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana, women took a variety of innovative and dynamic methods of resistance well beyond the traditional armed insurrection to showcase a high level of knowledge about community needs as well as their weaknesses under colonial rule (Ecka, 2016) ^[11]. They were involved directly in combat in the rebellions like the Santhal Hul and the Kol Revolt, where they used traditional weapons, which included bows, arrows, axes, sickles, and farm implements and changed the ordinary into a revolutionary weapon (Damodaran, 2013) ^[12]. No less formidable was a symbolic and ritual opposition; women used songs, dances, and community meetings to create collective morale, relay messages, and call on the ancestral defence, and because of this, they were the keepers of the cultural memory, preserving their accounts of struggle and identity (Mapping violence in the lives of Adivasi women, 2018) ^[13]. Another essential aspect was social and economic counteraction: women did not want to serve the embodiments of oppression, zamindars, or colonial intermediaries; and they did not allow the village grain stores to be taken; besides, they were encouraged to support rebel bands and families in need (Toppo, 2024) ^[3, 14]. This echoing of a strategy of everyday resistance, as described by James C. Scott, the women practised low-level resistance, including refusing to assist organisational colonial officials, concealing political fugitives, distributing disinformation, and even using coded language to resist against surveillance. The gendered forms of resistance also demonstrate how strategic they were, since in many ways, they took advantage of the colonial adage that they were non-political, so women made good spies, messengers, and emotional mobilisers who kept the morale of the community going. The ideas that are intertwined in these strategies show that there was a variety of ways of resistance that women needed to overcome, starting from an apparent struggle and up to silent rebellion that was present in the social, cultural, and economic life of the tribes under the colonial power (Ecka, 2016; Damodaran, 2013; Mapping violence in the lives of Adivasi women, 2018; Toppo, 2024) ^[3, 11, 12, 13, 14].

Colonial Responses to Women's Resistance

The reaction of colonials to the resistance of women in Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana was a combination of

fear, misconception, and patriarchal bigotry, which were shared in the accounts of the British administration and the missionary literature (Ecka, 2016) ^[11]. With the rise of women as active fighters in rebellions like the Kol uprising, the Santhal Hul or the Ulgulan, the British officers took note and became alarmed, and the women were arrested and punished more severely, as well as more closely monitored in villages where women were suspected of affecting mobilisation (Damodaran, 2013) ^[12]. Administrative files relate to women held because they were sheltering rebels, turning down an order to labour or because they were attending rituals that were deemed as subversive (Mapping violence in the lives of Adivasi women, 2018) ^[13]. This reply was met with gendered violence: ransacking of the home, coercion, rape, and sexual violence were all instruments used to terrorise populations and shatter lines of female support which existed in many resistance networks (Toppo, 2024) ^[3, 14]. The colonial interpretation of making the woman weak by suppressing her morale was such a kind of action. At the same time, missionaries tried to civilise tribal women by transforming their dressing, practices, rites, and social positions by labelling them as civilising missions and destabilising the traditional gender norms. According to their writings, women resisters were morally corrupt, pagan or requiring discipline and redemption. In the more general colonial literature, there was a strong tendency to stereotype women who were rebels as being wild, hysterical, barbaric, or fooled by the male leaders, not wanting to realistically accept their political agency (Ecka, 2016; Damodaran, 2013) ^[11, 12]. This representation had an ideological role of delegitimising the resistance of females and justifying the intervention of the colonies as stabilising forces. The administration, gender-based violence, intrusion of the missionaries and demeaning representations of text were combined to create a wholesome machine that was intended to subdue the role of women in anti-colonial action and to make the tribal society subdued to the colonial rule (Mapping violence in the lives of Adivasi women, 2018; Toppo, 2024) ^[3, 13, 14].

Social Consequences and Legacy

a. Impact on Tribal Society

The social implications of women's involvement in anti-colonial rebellions in Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana were a long-term practical redefinition of how the community operated and how women interacted with men (Mallick, 2017) ^[1]. It enhanced the social power of women in tribal society, as their open and active involvement in armed and symbolic struggle supported the ideas of women as economic participants in the community as well as political and cultural agents (Toppo *et al.*, 2024) ^[3, 14]. The women who defended the food supplies, aroused the villages, challenged the colonial authorities, and maintained the religious rites came to realise their key role in protecting communal sovereignty (Mishra & Tripathi, 2024) ^[5]. This helped in creating minor yet significant changes in gender relations, especially after the researchers of the big revolts, such as the Hul and the Ulgulan (Sinha, 2024) ^[8]. The presence of women's leadership in resistance movements empowered the voice of women when it came to making choices in the clans, community, and ritual life (Barwar & Minj, 2025) ^[10]. Although colonial oppression attempted to undermine female agency, the example of women's courage, engaged in more respect towards their efforts, allowed them

to preserve more equal gender relations in tribal societies of the late nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century (Damodaran, 2013)^[12].

b. Intergenerational Memory

Intergenerational memory in the form of stories, folklore songs, dance traditions and other phenomena of folklore have continued the tradition of women's opposition (Mallick, 2017)^[1]. Such oral traditions make certain that the strength of tribal identity is reinforced by the women resisters and encourage the social awareness of the young generations (Toppo *et al.*, 2024)^[3, 14]. Santal, Munda, and Oraon societies sing praises to women who took part in the Hul or supported the reform action of Birsa Munda, which they have incorporated into the heritage of the community (Mishra & Tripathi, 2024)^[5]. Within present-day movements of the Jharkhand, regarding land rights, forest protection, and cultural autonomy, these figures of women still possess symbolic strength (Sinha, 2024)^[8]. This heritage serves as an ethical and emotional source of the continued grassroots activism, proving how historical memory turns into political inspiration (Barwar & Minj, 2025)^[10].

c. Women Heroes and Local Histories

It is a land of local histories in Jharkhand where women heroes are numerous and have voiced their courage and sense of community leadership (Damodaran, 2013)^[12]. The legendary sisters of the Santhal Hul, Phulo and Jhano Murmu, are remembered to have brought women to the battle and to protect the independence of their people by heroic efforts (Yadav, 2020)^[15]. They are mentioned in songs, school curricula, women's organisations and even in commemoration (Mallick, 2017)^[1]. In the same way, some folklore about Munda and Oraon female fighters protecting sacred groves, or messengers through forests or rebels against colonial invasions, keeps alive a story of female strength not to be found in the mainstream accounts of history (Toppo *et al.*, 2024)^[3, 14]. These memories of the heroes empower the collective identity and make sure that women are known as an imperative agent of the anti-colonial history of the region (Mishra & Tripathi, 2024)^[5].

Discussion

The history of women's resistance in Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana should be interpreted in the light of convergence between gender, tribal identity and the colonial power, which defined the nature, meaning and implications of their involvement (Sinha, 2024)^[8]. Not only were economic and political power, but also an attempt to control tribal women's bodies, mobility, labour, and cultural practices, because the colonial rule introduced a patriarchal system of law (Barwar & Minj, 2025)^[10]. However, tribal women were not passive consumers of these structures; they turned out to be the active actors mobilising their social status, cultural knowledge base, as well as networks across communities to resist oppression (Damodaran, 2013)^[12]. Their activities indicate that women were not victims or passive supporters, as they were the key players in setting the course and encouraging the movement (Yadav, 2020)^[15]. This agency is more evident when it is compared to the role played by women in other sections of India. Bhil women in western India were informants, fighters, and shields of rebel hideouts in anti-colonial revolutions; Gond

women in central India provisioned guerilla campaigns and kept alive grounded traditions of sacred forests that took responsibility throughout the decades of close interactions with the colonialists; Khasi women in the northeast, traditionally powerful in matrilineal culture, rose in revolt against taxation by the British and asserted political control; and Naga women served as intermediaries, messengers, and cultural leaders in years of extended contact with the colonialists (Mallick, 2017; Toppo *et al.*, 2024)^[1, 3, 14]. These comparative visions help us understand that the resistance of women was a pan-tribal process due to the influence of the local cultural traditions, but bound by a unitary struggle against the forces of dispossession, forest limitations, and patriarchal colonial rule (Mishra & Tripathi, 2024)^[5].

A gendered analysis of these movements' questions nationalist and colonial historiographies that have been happy to heroicise masculine leadership and militarised action, and denied the resistance to power manifested through day-to-day resistance, symbolic resistance, and work that kept the revolts going (Sinha, 2024)^[8]. The gendered approach to tribal history. Rewriting tribal history also helps to restore the role of women in history, but it is also broadening the concept of resistance itself, refocusing on social, cultural, and emotional labour that communities needed to endure and demand an empire (Barwar & Minj, 2025)^[10]. This work adds impetus to a more open and shared historiography of women by identifying indigenous women as historical agents whose rebellious action transformed societies and left a trace in the recent movements of land, identity and cultural self-determination (Damodaran, 2013; Yadav, 2020)^[12, 15].

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