

The Dawn of Revolutionary Extremism in India- A study of Response to British Rule

Dr. Y. Ramesh

Associate Professor, Department of History, Maharani Women's Arts, Commerce and Management College
Seshadri Road, Bengaluru- 560 001

ABSTRACT

Peasant and tribal movements have been interpreted differently by different schools of historians. The historians with sympathies towards the British and the established order often regarded these uprisings as a problem of law and order. The range of problems faced by these tribals and peasants from the pre-colonial to the colonial times were often overlooked as possible causes for these uprisings. Therebels were often portrayed as primitive savages resisting "civilization". The Nationalists tended to appropriate the peasant and tribal history to the purposes of the anti-colonial struggle ignoring certain other facets of the oppressed people's struggle. Those more sympathetic to the cause of the tribals and peasants however tended to negate very often the logic of peasant and tribal protest in terms of the people's own experience. It is also necessary to understand the domain of peasant and tribal action in its own terms. The present paper is an inclusive account of the revolutionary extremism in India.

Keywords: Movements, Uprisings, Peasants, Tribals.

INTRODUCTION

From 1830-1925, four major tribal movements, viz. Kol Rebellion, Sardari Ladai, Birsa Movement and Tana Bhagat movement upsurge in Ranchi district and in the interim, their echoes reached the adjoining districts. These movements took place in different time frame, in varied circumstances under different leadership. Indeed, they differ from each other in terms of ideology, structure and objective. In short, they were heterogeneous in character rather than homogenous. In order to highlight the diverse nature of tribal movements, K.S. Singh had divided the tribal movements into two phases: 1765-1857 and 1857-1920. According to him, the 1st phase was primarily based on the nature of resistance against aliens or outsiders in both baronial and plebian sub-types. In contrast, he considers the 2nd phase as agrarian and forest centered resistance which also included political issue, social reform and independence¹.

One cannot help but agree with him to a certain extent but it is also true that the diversity in the nature of tribal movements was not limited to the above division and must be seen beyond that. In order to understand, the nature and concept of tribal movements during the period under consideration, the article is divided into two parts: pro-colonial and anti-colonial. Looking beyond the homogenous nature of these occurrences, this particular article is going to highlight the transition in the nature of movements from pro-colonial to anti-colonial by reflecting on the political, social, cultural and economic aspects of the movements. This article is also going to highlight different layers of tribal movements like the role of gender, internal hierarchy and the changing role of Dikus from outsider to insider.

¹ Singh, K. S. (2012). a. Tribal Movements. In K. K. Misra & G. Jayaprakashan (Eds.), Tribal movements in India: Visions of K. S. Singh (pp.63-96). New Delhi: Manohar.



Table 1: Tribal Movements of 19th and 20th Century

Name of the Tribe	Course and consequence of revolt
Chuars Area: Nanbhum and Barabhum (West Bengal) Year: 1766-68 Leader: Not available	Defiance of British authority by Chuars; suppression of the Revolt by British through use of force as well as conciliatory measures
Bhils Area: Khandesh Year: 1818-48	Beginning of revolt of Bhils with British occupation of Khandesh (1818) and their defiance of British for 30 years; final suppression through military operations combined with conciliatory measures.
Bhils Area: Shingbhum and Chhota Nagpur Year: 1820, 1822 & 1832	Occupation of Singhbhum by British and revolt of the Hos (1820); its suppression after extensive military operations; they revolt again in 1832.
Kolis Area: Sahyadri Hills (Gujrat and Maharashtra) Year: 1824, 1828, 1839 & 1844-48	Repeated revolts of Kalis and their final suppression after the capture of all their leaders.
Khasis Area: Khasi Hills (Assam & Meghalaya) Year: 1829-32 Leader: Tirut Singh and Bar Manik (Chiefs of Nounklow & Molim respectively)	Unsuccessful attempts of the Khasis to drive away the British from their territory; surrender of all Khasi chiefs, including Tirut Singh, to the British in 1832.
Singphos Area: Assam Year: 1830-39	Suppression of 1830 revolt by Captain Neufville; murder of Colonel-White (British Political Agent of Assam) by Singphos in 1839 but their ultimate defeat by British
Kols Area: Chhota Nagpur Year: 1831-32 Leader: BuddhoBhagat	Suppression of the revolt after extensive military operations of British and death of Bhagat
Koyas Area: Rampa Region (Chodavarm in Andhra Pradesh) Year: 1840, 1845, 1858, 1861-62, 1879-80, 1922-24 Leader: Alluri Sitaramaraju (1922-24)	Repeated revolts of the Koyas, the major ones being the 1879-80 and 1922-24 revolts; capture and execution of Raju by British in May 1924.
Khonds Area: Khondmals (Orrisa) Year: 1846-48, 1855 and 1914 Leader: Chakra Bisayi	The first two revolts, led by Bisayi, were put down with great difficulty by the British.
Santhals Area: Rajmahal Hills (Bihar) Year: 1855-56 Leader: Sidhu & Kanhu	Revolt of Santhals and establishment of their own government (July, 1855); defeat of British under Major Burrough by Santhals; transfer of the disturbed area to the military and final suppression of the revolt by the end of 1856; creation of a separate district of Santhal Paraganas to prevent Santhals from revolting again in future.



Naikdas Area: Panch Mahals (Gujarat) Year: 1858-59 & 1868 Leader: Rupsingh and Joria Bhagat	Revolt of Naikdas under Rupsingh in 1858 and conclusion of peace between British Rupsingh in 1859; their revolt again in 1868, and establishment of a kingdom with Joria as the spiritual head of Rupsingh as temporal head; suppression of the revolt after the capture and execution of Rupsingh and Joria.
Kacha Nagas Area: Cachher (Assam) Year: 1882 Leader: Sambhudhan	-----
Mundas Area: Chhota Nagpur Year: 1899-1990 Leader: Birsa Munda	Foundation of new religious sect, with Singh Bonga as the only true god, but Birsa (1895); - British fears over Birsa's preachings among Mundas, and arrest and imprisonment of Birsa (1895-97); release of Birsa and revival of his doctrine (1898); revolt of Mundas and their attack of churches and police stations (1899); defeat of Mundas by British (Jan, 1900) and capture of Birsa (he died of cholera in jail in June 1900).
Bhils Area: Banswara and Dungapur (southern Rajasthan) Year: 1913 Leader: Govind Guru	It began as a purification movement, but later developed into a political movement; failure of their attempts to set up a Bhil Raj due to British armed intervention.
Oraons Area: Chhota Nagpur Year: 1914-15 Leader: JatraBhagat	Launching of a monotheistic movement by Jatra in 1914 and its transformation into a radical political movement to drive away the British in 1915; its suppression by British through repressive measures.
TanaBhagat Movement Area: Chotanagpur, Jharkhand Year: 1918	Adivasis threatened nonpayment of the Chowikidari tax and rent during Non Cooperation movt.
ThadoeKukis Area: Manipur Year: 1917-19 Leader: Jadonang and his neice Rani Gaidinliu	Their rebellion and guerrilla war against British for two years.
Chenchus Area: Nallamala Hills (Andhra Pradesh) Year: 1921-22 Leader: Hanumanthu	Their revolt against increasing British control over forests.

Deccan Riots



In May and June 1875, peasants of Maharashtra in some parts of Pune and Ahmednagar districts revolted against increasing agrarian distress. The **Deccan Riots** of 1875 targeted conditions of debt peonage (kamiuti) to moneylenders. The rioters' specific purpose was to obtain and destroy the bonds, decrees, and other documents in the possession of the moneylenders. As Indian agriculture was drawn into the world economy, credit, commerce, inequality and growth were interrelated. The cultivators' distress resulted from falling agricultural prices, heavy taxation, and a sense of political powerlessness. The commercialization of agriculture under British land revenue policies burdened small peasants by placing a premium on access to credit to finance productive investments in the land. Employing capital advanced by European merchants, local moneylenders obtained unlimited title to the property and labor of their debtors; it gave them the "power to utterly ruin and enslave the debtor."² During the 19th century, they used this power to control peasant labour, and not their land, which was of little value without people to work it.

These changes in agriculture undermined the communal traditions which had been the basis of Indian village life³. Access to common resources declined steadily because various forms of joint use were misunderstood by the British, access to the forests was restricted, and the British redefined the state's relationship to pastoral communities. **Vasudeo Balwant Phadke** launched a violent campaign against British rule in 1879, aiming to establish an Indian republic by driving them out. However, his insurrection met with limited success. Someone betrayed Phadke to claim a bounty offered by the British; he was arrested and deported to Aden, where he died of a hunger strike in 1883⁴.

Indigo revolt

The **Indigo revolt** (or **Nilbidroha**) was a peasant movement and subsequent uprising of indigo farmers against the indigo planters that arose in Chaugacha village of Nadia in Bengal in 1859. Indigo planting in Bengal dated back to 1777 when Louis Bonnard, a Frenchman introduced it to the Indians. He was probably the first indigo planter of Bengal. He started cultivation at Taldanga and Goalpara near Chandannagar (Hooghly). With the Nawabs of Bengal under British power, indigo planting became more and more commercially profitable because of the demand for blue dye in Europe.

It was introduced in large parts of Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum, North 24 Parganas, and Jessore (present Bangladesh). The indigo planters persuaded the peasants to plant indigo instead of food crops. They provided loans, called dadon, at a very high interest. Once a farmer took such loans he remained in debt for his whole life before passing it to his successors. The price paid by the planters was meagre, only 2.5% of the market price. The farmers could make no profit growing indigo. The farmers were totally unprotected from the indigo planters, who resorted to mortgages or destruction of their property if they were unwilling to obey them. Government rules favoured the planters. By an act in 1833, the planters were granted a free hand in oppression. Even the zamindars sided with the planters. Under this severe oppression, the farmers resorted to revolt.

The Bengali middle class supported the peasants wholeheartedly. Bengali intellectual Harish Chandra Mukherjee described the plight of the poor farmer in his newspaper The Hindu Patriot. However the articles were overshadowed by Dinabandhu Mitra, who depicted the situation in his play Nil Darpan. His play created a huge controversy which was later banned by the East India Company to control the agitation among the Indians.

Kol rebellion of 1831-32

The **Kol uprising**, **Kol rebellion**, also known in British Indian records as the **Kol mutiny** was a revolt of the indigenous Kol people of Chhota Nagpur during 1829-1839 as a reaction to unfair treatment brought on by the systems of land tenure and administration that had been introduced by British powers in the area. The Kol people were joined by other communities including the Mundas, Oraons, Hos leading to some authors also calling it the **Munda uprising**.

²Report of the Committee on the Riots in Poona and Ahmednagar, 1875, Bombay (1876), p. 80. Quoted by Sven Beckert, "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War", American Historical Review, vol. 109, no. 5 (December, 2004).

³Thomas R. Metcalf, "The British and the Moneylender in Nineteenth-Century India", The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 34, No. 4 (December 1962), pp. 390-397

⁴"Report of the Deccan Riots Commission", Parliamentary Papers, 1878, LVIII, paragraph 12.



The uprising was a reaction to the appointment of a Political Agent to the Government in South Bihar and recently ceded districts nearby around 1819. This resulted in many people moving into these areas which were the lands of numerous indigenous tribes. These tribes had no rulers and their lands were divided according to families that were bound by "parhas" or conferences. With the application of new land laws, the indigenous Kols were exploited by outsiders moving into the area and taking up agriculture and commercial activities that were alien to tribal culture.

Many of the lands of the locals were taken away as securities for un-retained loans. The locals whose languages were unknown to the settlers were physically tortured and mistreated in a number of incidents. Another irritation was the taxation on the movement of products such as salt that were formerly freely moved. Corrupt official practices and lawlessness followed. The masses of common people, of whom the Kols were the largest in number, burnt the houses of the newly settled people in revenge⁵⁶⁷⁸. British historiography treated the rebellious tribals as bandits and treated it as a riot that was "successfully" suppressed by British forces.⁹

1921 Mappila Rebellion

By the end of the year 1921, the Mappila Rebellion had reached its crescendo. Massacre and atrocities against Hindus had become the order of the day. For the rebels, killing a —kaffar! or raping a Hindu woman or a child or burning a temple had become a religious duty. There was fear in the air. But the poor man thought he would be safe as he had many Muslims as his servants. One night Mappila rebels stormed his house. They searched the entire house but could not locate him.

In this context, the boy called his 'father' to come out. Feeling reassured, the man appeared on the scene. When the rebels ventured to kill him, the boy declared: —Nobody should touch him, I will behead my father. And without any qualms, the boy cut the old man's throat.

Puzhikkal Narayanan Nair of Nannambra, too, had faced somewhat similar ordeal after his trusted Muslim servants betrayed him. Mappila rebels looted his house, carried off one of the girls and a boy and put to death other seven members of the family. Narayanan Nair made a miraculous escape. The minor girl was rescued from the captivity after six weeks of torture and rape.

The savagery and brutalities committed by Mappila-Muslim rebels against innocent Hindus during the Malabar Rebellion in 1921-22 might embarrass even the most inhuman Islamic State cadres of today. The most unfortunate part of the Malabar saga is that while the perpetrators are being celebrated as freedom fighters getting pensions and other facilities from both Kerala and Central governments, Hindu victims and their kin are left to fend for themselves. Adding insult to injury, Marxist historians, in a bid to co-opt Mappilas, have painted Hindu victims as 'collaborators of imperialists'.

Munda Ulgulaan (1899-1900)

Birsa Munda's slogan threatening the British Raj—Abua raj seterjana, maharani raj tundujana ("Let the kingdom of the queen be ended and our kingdom be established")—is remembered today in areas of Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh¹⁰.

Birsa Munda – a tribal freedom fighter, religious leader and a folk hero belonged to the Munda tribe. Birsa Munda spearheaded an Indian tribal mass movement that arose in the tribal belt of modern Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh in the late 19th century during the British Raj. Munda is one of the most important faces of Indian

⁵Jha, Jagdish Chandra (1958). "The Kol rising of Chotanagpur (1831-33)-its causes". Proceedings of the Indian History Congress. **21**: 440–446. [JSTOR 44145239](#).

⁶Priyadarshi, Ashok (2011). "Tribal rebellions in north Orissa: a study on Kol uprising of Mayurbhanj State (1821-1836)". Proceedings of the Indian History Congress. **71**: 696–705. [JSTOR 44147538](#).

⁷Sharma, K.L. (1976). "Jharkhand Movement in Bihar". Economic and Political Weekly. **11**: 37–43. [JSTOR 436431](#).

⁸Griffiths, Walter G. (1946). *The Kol Tribe of Central India*. Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.

⁹Jha, J.C. (1964). *The Kol Insurrection of Chota-Nagpur*. Thacker, Spink & Co.

¹⁰BirsaMunda commemorative postage stamp and biography India Post, 15 November 1988.



tribal movements against the British, who inspired various tribes not only Mundas but also Kharias and Oraons, who accepted him as their leader.

Birsa Munda was born at Ulihatu in the Bengal Presidency (presently in Jharkhand) on 15 November 1875 into a Munda family. Munda spent his childhood amidst poverty in a typical tribal setup, where he converted to Christianity and became Birsa David in order to receive an education from a missionary school. The British colonial system intensified the transformation of the tribal agrarian system into a feudal state. As the tribals with their primitive technology could not generate a surplus, non-tribal peasantry were invited by the chiefs in Chhotanagpur to settle on and cultivate the land. This led to the alienation of the lands held by the tribals. The new class of Thikadars was of a more rapacious kind and eager to make the most of their possessions.

In 1856 Jagirs stood at about 600, and they held from a village to 150 villages. But by 1874, the authority of the old Munda or Oraon chiefs had been almost entirely annulled by that of the farmers, introduced by the landlords. In some villages they had completely lost their proprietary rights, and had been reduced to the position of farm labourers. To the twin challenges of agrarian breakdown and culture change, Birsa along with the Munda responded through a series of revolts and uprisings under his leadership. In 1895, in Chalakkad village of Tamar, Birsa Munda renounced Christianity, asked his fellow tribesmen to worship only one God and give up worship of bongas. He advised people to follow the path of purity, austerity and prohibited cow-slaughters. He declared himself a prophet who had come to recover the lost kingdom of his people. He said that the reign of the Queen Victoria was over and the Munda Raj had begun. He gave orders to the raiyats (tenant farmers) to pay no rents. The Mundas called him Dharati Aba, the father of earth.

Due to a rumor that those who didn't follow Birsa would be massacred, Birsa was arrested and sentenced to two-year imprisonment. On 28 January 1898, after being released from jail he went with his followers to Chutia to collect the record and to re-establish racial links with the temple. He said that the temple belonged to the Kols. The Christian missionaries wanted to arrest Birsa and his followers, who were threatening their ability to make converts. Birsa went underground for two years but attending a series of secret meetings. During this period he visited the Jagannath temple.

It is said that around 7000 men and women assembled around Christmas of 1899, to herald the Ulgulaan (revolution) which soon spread to Khunti, Tamar, Basia, and Ranchi. The Anglican Mission at Murhu and the Roman Catholic Mission at Sarwada were the main targets. The Birsais openly declared that the real enemies were the British and not Christian Mundas and called for a decisive war against the British. For two years, they attacked places loyal to the British.

On 5 January 1900, Birsa's followers killed two constables at Etkedih. On 7 January, they attacked Khunti Police station, killed a constable, and razed the houses of local shopkeepers. The commissioner, A. Fobes, and deputy commissioner, H.C. Streattfield, rushed to Khunti with an army of 150 to crush the rebellion. The British administration set a reward of Rs 500 for Birsa. The British forces attacked Munda guerillas at Dumbari Hill, indiscriminately firing on and killing hundreds of people. Birsa escaped to the hills of Singhbhum.

He was arrested at Jamkopai forest in Chakradharpur on 3 March 1900. According to Deputy Commissioner Ranchi, vide letter, 460 tribals were made accused in 15 different criminal cases, out of which 63 were convicted. One was sentenced to death, 39 to transportation for life and 23 to imprisonment for terms up to fourteen years. There were six deaths, including that of Birsa Munda in the prison during trials. Birsa Munda died in the jail on 9 June 1900.¹¹

The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857

Seldom do our history books have mention of revolts originating from struggles of indigenous tribes and clans. They have not been given their deserved importance in history. Two years before The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, there was a revolution against the barbaric Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 of the British Raj. It was a revolution for freedom from serfdom under the Mahajani and Zamindari System. This Revolution was The Santhal Rebellion. However, British historians and many national historians perceive the movement as the harbinger of Indian National Congress' movement for independence; thus, little emphasis is given on their struggle to protect their rights.

¹¹Homage to Bhawan Birsa Munda on his Birth Anniversary at Ranchi Archived 10 April 2009 at the Wayback Machine Raj Bhavan (Jharkhand)



The Santhals migrated into India in the 18th century along with other tribes and took shelter in the forests and hills of North India. After the colonisation of Bengal by the British Raj, the British demarcated the Damini Koh region (now in Jharkhand) and invited Santhals to settle in the area in order to reclaim the forest for farming and other forms of cultivation. A great populace of Santhals from Cuttack, Dhalbhum, Manbhum, Hazaribagh, Midnapore, etc. came to settle in these promising lands to enjoy a life like the non-tribals. The Santhals are often termed as —naïve and Noble savages who were peace loving. Their low level of literacy got them caught in the shackles of the Zamindari system. The Britishers, though demarcated lands for these ‘outcasted’ people, but their moot point was to earn profits by exploitation of their land and labour.

CONCLUSION

Protest movements of the oppressed peasants and tribals did not emerge in a full-blown form. In the early stages they are form of social action which the state many look upon as plain crime. Most often in the British official records this transition from crime to rebellion is ignored and the two are seen as the same. Also obscured is the fact that crimes ranging from starvation, thefts to murder spring from the violent conditions of living in the countryside.

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