



Tribal Autonomy and Resistance: A Research Study of Adivasi Uprisings in Indian History

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines the struggle for autonomy among India's Adivasi communities through an analysis of major tribal uprisings from the colonial period to the twentieth century. It investigates the causes, nature, and impacts of these movements, highlighting how land alienation, economic exploitation, and cultural suppression drove them to revolt. The study draws on historical accounts, leader speeches, and legislative outcomes, arguing that the demand for self-rule remains central to understanding Indian democracy and development.

Introduction:

Adivasis, or India's indigenous peoples, have long inhabited the country's forests, hills, and remote regions. Their societies were historically marked by communal land ownership, egalitarian structures, and distinct cultures. With the onset of British colonialism and later policies of the Indian state, Adivasi autonomy came under attack, setting the stage for frequent, militant uprisings. These revolts sought to maintain tribal self-governance against land dispossession, economic exploitation, and cultural marginalization.

Theoretical Framework:

The study uses subaltern and indigenous resistance theory to interpret tribal uprisings. Central to this framework is the argument that Adivasi revolts were not isolated incidents but systematic responses to processes that aimed to undermine tribal autonomy, identity, and rights. The notion of

autonomy—both territorial and cultural—is essential to this analysis.

Methodology:

This research is qualitative and draws upon secondary sources—historical records, government documents, leader speeches, and recent scholarly analyses. Key revolts and movements are selected based on their societal impact and representation of core Adivasi grievances and aspirations.

Major Tribal Uprisings: Detailed Analysis: Santhal Rebellion (1855–56):

The Santhal Rebellion was one of the earliest and largest tribal uprisings against British rule and exploitative zamindars.

Causes: The Permanent Settlement dispossessed Santhals of their ancestral lands. Moneylenders imposed harsh debt, and colonial officials enforced oppressive labor and taxes.

Organization: Led by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, the Santhals declared independence in Bhognadih and marshaled about 60,000 people.

Events: The Santhals attacked colonial establishments and landlords, employing guerrilla tactics in dense forests with bows and arrows. Martial law was declared, and the British regained control through severe force—thousands perished, villages were razed.

Impact: The rebellion led to the formation of the Santhal Parganas district (1855) and tenancy laws which recognized certain tribal rights. The movement's slogan, "We rule our own land... injustice will not be accepted," became a lasting message of tribal resistance.

Munda Ulgulan (1899–1900):

Led by Birsa Munda, the Mundas in present-day Jharkhand rose against land alienation and religious oppression.

Causes: British policies stripped tribals of land and threatened indigenous religious practices.

Leadership: Birsa's vision outlined a fight for restoring community lands and faith: "Our kingdom will come, the British kingdom will go."

Impact: After the movement was suppressed, Birsa's legacy shaped future laws and tribal identity—his birthday is celebrated as a day of tribal pride.

Bhil Revolts (1818–1831; 1913):

The Bhils of western India rebelled against colonial and local rulers who denied forest rights and imposed new taxes.

Organization: Several campaigns involved guerrilla warfare in the Aravalli hills, requiring repeated British suppression efforts.

Impact: Following prolonged resistance, concessions were granted on taxes and forest use.

Kol Rebellion (1831–32):

The Kol tribes, led by Buddho Bhagat, revolted when outsider businessmen and landlords dispossessed them and imposed new taxes.

Events: The Kols attacked settlements, burning homes and killing those seen as exploiters. The rebellion required military intervention from Calcutta and Benares.

Impact: The British acknowledged Kol grievances, offering limited protection for tribal lands.

Khond Uprisings (1837–56):

The Khonds of Odisha resisted colonial efforts to change tribal customs and seize territory. Led by Chakra Bisoi, their struggle lasted nearly two decades.

Impact: After years of turbulence, some conciliatory measures were adopted.

Bastar Rebellion (1910):

When British forest policies restricted tribal land and customary rights, tribals of Bastar rose in revolt, demanding restoration of rights and resisting feudal exactions. The uprising remains emblematic of tribal struggle against restrictive resource policies.

Jharkhand Movement:

The twentieth-century movement for a tribal state culminated in the formation of Jharkhand in 2000, marking a new phase in Adivasi political assertion.

Discussion:

Tribal revolts shared common features: resistance to land alienation, economic exploitation, outsider intrusion, and

cultural suppression. Guerrilla warfare, charismatic leadership, and community mobilization defined their nature. While tribal uprisings were distinct from mainstream nationalist movements in motives and methods, they contributed fundamentally to India's anti-colonial struggle. They forced legislative changes and greater attention to the rights and autonomy of indigenous peoples.

Conclusion:

The history of Adivasi resistance reveals that demands for autonomy and justice are central to India's democratic evolution.

Powerful voices—Birsa Munda, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, Jaipal Singh Munda—remind us that tribal societies exemplify true grassroots democracy and resilience. Despite legal reforms, tribal communities face ongoing challenges—land loss, economic hardship, cultural erosion—but their movements continue to inspire change.

As Jaipal Singh Munda said:

“True freedom will come to India only when justice reaches the tribal hamlets.”

Recognition of Adivasi autonomy is essential for an inclusive and just Indian society.