

discuss the character of major tribal uprising in British India in the 19th century

causes intro
character body

conclusion

organization
leadership objectives
program/ method
membership
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conclusion

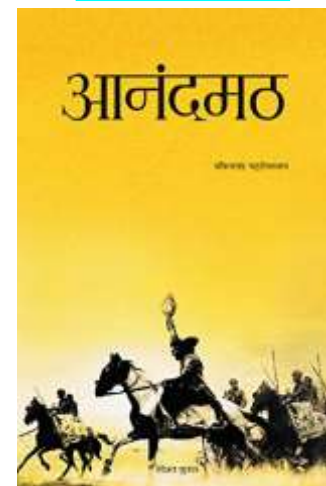
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GS Foundation 2024: Modern India
Handout 17: Tribal and Peasant Revolts (2)
Nikhil Sheth

Peasant Movements

(1) Sanyasi-Faqir Rebellion, Bengal (1770-1820s)

- Sanyasi
 - The Hindu Naga and Giri armed Sanyasis once formed a part of the armies of the Nawabs of Awadh and Bengal, and also of the Maratha and Rajput chiefs.
 - In 1770, Bengal was visited by a devastating famine leading to anarchy. Originally peasants, even some evicted from land, these sanyasis were joined by a large number of dispossessed small zamindars, disbanded soldiers and rural poor.
 - Sanyasis revolted against taxes imposed on pilgrims (immediate trigger). Now, they attacked English factories and started collecting money from cities. After nearly half-a-century long strife, the Sanyasi Uprising ended in the second quarter of the 19th century.
- Faqirs
 - Faqirs were a group of wandering Muslim religious mendicants. Shortly after the annexation of Bengal in 1776-77, **Majnum Shah**, the leader of these Faqirs, began to levy contributions on the zamindars and peasants and, defied the British authority.
 - After Majnum Shah's death, **Chirag Ali Shah**, supported by Pathans, Rajputs and the disbanded Indian soldiers extended the operations to the northern districts of Bengal. Two famous Hindu leaders who supported him were **Bhawani Pathak** and **Devi Chaudhurani**, a woman.
 - The Faqirs led by Chirag Ali Shah gained considerable strength and attacked English factories, seized their goods, cash, arms and ammunitions. There were a number of skirmishes between the Faqirs and Company's troops. The Faqirs were finally brought under control at the beginning of the nineteenth century.



The cause of Faqir-Sanyasis formed the background for the work **Anandmath**, by the famous Bengali novelist, **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee**. 'Vande Matram', which was to become the national song during the Swadeshi Movement, was penned in the same novel. Another novel **Devi Chaudhurani** also mentions the revolt.

(2) Chuar Revolt, Jangal Mahal (1766-1816)

- When the East India Company first began collecting revenue in the Jangal Mahal district of Bengal in 1765, the Chuars revolted against them.
- Ganga Narayan Singh led a revolt against the British in 1832–33, called Bhumij rebellion, which was the continuation of Chuar Revolt.

(3) Rangpur Rebellion (Dhing), Bengal (1783)

- An armed rebellion in Rangpur area of Bengal against the illegal exactions of company and its revenue contractors.
- Basically, a revenue contractor Devi Singh and his agents had unleashed a reign of terror on these areas. This revolt started under the leadership of Dhiraj Narayan and Nuruluddin.

(4) Pagal Panthi Rebellion, Mymensingh Region, northern Bengal (1824)

- Karam Shah was the founder of the Pagal Panth - a semi religious sect having influence in the northern districts of Bengal. This order sought to uphold religious principles and the rights of landless peasants in Bengal.
- An activist fervour to the sect was imparted by Tipu, the son and successor of Karam Shah. Tipu was motivated by both religious and political motives and took up the cause of the tenants against the oppression of the zamindars.
 - Apart from excessive zamindari revenue, there were additional reasons for the resentment of peasants in this region. The British wanted to construct roads in these areas to deploy army easily for the Burma war and ryots were forced to do begar in the road construction.
 - To meet the costs of war, severe taxation was imposed on the region's peasants by the Company and the landlords. Forcible collections and usurpation of property increased peasant discontent and they resisted strongly.
- Revolt
 - Tipu captured Sherpur in 1825 and assumed royal power.
 - A rumour spread among the peasants that raj of company and zamindars is ending and the reign of Tipu is imminent. Peasants gave an armed resistance to the British forces that arrived in the area.
 - The insurgents extended their activities to Garo Hills.
 - The area remained disturbed in the 1830s and 1840s.

(5) Faraizi Movement, Eastern Bengal (1838-51)

- The Faraizis were the followers of a Muslim sect founded by Haji Shariat-Allah of Faridpur in Eastern Bengal.
 - They advocated radical religious, social and political changes. The sect tried to spread pure Islam and persuade people in East Bengal to give up un-Islamic practices. They appointed Caliphs at Dacca, Pawna, Jessore and Barasal to spread his thoughts. (Reformist dimension).
 - Additionally, the movement also tried to protect the rights of the peasants. It was against forced cultivation of Opium, feudal exploitation by zamindars and tyranny

of indigo planters. The Faraizis took the aggrieved peasants to the courts and sued the concerned zamindars. This movement was in a way a struggle between the lower class and the bourgeoisie.

- Shariat-Allah son **Dadu Mian** (1819-60) organised his followers with an aim to expel the English intruders from Bengal.
- The Faraizi disturbances continued from 1838 to 1857. Most of the Faraizis joined the Wahabi ranks. Later on, during the partition of Bengal in 1905, the leaders/followers of the movement supported the Nawab Salimullah of Dacca and British in favour of the partition.

(6) Narkelberia Uprising, Bengal (1831)

- **Titu Mir** adopted Wahhabism, and advocated Sharia laws, bypassing/contradicting the tradition of folkish Islam in Bengal.
- However, his revolt can also be located in the larger context of uprisings of peasants in Bengal, who were the first to suffer the impact of colonial systems of taxation and agricultural extraction. Mir refused to pay the enhanced tax imposed on poor peasants in North 24 Paraganas district and then organised and led protests, which irked the land holders, both Hindu and Muslim.
- Eventually the zamindars and British administrators jointly mobilised forces against Titu. A large British force was sent by Governor-General William Bentinck to Narkelberia which laid seige to Titu's bamboo fortress in 1831. Finally, the fortress fell and Titu was bayoneted to death; 50 of his comrades were killed. At least 800 of Titu's soldiers were captured and 140 were sent to prison.



(7) Ramosi Revolt (1820s, 1880s), Maharashtra

- Ramosi tribals lived on the western Ghats. Ramoshis used to work for night patrolling and fort security in Maratha region and collected taxes from few peasants in return. But after the defeat of the Maratha Empire, this right got vanquished. In **1826**, **Umaji Naik** organized the peasants.
- In **1879** under the leadership of **Vasudev Balwant Phadake**, Ramosis revolted again in the wake of the devastating famine. Starting with dacoities, they soon took revolutionary methods and guerilla warfare. But the movement was suppressed. Phadake was captured and tried in Pune court and transported for life to Aden, Yemen. (His was defended by GV Joshi)



(8) The Moplah Rebellions (Malabar 1835 - 1921):

The Moplah rebellions of Malabar, South India, were **not only directed against the British but also the Hindu landlords**. Hike in revenue demand and reduction of field size, coupled with the oppression of officials, resulted in widespread peasant unrest among the Moplahs of Malabar.

Background

In the traditional Malabar land system, the jenmi held land by birth right and were mostly high-caste Hindus. The land was given by the ruling raja to **Namboodiri Brahmins** whose obligation was to look after the temple and related institutions, and to the chieftains (mostly **Nayars**), who provided martial aid when needed. They let the land out to others for cultivation. The other main sections of the Malabar society were the kanamdar, who were mostly **Moplahs**, the verumpattamdar (cultivators) and agricultural labourers. The peasants were mostly the Muslim Moplahs.

British by recognizing the jenmis as the absolute owners of the land gave them the right to evict the tenants at will. This reduced the others to the status of tenants and leaseholders. The courts and the law officers sided with the jenmis. Once the jenmi landlords, who had the backing of the revenue officials, the law courts and the police started tightening their hold and demands on the subordinate classes, the Moplah peasantry rose up in revolt.

Twenty-two rebellions took place between 1836 and 1854. None, however, proved successful.

- The first outbreak occurred in 1836 and the ones in 1841 and 1849 being quite serious.
- **The first phase** of the uprisings from 1836 to 1854 witnessed 22 revolts and had messianic overtones. The faithful Muslims died in the belief that as Ahadis they would go straight to heaven.
- **The second phase** of the revolts was recorded in 1882-85, and another spate of outbursts in 1896.

The pattern of the rebellion was uniform with usually a group of Moplah youths attacking a Brahmin jenmi or a Nayar official or a jenmi's servant, burning or defiling a temple or attacking the landlords' house. The police would then crack down on them and the rebels would then seek refuge in either a mosque or the temple.

Peasant Movements after 1857

Indigo Revolt (1859-60)

Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 was the most widespread and radical peasant movement. It was led by Digambar, Vishnu Biswas and Malda's Rafiq Mandal in Gobindpur village.

This was a direct fight against exploitation due to barbaric atrocities of the Indigo planters. Indigo was an important export commodity for the East India Company. Mostly Europeans were involved in the indigo manufacturing industry. In Bengal, the indigo planters, nearly all Europeans, exploited the local peasants by forcing them to grow indigo on the portion of their lands instead of the better paying crops like rice. The planters forced the peasants to take advance sums and enter into fraudulent contracts which were then used against the peasants. The planters intimidated the peasants through kidnappings, illegal confinements, flogging, attacks on women and children, seizure of cattle, burning and demolition of houses and destruction of crops.

The anger of the peasants exploded in 1859 when, led by Digambar Biswas and Bishnu Biswas of Nadia district, they decided not to grow indigo under duress and resisted the physical pressure of the planters and their lathiyals (retainers) backed by police and the courts. They also organised a counter force against the planters' attacks. The planters also tried methods like evictions and enhanced rents. The ryots replied by going on a rent strike by refusing to pay the enhanced rents and by physically resisting the attempts to evict them.

Gradually, they learned to use the legal machinery and initiated legal action supported by fund collection. The Bengali intelligentsia played a significant role by supporting the peasants' cause through *newspaper campaigns, organisation of mass meetings, preparing memoranda on peasants' grievances and supporting them in legal battles*.

Later, a committee (Indigo Commission) was set up by the government to examine the condition of the peasants. Based on its recommendations, the Government issued a notification in 1860 that the ryots could not be compelled to grow indigo and that it would ensure that all disputes were settled by legal means. But the planters were already closing down factories and indigo cultivation was virtually wiped out from Bengal by the end of 1860.

The major reasons for the success of the Indigo Revolt were:

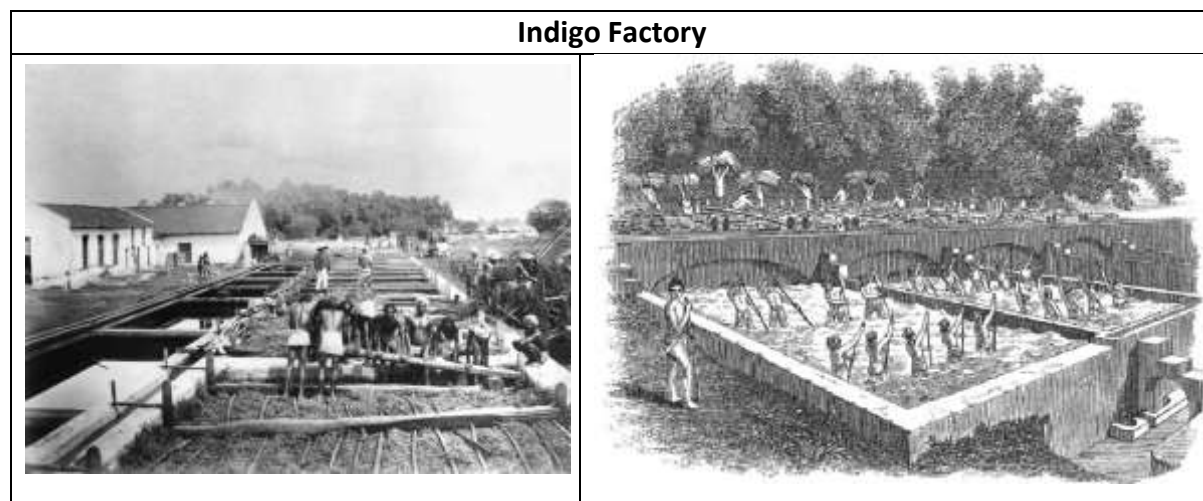
- The tremendous initiative, cooperation, organization and discipline of the ryots.
- Complete unity among Hindu and Muslim peasants.
- Leadership for the movement was provided by the more well-off ryots and in some cases by petty zamindars, moneylenders and ex-employees of the planters.



The vivid portrayal of oppression of the peasants has been described by **Deenbandhu Mitra** in '**Neel Darpan**'.

It was translated into English by **Michael Madhusudan Dutta** and published by **Reverend James Long**, for which he was jailed with the charge of sedition and later deported.

- Role of Intelligentsia, legal support and role of press (Harish Chandra Mukherjee, editor of Hindoo Patriot)



Pabna Revolt of Bengal, 1873

During the 1870s and 1880s, large parts of Eastern Bengal witnessed agrarian unrest caused by oppressive practices of the zamindars. The zamindars resorted to **enhanced rents** beyond legal limits and prevented the tenants from acquiring **occupancy rights** under Bengal Tenancy Act of 1859. To achieve their ends, the zamindars resorted to forcible evictions, seizure of cattle and crops and prolonged, costly litigation in courts where the poor peasant found himself at a disadvantage.

Having had enough of the oppressive regime, the peasants of Yusufshahi Pargana in Pabna district formed an **agrarian league** to resist the demands of the zamindars.

- The league organised a rent strike, the ryots refused to pay the enhanced rents, challenging the zamindars in the courts. Funds were raised by ryots to fight the court cases. The struggles spread throughout Pabna and to other districts of East Bengal.
- The main form of struggle was that of **legal resistance**; **there was very little violence**.

Though the peasant discontent continued to linger on till 1885, most of the cases had been solved, partially through official persuasion and partially because of zamindars' fears. Many peasants were able to acquire occupancy rights and resist enhanced rents. The Government also promised to undertake legislation to protect the tenants from the worst aspects of zamindari oppression. In 1885, the Bengal Tenancy Act was passed.

Reasons for success:

- What persuaded the zamindars and the colonial regime to reconcile themselves to the movement was the fact that its aims were limited to the redressal of the immediate grievances of the peasants. It was **not aimed at the zamindari system**.
- A number of young Indian intellectuals supported the peasants' cause. These included **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, R.C. Dutt and the Indian Association under Surendranath Banerjee**.
- Once again, the Bengal peasants showed **complete Hindu-Muslim solidarity**, even though the majority of the ryots were Muslim and the majority of zamindars Hindu.

- An important feature of this movement was not against the British rulers. On the contrary, the peasants were willing to be tenants of the Queen.

Deccan Riots (1875)

Causes:

- The ryots of Deccan region of western India suffered heavy taxation under the **Ryotwari system**.
- Here again the peasants found themselves trapped in a **vicious network with the moneylender** as the exploiter and the main beneficiary. These moneylenders were mostly **outsiders - Marwaris or Gujaratis**.
- The conditions had worsened due to a crash in cotton prices due the end of the American civil war in 1864 (after short-lived boom), the Government's decision to raise the land revenue by 30% in 1867, and a succession of bad harvests.

- **Nagpur Railway** started in 1867
- **Bombay Stock Exchange** est. in 1875 by a cotton merchant Premchand Roychand

In 1874-75, the growing tension between the moneylenders, and the peasants resulted in a **social boycott** movement organised by the ryots against the "outsider" moneylenders. This social boycott spread rapidly to the villages of Poona, Ahmednagar, Sholapur and Satara. Soon the social boycott was transformed into **agrarian riots with systematic attacks on the moneylenders' houses and shops**. The **debt bonds and deeds were seized and publicly burnt**.

The Government succeeded in repressing the movement. As a conciliatory measure, the **Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act** was passed in 1879. This time also, the modern nationalist intelligentsia of Maharashtra supported the peasants' cause.

Dirang Movement (1893-94)

In the Kamrup and Dirang areas of Assam, a new land revenue settlement system was rolled out in 1893-94 in which the land revenue rates were hiked 50 to 70 per cent.

To face up to this challenge, rural councils were set up under the leadership of rural elites. In these councils, it was decided that the payment of land revenue would be stopped. In order to implement this decision on a significant scale, social boycott was also invoked so that whosoever went against this decision. An important feature of this movement was the **method of protest through the system of Panchayat and Dhobi-Nai Bandh**. This is perhaps the first instance of such a **comprehensive social boycott**.

Jorhat Public Assembly supported the call for land revenue demand reduction and the Bengali moderate congress leader Ras Bihari Bose raised this issue in the Imperial Legislative Council. This movement continued further under the leaders like Pushpram Kanhar.

19th century Tribal Revolts

Palamau revolt (1790)

- It was first major tribal revolt against the British land revenue system began in Palamu in 1790 where local tribals rose against the exploitation of zamindars. The police action by the local raja aggravated the situation. The British made a bid to appease the restive tribals by replacing the incumbent raja. But it wasn't a permanent solution.
- Similarly, Cheros (1817) and Mundas (1819) revolted in favour of old zamindars that had been emasculated by the company rulers.

Ho Revolt (1820)

- Hos tribals revolted in 1820 CE at a place called Porahat, on the border of modern Orissa and West Bengal. Zamindars suppressed it with the help of company sepoy till 1821-22.
- But the tribals had to make significant concessions in the agreement e.g. they had to accept the sovereignty of the company, agree to pay taxes to the zamindar, allow other communities to settle in their villages, and let their children be taught Hindi or Odia.

Kol revolt (1822)

- Unrest of Kol tribals of Chotanagapur region began in 1822 CE. In Chotanagapur region, tribals region were deeply upset with the move of British government to impose a 4 anna cess per house on the production of a mildly intoxicating drink produced from rice (hariya) in 1822 CE. It was implemented from 1830 CE. Opium was being coercively cultivated in the area from 1827 onwards.
- Eventually, tribals united themselves and broke out in a revolt in 1831 CE which is known as the Kol revolt. It was led by Sindrai Manki and Bindrai Manki. On 11th December 1831, people of Tamar and Bargaon villages gathered in Lanka village and decided to launch a movement against the foreign rule, zamindars and diku (outsiders).
- Bhumij Revolt of 1833-34 was actually an extension of the Kol revolt in which the British rule and zamindars were once again targeted. This revolt was suppressed by the Captain Thomas Wilkinson.

Santhal Hul (1855-56)

Amongst the tribal revolts of 19th century, the Santhal revolt was the most remarkable one. It took place in 1855-1856 CE.

In the sixty-odd years after Robert Clive's victory in Plassey in 1757, the British gradually settled Santhals. With the introduction of permanent settlement in Bengal in 1793, the Santhals were employed as labourers with the promise of wages or rent-free lands.

From the 1820s officials encouraged landless indigenous Santhals to migrate from the jungle plateau (Chota Nagpore) into the uplands of 'Lower Bengal' — the core of which was the Damin-i-Koh and the Rajmahal Hills." However, they were forced to become agricultural serfs, exploited at will. They soon developed the forest land on their own labour and started cultivation.

Soon the outsider zamindars and moneylenders started to deceitfully grab their land at the behest of the British. They were made to pay rent on their own land, and they were punished severely if they failed to pay on time. They were also constantly being exploited by the moneylenders who gave loans at exorbitant interest (50 to 500%)

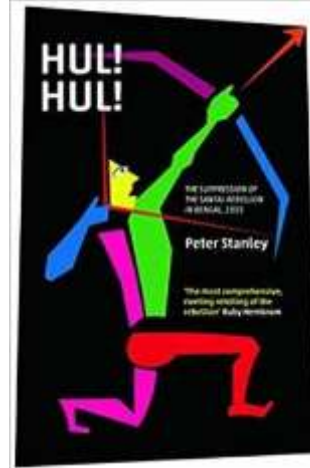
- The Company's government too protected the oppresso
- rs rather than redressing the grievances of the Santhals, which turned them against the British.
- The beginning of railway construction in the area also alarmed them because most of the Santhals were made to do begar but paid meagre sums.

Sahib rule is trouble full,
Shall we go or shall we stay?
Eating, drinking, clothing,
For everything we are troubled;
Shall we go or shall we stay?
(Santhal song)

Up to 1854, the unrest among the Santhals peaked. On 30th June 1855, approximately 6000 tribals from 400 villages assembled in Bhaganidih for a public meeting. A unanimous decision was taken to stage an open rebellion in order to chase the outsiders away, to replace the foreign rule with a Satyuga and to set up a self-rule based on justice and religion. Two main leaders of the Santhal Revolt, Sidhu and Kanhu Muru declared that the god Thakurji had decreed that the Santhal country no longer belonged to the sahebs, so the Santhals should take up arms for its liberation. Thakurji would himself fight on their side.

Within a month, the rebellion had assumed a formidable shape. The rebels cut off the postal and railway communications between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal, proclaimed the end of the Company's rule and commencement of the Santhal regime. They attacked the houses of moneylenders, zamindars, white planters, railway engineers and British officials. The open war with the British continued till February 1856.

Marshal Law was imposed on the areas and bounties were announced for the capture of their leaders. The rebellion was crushed ruthlessly in 1856.



Stanley shows, the Hul, inadvertently, turned out to be a concerted effort as “[other] non-Santals also joined the Hul. Company records refer to rebels who were manifestly not Santals. Santal metal tools and weapons, for example, were made by Bengali smiths living in their villages, and the records contain references to Hindu cattle-herders and oil-men who often lived among their Santal neighbours, and who became swept up in the turbulence of the Hul.”



An illustration of an engagement during the Santal rebellion which appeared in The Illustrated London News in 1856

More than 15,000 Santhals were killed while tens of villages were destroyed. Sido was betrayed and captured and killed in August 1855 while Kanhu was arrested by accident at the tail-end of the rebellion in February 1866. And 'the Rajmahal Hills were drenched with the blood of the fighting Santhal peasantry'.

Although the British crushed the rebellion, the Santhal revolt wasn't completely unsuccessful as the British authorities were compelled to create a separate district called the **Santhal Pargana** due to it.

Khond Uprisings (1837-56)

- The Khonds lived in vast hill tracts stretching from Tamilnadu to Bengal, covering Central Provinces, and in virtual independence due to the inaccessible mountainous terrain. Their uprisings from 1837 to 1856 were directed against the British, in which the tribals of Ghumsar, China-ki-Medi, Kalahandi and Patna, actively participated. The movement was led by Chakra Bisoi in the name of the young Raja.
- The main issue was the attempt by the government to suppress human sacrifice (mariah), introduction of new taxes by the British and the influx of zamindars and sahuikars (money-lenders) into their areas, which was causing the tribals untold misery.
- The British formed a Mariah Agency, against which the Khonds fought with tangi, a kind of battle axe, bows, arrows, and even swords. Later, Savaras and some local militia clans also joined in, led by Radhakrishna Dandasena. Chakra Bisoi disappeared in 1855, after which the movement petered out.

Rampa revolt (1840-62)

- The hill chiefs of the Koya and Konda Dora tribes of the Rampa area revolted many times against their chiefs from 1840 CE to 1862 CE. The reason for March 1840 revolt was that these mansabdars tried to increase levy on timber wood and grazing land. At its height, the revolt covered an area as large as 5000 square kilometre and it took 6 regiments of the Madras Infantry to suppress it.
- Later, in the Vishakhapattanam agency, a Konda Dora chief named Kora Mallayya claimed that he was possessed by the gods in 1900 CE. He gathered some 4000 to 5000 tribals around him and claimed that he was an incarnation of one of the Pandava brothers and his infant son was an incarnation of Lord Krishna. He used to claim that he would fight the British out the region.

Koya Rebellion (1850s-70s)

- It took place during 1879-80 in the eastern Godavari tract of present-day Andhra Pradesh and also affected some portions of Malkangiri district in Orissa. Its hub was in the 'Rampa country' of Chodavaram where tribal Koya and Konda Sara hill chiefs **had risen against their overlord, a mansabdar family that was in collusion with the British** in 1803, 1840, 1845, 1858, 1861 and 1862.
- The 1879-80 rebellion was led by Tomma Sora and addressed problems faced by tribals, like erosion of customary rights over forests, mansabdar's efforts to enhance taxes on timber and grazing, police exactions, exploitation by moneylenders, and new excise regulations restricting domestic production of toddy. Tomma Sora was hailed as the king of Malkangiri. The rebellion at its height affected 5,000 square miles and the peasants

took over a police station. Sora was shot dead by the police and the movement collapsed under the massive assault of six regiments of the Madras infantry. In 1886 another uprising took place here. The rebels, led by Raja Anantayyar, formed themselves into Ram Dandu (Ram's Army) and appealed to the Maharaja of Jeypore to help them in throwing out the British. This uprising was 'proto-nationalist' in nature.

Munda Ulgulan (1899)

Among the 19th century tribal revolts, the Munda revolt of 1899-1900 CE was an important one. It was led by Birsa Munda. It was also known as Ulgulan or the Great Upehaval.

Before 1850s, Mundas rose up in rebellion seven times against the landlords, dikus, money-lenders and the British, who sided with the oppressors. In the post-1857 period with a hope of better future, many Mundas turned to the Evangelical Lutheran Mission, which was overseeing mission work in Chhotanagpur.

The Mundas were oppressed due to the disregard for khuntkatti rights by the zamindars bonded labour, begar, etc. The transformation of the Mundari agrarian system into non-communal, feudal, zamindari or individual tenures was the key issue. Moneylender and merchant thekedars (forest contractors) added to the Munda woes. Soon, many Mundas became more militant and broke away seeking redressal of their grievances, once they realised that the missionaries could not provide a solution to them. This resulted in the identification of the Christian missionaries as extensions of the colonial officials by the tribals.

Initially, tribal leaders raised their voice against this systematic exploitation. An interesting feature of the Munda revolt is that, before they turned to an armed revolt, the Mundas took recourse to legal remedies for alleviation of pain of the Mundas. It is only when all hopes were dashed, they took up arms.

During 1890s, 'Sardari Larai' (war of the leaders) was fought with the aim of expelling dikus, and restoration of the Munda domination over their homeland. While it failed, it did not peter out but remained dormant and in need of a charismatic leader. It was given a new life by Birsa Munda.

The Ulgulan (Great Tumult) of Birsa Munda in the region south of Ranchi in 1899-1900 is the best-known tribal rebellion of this period. Under him, the movement acquired a millenarian character under Birsa Munda. Birsa had received some education from the missionaries and later came under Vaishnava influence. His initial popularity was based on his claim of possessing medicinal and healing powers, by which his followers could become invulnerable. The Mundas envisaged an **ideal and just society, which would be free from exploiters, both indigenous and European.** Women too participated in the movement. Birsa called himself Dharti Aba, father of the world.

The uprising began on the Christmas Eve of 1899, when the Birsaites attacked the converts who had gathered to observe the Christmas celebrations. Thereafter, they burned many villages and churches. Police became their target in 1900, The rebels were defeated in a fight at Sail Rakab hill, and Birsa died in jail. Nearly 350 Mundas were tried, of whom three were hanged and 44 transported for life. However, the Birsaites survive till date amongst the

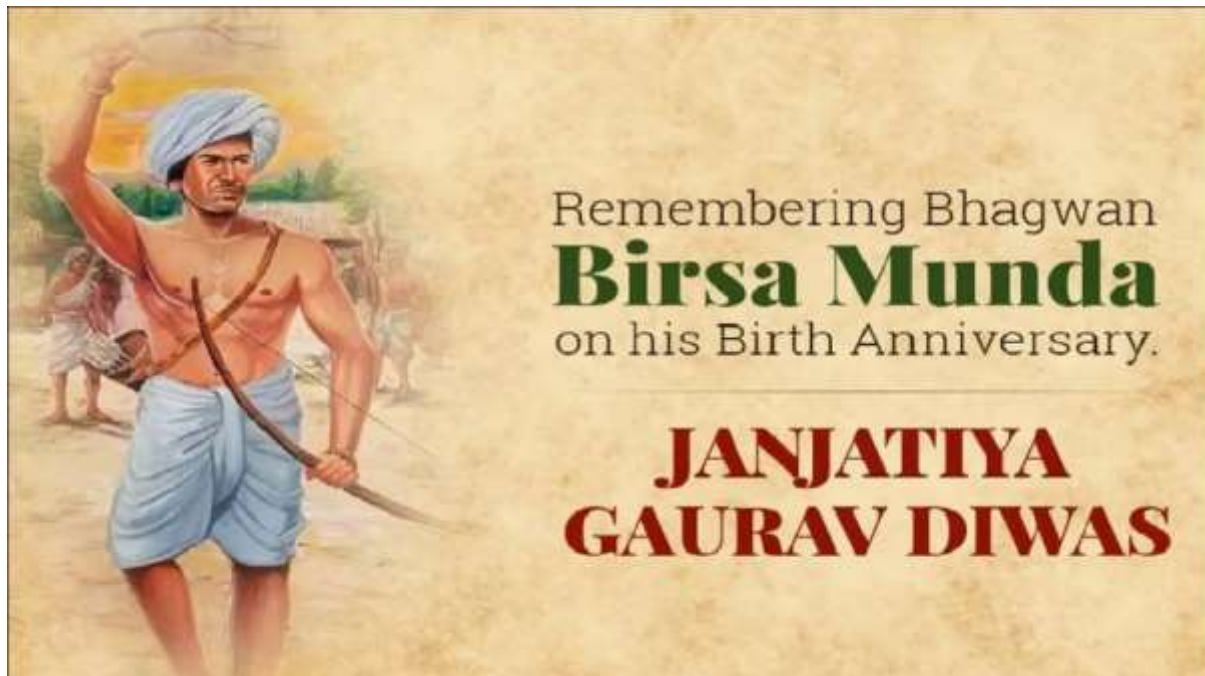


Mundas. They uphold monotheism and puritanical social reform in the hope of distant deliverance rather than an immediate one.

Some belated relief was provided by the **Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908** with recognition being given to joint farming rights and ban on beth begari or forced labour. Though the claim that the Ulgulan was a full-fledged nationalist is a bit far-fetched, a primitive but basic anti-imperialist thrust can be observed in it.

Saheb Katong Katong, Rari Katong Katong . . .

(O father, kill the Europeans, kill the other castes O kill, kill...).





Life, legend of tribal icon Birsa Munda

"*BIR BIRSA ne baagh mara* (The brave Birsa killed a tiger)". This passing reference is all I could recollect on tribal icon Birsa Munda during my early years of education. That was because while mainstream historians recognised the contribution of leaders such as Chandragupta Maurya right up to socialist politician Jayaprakash Narayan, very few acknowledged the role Birsa Munda played in India's tribal rights movement and freedom struggle.

It wasn't until JC Jha, professor of history at Patna University, published his seminal work on the 'Kol revolt' — the mutiny of the tribal people against economic exploitation in 1831-1832 — in the 60s and his student, Kumar Suresh Singh, took his work forward that Birsa Munda began to be recognised as an important historical figure. Singh went on to become an IAS officer and served in Khunti, the epicentre of the Birsa Munda rebellion.

It was his book, originally titled *The Dust Storm and the Hanging Mist* and later published by Oxford University Press as *Birsa Munda and his Movement 1874-1901*, that offered the first mainstream account of the life and times of Birsa Munda — from his transformation from a Christian convert to a healer and prophet and finally, a rebel who is credited with coining the war cry "*Ulgulan* (Revolt)".

Born in the late 19th Century, around 1874, in a poor, peasant family, Munda grew up at his aunt's home in Chlakad, away from his father's birthplace in Khunti. There are stories of the crippling poverty that surrounded him and of days spent without food.

Munda converted to Christianity in 1886 and a ceremony was performed on this occasion. At the root of such conversions lay the community's struggle for survival: the promise that their land, which they had been deprived of due to the rise of the feudal system and the resultant economic exploitation, would be returned to them.

Though Munda trusted the missionaries, he fell out with them and quit his missionary school. This was to be the turning point of his life, resulting in him coining the catchphrase: "*Saheb Saheb ek topi* (The British and missionaries wear the same hat)." It laid the seeds of anti-missionary and anti-British ideas in his mind.

Birsa was deeply influenced by tribal chieftains — also known as Sardars — and by their silent resistance between 1858



Born in the late 19th Century, Munda was a Christian convert and healer before he turned a rebel

and 1896 to British repression. Their petitions and complaints to the police and collector, and even to the court, against their economic exploitation and demanding restoration of land rights fell on deaf years. According to Ranchi Gazetteers, the tribal communities paid Rs 1 lakh over a decade as fees to lawyers, clerks and court staff. Such was the exploitation. The tribal socio-economic system was disintegrating, yet the resistance remained peaceful until 1886.

Between 1894 and 1896, Birsa turned spiritual and was known as "Birsa, the roghar (healer of diseases)" and with that grew tales of his miraculous powers. He also briefly propagated his own religion, Birsait, which was said to be influenced by both Christianity and Vaishnavism. Birsa also painted himself with turmeric, throwing a powerful aura around him. Here we also get a peek into the mind of a master strategist: he was willing to set the narrative and communicate, whether through social or religious means.

The last decade of the 19th century was also the culmination of various rebellions across the country: Rampa revolt on the banks of the Godavari by Alluri Sitarams Raju, Bhil Revolt in Rajasthan under Guru Govindgiri, Dhur rebellion in Chhattisgarh and, simulta-

neously, in Keonjhar Odisha.

The failure of the silent rebellion by tribal chieftains had a huge impact on Birsa. Then came the political movement of 1895, when Birsa used his popularity to exhort people to not pay rents on their lands. The tone of Birsa's preachings also changed — he said that he would not heed to the converted, and the outsider.

On August 22, 1895, Birsa was arrested by the British on charges of conspiracy to "disturb the peace of the area".

Supporters in thousands thronged Khunti, where his trial was being conducted. He was released after two years, but the rebellion was far from over. Birsa Munda wanted the land freed from European missionaries as well as the British officials and continued the movement to assert their rights of Munda tribes as being the true owner of the land.

It resulted in several bow-and-arrow attacks by the Munda tribes on foreigners, and culminated in arson, when a part of the Khunti police station was burnt down.

The British retaliated and many of his supporters died in police firing on Sail Rakab Hill, where they had taken refuge. Several people died and Birsa Munda was arrested in February 1900. A few months later, he died in prison, possibly due to cholera.

As the death fuelled the discontent among the tribals, British officials conceded and prepared a 'records of rights' of the tribal land owners. The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, which has bearings in Jharkhand even today, put in place restrictions of the sale or transfer of tribal lands.

Despite this rich history, barring a few instances where Birsa Munda was remembered, it was not until 1982 — when Munda's statue was erected in Rourkela, Odisha, 130 kilometres away from Khunti, by daily-wage workers who faced police brutalities — that Birsa Munda was thrust into public consciousness.

As word spread, a photograph of Munda was unveiled in Parliament in 1989, and a statue came up in 1998. Since last year, the Central government has been marking Birsa Munda's birth anniversary on November 15 as 'Adivasi Gaurav Diwas (Tribal Pride Day)'. On November 15, India's first tribal President, Droupadi Murmu, paid her respects at Ulihatu, considered the birthplace of Birsa Munda.

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The inspiration for New India: The unsung martyrs of Mangarh

More than 1,500 tribal freedom fighters died, battling colonial rule. India's growth story was incomplete when the tribals were left behind. In New India, the community must have a prominent place.

Written by **Arjun Ram Meghwal**

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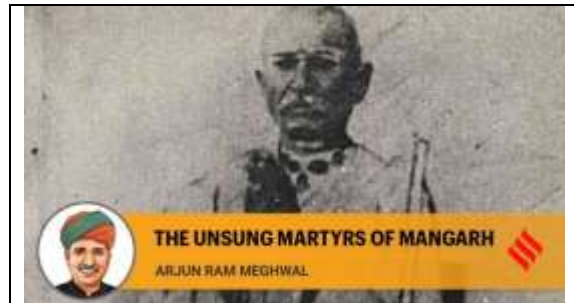
The [Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav](#) is an apt occasion to introspect and motivate people to make sure the nation scales new heights. Several heroes who sacrificed their lives for the country during the freedom struggle have remained unsung. On November 15, the country celebrated the second [Janjatiya Gaurav Divas](#), the birth anniversary of Birsa Munda, by recollecting the valour of tribal freedom fighters. Today, we pay our respects to the courageous [tribal martyrs](#) led by Govind Guru, who fought the British rulers in the early [20th](#) century.

Born in a [nomadic community](#) in the Dungarpur-Banswara region of Rajasthan, Govind Guru was influenced by the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati to work for the socio-religious upliftment of people from the [Bhil community](#). While the colonial state was engaged in an organised loot of India's resources, Govind Guru drew from Indian traditions and ideals to promote harmony amongst the tribal communities. He was 25 when he founded the Samp Sabha for this purpose in 1883. From 1903 onwards, Mangarh hill became famous for an annual congregation of the [Bhils](#) and other tribal groups in the region.

At that time, the demand for [self-rule](#) was gathering currency amongst the people of the country. The [divide-and-rule](#) policy of the British, the Bengal Partition and the drain of wealth from the country had dented the moral foundation of [British rule](#). Govind Guru demanded that the [colonial state](#) reduce the revenue rate during famines and stop encroaching on the religious freedom of tribal communities and harming their culture. The [Bhils and other tribals](#) were engaged in a long [standoff](#) with the British. On November 17, 1913, a full moon day, Mangarh hill witnessed a mass gathering of more than 1.5 lakh Bhils. They swore allegiance to their guru and sought to fulfil their spiritual desires. The gathering also resolved to find ways to end the British hegemony, especially the unjust revenue regime.

'[Bhuretia Nahi Manu Re](#)' (I will not accept the [tyrannical rule](#) of white people), the song of the tribal people has, since then, become an anthem of sorts for them. Govind Guru's calls for protesting against the injustice of the colonial rulers laid the foundation of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Sensing trouble from the congregation, the British deputed seven companies to surround the [Mangarh hill](#) and tried to suppress the tribals with the fear of bullets and cannons. But the brave tribals could not be subdued. Their awakened consciousness and new-found spirituality had raised their confidence and the desire to protect the [motherland](#) overwhelmed the fear of the bullet.



Born in a [nomadic community](#) in the Dungarpur-Banswara region of Rajasthan, Govind Guru was influenced by the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati to work for the socio-religious upliftment of people from the [Bhil community](#).

The British ordered a mass shooting, and because of this inhuman act, more than 1,500 tribal freedom fighters died on November 17. The moral legitimacy of the British kept on eroding, especially after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919.

The sacrifices of these unsung heroes increased the moral quotient of the national movement. People began to see a stake in the country's freedom. The spirit of taking ownership of the country's welfare has passed down to people after the country gained Independence.



Rajasthan's Jallianwala Bagh: A lost story

ON NOVEMBER 17, 1913, six years before the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 13, 1919, a horrifying tragedy occurred in Mangarh (Banswara, Rajasthan). While 379 lives were lost in Jallianwala, British cannons and machine guns are known to have killed more than 1,500 tribals in Mangarh.

Yet, unlike the Jallianwala massacre, this heinous crime against the tribals of Rajasthan could not find its place in the history of India's freedom struggle. While Amritsar was closer to Delhi and in the hands of prominent politicians and freedom fighters, the same was not the case with Mangarh. Much like today, the tribals of Mangarh struggled to find their place in Indian society even as they fought with all their might for India's Independence.

A noteworthy name in these lost pages of history is that of Govind Guru, a revolutionary leader of the tribals of the region that included present-day Udaipur, Dungarpur and Banswara in Rajasthan, Gujarat's Idar and Malwa in Madhya Pradesh. Guru was a living legend among the Bhil and Garasiya tribal communities, a man who united thousands of tribals with his voice.

Bhil soldiers also played a significant role in the battlefields of Mewar — the erstwhile Mewar army's emblem that portrayed a Bhil archer next to a Rajput warrior is further proof of their importance. In fact, their significance can be traced in the battlefields of Haldighati to Maharana Pratap's slogan "*Bhili jayo rani jayo bhai-bhai*" (A Bhil's son and that of a queen are brothers)".

Before Govind Guru became a leader in India's freedom struggle, he played an important role in India's renaissance movement. At the age of 25, he impressed Swami Dayanand Saraswati, a central figure of that movement in north India. Those days, Dayanand Saraswati was in Udaipur; a sanyasi, he was raising issues related to swaraj, swabhasha and swadeshi (self-rule, self-language, and self-reliance) in the country and was spearheading social reforms in the Rajputana. These two figures together initiated a wave of social reforms in the tribal areas.

In 1903, Govind Guru pledged not to drink alcohol, shifting his focus to eradicating social evils, boycotting foreign goods, ending forced labour, educating girls, and resolving mutual disputes among tribes instead of taking them to the



A fibre installation depicting the Mangarh massacre, at Rajasthan's Museum on Political Narratives that will be open to the public next month. *Hamza Khan*

courts. This led to the creation of a Sump (Unity) Sabha, whose first meeting was held on the hilltop in Mangarh. This historical event solidified Mangarh's significance in Indian history as it became central to the tribal movement in this area. Like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, this incident worried the British government and the local princely states. While the British were worried about their participation in the freedom struggle, the princely states were more concerned about social reform that could lead to the tribes demanding an independent Bhil state.

Consequently, there were many attempts to suppress the movement that started in 1883 but had spread like wildfire by 1903. Called the Bhagat movement, the gathering of tribals around the fire to reaffirm their oath was seen by the British as a threat. By 1913, the movement had turned into a revolution that made British officers even more wary as the tribals pledged to fight against suppression.

In November 1917, thousands of tribals gathered on the call of Govind Guru to decide on a decisive action against the suppression being faced by them in the form of forced labour, bonded system, and taxes on farmers during the famine.

In what is today known as the Mangarh massacre, British soldiers fired cannons and machine guns at a large crowd of unarmed tribals who had gathered in an open space on the hilltop of Mangarh. More than 1,500 tribals were killed in the massacre and hundreds were injured.

While during the Jallianwala massacre, thousands of shots were fired after

closing the only gate of the garden, it is said that five times as many rounds were fired by the British officers in Mangarh. Like Jallianwala, anecdotes say, the firing stopped only when the soldiers ran out of ammunition. Yet, amid this brutality, the tribals of the area are said to have continued singing, "*Hey Bhuretia Nai Maanu Re, Nai Manu Re* (Hey, British, we will not agree)!" Their song about standing up to British suppression was as scary as it was magnificent.

The consequence of the Mangarh massacre was cruel. Unlike in the Jallianwala Bagh case, no Dyer was held responsible or punished here. Rather, Govind Guru was given a death sentence, and his wife was arrested. But fearing that the movement of tribal Bhils would turn violent, the British postponed his execution and sentenced him to 20 years of imprisonment on an isolated island. When he was released from jail, all the princely states came together to exile him. He lived his last years in Kamboi, Gujarat, where he died on October 30, 1931.

The cruel irony is that this extraordinary incident, which tells the story of tribal contributions to India's struggle for Independence, has still not found its rightful place in history. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's November 1 visit to Mangarh Dham, it was expected that he would finally announce it as a national monument. However, for whatever reasons, it was not declared so.

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