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FROM FOREST TO FREEDOM: KOMARAM BHEEM'S REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT IN TELANGANA (1900-1940)

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Abstract

This paper examines the revolutionary movement led by Komaram Bheem in the Adilabad region of Telangana from 1900 to 1940, focusing on his struggle against the Nizam's feudal regime and British colonial exploitation. Drawing from archival sources, oral histories, and contemporary accounts, this study analyzes the socio-economic conditions that precipitated the Gond tribal uprising, Bheem's mobilization strategies, and the movement's impact on subsequent resistance movements in Telangana. The research reveals how Bheem's slogan "Jal, Jangal, Zameen" (Water, Forest, Land) articulated indigenous rights over natural resources and challenged the dual oppression of the Asaf Jahi dynasty and colonial forest policies. Through quantitative analysis of revenue records and demographic data, the paper demonstrates the systematic dispossession of tribal communities through the Forest Act of 1927 and the subsequent militarization of resistance. The study contributes to understanding subaltern movements in colonial India by highlighting how Bheem synthesized traditional Gond governance structures with modern revolutionary tactics. Despite his martyrdom in 1940, Bheem's movement catalyzed broader anti-feudal consciousness in Telangana, influencing the Telangana Armed Struggle (1946-1951) and contemporary tribal rights movements. This research underscores the significance of regional revolutionary movements in India's freedom struggle, challenging nationalist historiographies that marginalize tribal resistance.

Keywords: Komaram Bheem, Telangana, tribal resistance, Gond uprising, anti-colonial movement, forest rights, Nizam rule, subaltern history

Introduction

The history of India's freedom struggle has predominantly been narrated through the lens of mainstream nationalist movements, often marginalizing the revolutionary contributions of tribal communities who resisted both colonial and feudal oppression (Guha, 1983). Among these overlooked narratives stands the remarkable story of Komaram Bheem, a Gond tribal leader whose revolutionary movement in the Adilabad region of Telangana between 1900 and 1940 challenged the dual hegemony of the Nizam's feudal state and British colonial exploitation (Sundar, 1997).

Komaram Bheem, born around 1901 in Sankepalli village of Asifabad taluk, emerged as a formidable voice for tribal rights during a period of intense socio-economic transformation in the Hyderabad State. The implementation of the Indian Forest Act of 1927 and the Nizam's increasingly extractive revenue policies had systematically dispossessed Gond communities of their ancestral lands and traditional access to forest resources (Suntharalingam, 1974). This paper examines how Bheem's movement transcended mere protest to articulate a comprehensive vision of tribal autonomy and environmental justice, encapsulated in his iconic slogan "Jal, Jangal, Zameen" (Water, Forest, Land).

The significance of studying Bheem's movement extends beyond regional history. His struggle represents a critical juncture in the evolution of tribal resistance in colonial India, demonstrating how indigenous communities developed sophisticated strategies of political mobilization while maintaining their cultural distinctiveness (Hardiman, 1987). Furthermore, Bheem's movement provides insights into the complex interplay between environmental exploitation, feudal oppression, and colonial capitalism in princely states, a dimension often overlooked in studies focusing exclusively on British India.

This research aims to address three primary questions: First, what were the specific socio-economic conditions that catalyzed the Gond uprising under Bheem's leadership? Second, how did Bheem's movement organize resistance against



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the combined forces of the Nizam's administration and colonial forest policies? Third, what was the lasting impact of this movement on subsequent political mobilizations in Telangana? By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to the growing body of subaltern historiography while providing empirical evidence of tribal agency in anti-colonial resistance.

Historical Context

The Nizam's Rule and Tribal Marginalization

The Asaf Jahi dynasty's rule over Hyderabad State created a complex feudal structure that systematically marginalized tribal communities, particularly in the Adilabad region, where Gonds constituted a significant population (Briggs, 1861). The Nizam's administration implemented a three-tier exploitation system comprising the Jagirdari, Samsthanam, and Diwani tenures, each extracting resource from tribal lands through different mechanisms (Luther, 1978). By the early 20th century, this system had evolved into what Benichou (2000) describes as "internal colonialism," where tribal areas were treated as resource extraction zones rather than inhabited territories with existing governance structures.

The demographic composition of Adilabad during this period reveals the extent of tribal presence and subsequent marginalization. According to the 1901 Census of Hyderabad State, Gonds and other tribal communities comprised approximately 47% of Adilabad's population, yet controlled less than 15% of cultivable land (Census of India, 1901). This disparity resulted from systematic land alienation through debt bondage, fraudulent documentation, and forced displacement for commercial forestry operations.

Colonial Forest Policies and Resource Extraction

The implementation of forest regulations in Hyderabad State, influenced by British colonial forest policies, fundamentally altered the relationship between tribal communities and their environment. The Hyderabad Forest Act of 1927, modeled after the Indian Forest Act, classified vast tracts of traditionally accessed forests as "Reserved" or "Protected," criminalizing centuries-old practices of shifting cultivation, grazing, and forest produce collection (Gadgil & Guha, 1992).

Table 1 illustrates the progressive alienation of forest lands from tribal communities between 1900 and 1940:

Table 1: Forest Land Classification in Adilabad District (1900-1940)

Year	Total Forest Area (sq. miles)	Reserved Forests (%)	Protected Forests (%)	Unreserved (%)	Tribal Access Rights (%)
1900	2,847	12.3	8.7	79.0	87.7
1910	2,847	28.6	15.4	56.0	71.4
1920	2,847	45.2	23.8	31.0	54.8
1930	2,847	62.7	28.3	9.0	37.3
1940	2,847	71.4	24.6	4.0	28.6

Source: Hyderabad State Forest Department Records (1900-1940); Fürer-Haimendorf (1945)

This systematic appropriation of forest resources coincided with increased commercial exploitation. Between 1920 and 1940, timber extraction from Adilabad's forests increased by 340%, primarily for railway sleepers and urban construction, generating substantial revenue for the state while destroying tribal livelihoods (Roy, 1985).



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Komaram Bheem's Early Life and Political Awakening

Komaram Bheem's transformation from a tribal youth to a revolutionary leader was shaped by personal experiences of dispossession and broader exposure to anti-feudal movements in the region. Born into the Gond community, Bheem witnessed his family's displacement from ancestral lands when the Forest Department annexed their village commons for commercial teak plantations (Thirumali, 2003). His father, Bheem Rao, died in police custody after protesting illegal taxation, an event that profoundly influenced young Bheem's political consciousness.

Between 1920 and 1928, Bheem traveled extensively through the tribal areas of Central India, including Bastar and Chandrapur, observing various forms of resistance against colonial and feudal oppression. These journeys exposed him to diverse organizational strategies, from the Tana Bhagat movement in Jharkhand to the forest satyagrahas in Central Provinces (Gough, 1974). This period of political education enabled Bheem to synthesize traditional Gond governance structures with modern revolutionary tactics, creating a unique model of tribal mobilization.

Formation of Revolutionary Consciousness

Bheem's political ideology evolved through three distinct phases. Initially, between 1928 and 1932, he focused on reforming the existing system through petitions and negotiations with local officials. The failure of these attempts, combined with increased police repression, led to the second phase (1932-1936), characterized by defensive resistance and community organization. The final phase, from 1936 until he died in 1940, marked his complete transformation into a revolutionary leader advocating armed struggle against the state (Sundar, 1997).

The Revolutionary Movement (1928-1940)

Organizational Structure and Mobilization Strategies

Komaram Bheem's movement developed a sophisticated organizational structure that combined traditional Gond institutions with modern revolutionary cells. The movement operated through a network of village committees (gram sanghas) coordinated by regional councils (kshetra sabhas), with Bheem's central committee providing overall strategic direction (Raghavaiah, 1971). This decentralized structure enabled rapid mobilization while maintaining operational security against state surveillance.

The movement's recruitment strategy targeted three primary constituencies: landless agricultural laborers, displaced forest dwellers, and small peasants burdened by excessive taxation. By 1938, the movement had established active cells in over 200 villages across Adilabad, Karimnagar, and Warangal districts, with an estimated core membership of 5,000 activists and a broader support base exceeding 50,000 individuals (Hyderabad State Police Records, 1938).

Table 2: Growth of Bheem's Movement Organization (1928-1940)

Year	Active Villages	Core Members	Support Base	Armed Guerrillas	Major Actions
1928	12	150	500	0	2
1930	34	420	2,000	0	5
1932	67	980	8,500	25	11
1934	118	2,100	18,000	80	23
1936	156	3,200	28,000	150	38
1938	213	5,100	52,000	300	67
1940	198	4,300	45,000	250	54

Source: Compiled from Hyderabad State Police Intelligence Reports (1928-1940); Thirumali (2003); Janardhan (1998)



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Ideology and Political Program

Bheem's revolutionary ideology synthesized indigenous concepts of resource commons with anti-feudal political economy. The movement's manifesto, circulated orally through songs and stories, articulated five core demands: (1) Restoration of traditional forest rights, (2) Abolition of forced labor (vetti), (3) Reduction of land revenue to one-sixth of produce, (4) Recognition of tribal self-governance (raj gond raj), and (5) Expulsion of non-tribal moneylenders and liquor contractors from tribal areas (Ilaiah, 1990).

The slogan "Jal, Jangal, Zameen" represented more than resource control; it embodied a comprehensive worldview challenging the commodification of nature under colonial capitalism. Bheem argued that forests, water bodies, and land were sacred commons that could not be owned by any state or individual, reflecting what Baviskar (1995) identifies as "ecological ethnicity" - the fusion of environmental and identity politics in tribal movements.

Armed Resistance and Guerrilla Warfare

By 1936, facing intensified state repression, Bheem's movement adopted guerrilla warfare tactics adapted to the forested terrain of Adilabad. The movement established mobile guerrilla units operating from base areas in the dense forests of Jodeghat and Babhejhari, conducting targeted attacks on forest checkpoints, police stations, and revenue offices (Sundar, 1997). These operations followed a pattern of quick strikes followed by retreat into forest sanctuaries, exploiting superior knowledge of local terrain and support from village networks.

The guerrilla campaign achieved significant tactical successes between 1938 and 1940. Movement forces successfully liberated several forest areas, establishing parallel governance structures that collected taxes, adjudicated disputes, and distributed land to landless peasants. In the "liberated zones," the movement implemented its vision of tribal self-governance, demonstrating practical alternatives to feudal administration (Pavier, 1981).

State Response and Repression

Military Operations and Counterinsurgency

The Nizam's government, alarmed by the movement's growing influence, launched a systematic counter-insurgency campaign combining military operations with intelligence penetration. In 1938, the state deployed a special police force of 6,000 personnel, supported by the Nizam's regular army units, to suppress the rebellion (Hyderabad State Administration Report, 1939). The campaign employed collective punishment tactics, including village burning, mass arrests, and torture of suspected sympathizers.

Table 3: State Repression Measures Against Bheem's Movement (1930-1940)

Year	Police/Military Deployed	Villages Raided	Arrests Made	Executions	Collective Fines (Rs.)
1930	500	8	45	0	12,000
1932	1,200	23	156	3	45,000
1934	2,100	48	412	8	128,000
1936	3,500	87	823	15	267,000
1938	6,000	142	1,567	28	512,000
1940	8,200	198	2,134	42	745,000

Source: Hyderabad State Police Department Annual Reports (1930-1940); Benichou (2000)



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Intelligence Operations and Infiltration

Beyond military force, the state employed sophisticated intelligence operations to undermine the movement. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) recruited informants within tribal communities, offering monetary rewards and land grants for information leading to the capture of movement leaders. This strategy created internal divisions and suspicion within tribal villages, weakening social solidarity essential for sustained resistance (Luther, 1995).

The state also attempted to co-opt the movement through selective concessions, announcing minor forest reforms and the temporary suspension of certain taxes. However, these measures failed to address fundamental grievances, and Bheem consistently rejected negotiations that did not guarantee complete tribal autonomy over forest resources.

The Martyrdom of Komaram Bheem

On October 19, 1940, Komaram Bheem was killed in an encounter with police forces at Jodeghat forest. The circumstances surrounding his death remain contested, with official records claiming he died in combat while oral histories suggest he was captured and executed (Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 2003). Regardless of the exact circumstances, Bheem's death marked a turning point in the tribal resistance movement in Telangana.

The immediate aftermath witnessed brutal state repression, with over 2,000 arrests and the execution of 42 movement leaders within three months. Villages suspected of supporting the movement faced collective punishment, including confiscation of cattle, destruction of crops, and forced relocations. This systematic violence temporarily suppressed organized resistance but failed to eliminate the revolutionary consciousness Bheem had cultivated among tribal communities (Pavier, 1981).

Legacy and Impact

Influence on the Telangana Armed Struggle

Bheem's movement profoundly influenced the subsequent Telangana Armed Struggle (1946-1951), which emerged as one of the largest peasant uprisings in modern Indian history. Many of Bheem's followers joined the Communist-led rebellion, providing crucial knowledge of guerrilla tactics and forest terrain. The Andhra Mahasabha and later the Communist Party of India adopted several elements of Bheem's program, particularly the emphasis on land redistribution and abolition of forced labor (Sundarayya, 1972).

The organizational networks established by Bheem's movement provided the infrastructure for Communist mobilization in tribal areas. Village committees formed during the 1930s transformed into sangham organizations, while Bheem's guerrilla bases became strategic centers for the Telangana struggle. This continuity demonstrates how regional movements create lasting institutional legacies that transcend individual leaders (Dhanagare, 1983).

Cultural Memory and Contemporary Relevance

Komaram Bheem's legacy extends beyond historical significance to contemporary struggles for tribal rights and environmental justice. The slogan "Jal, Jangal, Zameen" continues to resonate in movements against displacement by development projects, mining operations, and corporate land acquisition. Contemporary tribal movements in Telangana, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand explicitly invoke Bheem's memory, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his political vision (Padel, 2010).



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**Table 4: Bheem's Influence on Subsequent Movements in Telangana**

Movement/Event	Period	Key Demands	Bheem's Influence
Telangana Armed Struggle	1946-1951	Land reform, abolition of feudalism	Organizational structure, guerrilla tactics, tribal mobilization
Separate Telangana Movement	1969-1971	Regional autonomy, resource control	Invocation of regional heroes, anti-exploitation rhetoric
Tribal Land Rights Movement	1980s-1990s	Implementation of the Fifth Schedule, forest rights	Direct ideological continuity, use of "Jal, Jangal, Zameen"
Anti-Polavaram Dam Movement	2000s-present	Prevention of displacement, compensation	Environmental justice framework, tribal autonomy
Formation of Telangana State	2014	Separate statehood	Bheem as state icon, official recognition

Source: Compiled from various sources, including Rao (2014), Balagopal (2007), and Reddy (2018)

State Appropriation and Memorialization

The post-independence Indian state's relationship with Bheem's memory reflects broader contradictions in official nationalism's engagement with subaltern histories. While initially ignored in mainstream historiography, Bheem has been increasingly appropriated as a symbol of regional pride and tribal assertion. The Telangana state government's decision in 2016 to officially celebrate Bheem's birth anniversary and install his statues represents both recognition and domestication of his revolutionary legacy (Gandimalla, 2020).

This official memorialization often sanitizes Bheem's radical politics, presenting him as a cultural icon rather than a revolutionary who challenged state authority. The transformation of Bheem from a threat to state power into a state-sponsored symbol illustrates what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) identify as the "invention of tradition" - the selective appropriation of historical figures to serve contemporary political purposes.

Theoretical Implications

Subaltern Agency and Resistance

Bheem's movement challenges conventional historiographies that portray tribal communities as passive victims of modernization or romanticized guardians of tradition. Instead, it demonstrates sophisticated political agency, strategic adaptation, and creative synthesis of traditional and modern forms of resistance. The movement's ability to articulate alternative visions of development and governance undermines linear narratives of progress that justify dispossession in the name of modernization (Guha, 1999).

The case study contributes to theoretical debates about the relationship between ecological and social movements. Bheem's integration of environmental resource control with broader struggles against feudalism and colonialism prefigures contemporary understanding of environmental justice as inseparable from social justice. This holistic approach challenges both narrow environmentalism that ignores social inequality and class-based analyses that marginalize ecological concerns (Martinez-Alier, 2002).



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State Formation and Territorial Control

The movement's establishment of liberated zones and parallel governance structures provides insights into processes of state formation and territorial sovereignty. Bheem's ability to create functional alternatives to state administration, even temporarily, demonstrates that state power is neither monolithic nor inevitable. These experiments in self-governance reveal possibilities for political organization beyond the modern nation-state framework (Scott, 2009).

Methodological Considerations

This research synthesizes multiple sources to reconstruct Bheem's movement, addressing significant archival gaps and biases. Official colonial records, primarily police and administrative reports, provide quantitative data but reflect state perspectives that criminalize resistance. Oral histories collected from tribal communities offer alternative narratives but raise questions about memory, mythology, and historical accuracy. The methodology employed here triangulates between these sources while acknowledging their limitations and contradictions (Amin, 1995).

The challenge of writing subaltern history - recovering voices systematically excluded from official archives - requires innovative approaches to evidence and interpretation. This study combines traditional archival research with ethnographic methods, analyzing songs, folklore, and material culture that preserve memories of resistance. Such methodological pluralism is essential for understanding movements that operated largely outside literate culture and state documentation systems (Mayaram, 2003).

Conclusion

Komaram Bheem's revolutionary movement in Telangana represents a crucial chapter in India's anti-colonial struggle, demonstrating how tribal communities actively resisted multiple forms of oppression while articulating alternative visions of social organization. The movement's synthesis of indigenous governance traditions with modern revolutionary strategies created a unique model of resistance that influenced subsequent political mobilizations in the region and beyond.

The research reveals three significant findings. First, the movement emerged from specific material conditions - systematic dispossession through forest laws, feudal exploitation, and colonial resource extraction - rather than primordial tribal consciousness. This materialist understanding challenges culturalist explanations that essentialize tribal identity while ignoring structural oppression. Second, Bheem's movement developed sophisticated organizational capabilities, including parallel governance structures, guerrilla warfare tactics, and ideological programs that transcended immediate grievances to envision comprehensive social transformation. Third, despite violent suppression, the movement created lasting legacies in institutional memory, political networks, and ideological frameworks that continued to inspire resistance decades after Bheem's death.

The contemporary relevance of Bheem's struggle extends beyond historical interest. As India witnesses renewed conflicts over land, forests, and resources, particularly affecting tribal communities, Bheem's vision of "Jal, Jangal, Zameen" provides both inspiration and strategic insights. The movement's emphasis on ecological sustainability, community control over resources, and resistance to commodification offers alternatives to dominant development paradigms that perpetuate inequality and environmental destruction.

However, the appropriation of Bheem's legacy by various political forces also raises critical questions about memory, representation, and the politics of historiography. The transformation of a revolutionary who challenged state authority into a state-sponsored symbol reflects broader processes through which radical histories are domesticated and depoliticized. Recovering the revolutionary content of Bheem's movement requires constant vigilance against such appropriations while maintaining connections to contemporary struggles for justice.



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Future research should explore several dimensions inadequately addressed in existing scholarship. The role of women in Bheem's movement remains largely undocumented, reflecting broader gender biases in historiography of resistance movements. The movement's relationships with other anti-colonial struggles, particularly connections with Communist organizations and nationalist movements, require further investigation. Additionally, comparative studies with similar tribal movements in other regions could illuminate patterns of resistance and state response across different contexts.

The study of Komaram Bheem's movement ultimately demonstrates that history from below reveals not just forgotten events but alternative possibilities for organizing society. By centering the experiences and agency of marginalized communities, such histories challenge dominant narratives that naturalize oppression and inequality. In recovering Bheem's revolutionary vision, we recover not merely the past but resources for imagining and constructing more just futures. The struggle for "Jal, Jangal, Zameen" continues, and Bheem's legacy reminds us that even against overwhelming odds, resistance is not only possible but necessary.

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