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THE TRIBAL MOVEMENT SEARCH FOR THE PATH TOWARDS SELF DETERMINATION

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Long before India's organized nationalist movement took shape, tribal communities across the subcontinent were already fighting back. From the forests of Chotanagpur to the hills of the Rajmahal, indigenous peoples confronted colonial authority not with political pamphlets but with bows, arrows, and an unshakeable sense of identity. These tribal movements were some of the earliest organized resistances to British rule – expressions of a people determined to defend their land, culture, and right to self-governance. Understanding them is not just a historical exercise; it is a philosophical inquiry into what self-determination truly means for communities living outside the centers of power.

The colonial disruption of tribal life

Before British rule, tribal communities across India operated within their own social, economic, and governance structures. Land was held communally, forests were managed collectively, and chiefs governed through customary law. Colonial administration dismantled this order methodically. The British declared forests as state property, meaning tribes could no longer manage these lands as they had for generations. New revenue systems – the zamindari, ryotwari, and mahalwari – transformed communal land into taxable private property, opening it to seizure by outsiders.

The entry of moneylenders and traders into tribal territories made conditions worse. Exploitation and extortion by police officers and petty officials aggravated distress among tribals, while forest acts passed in 1865 and 1878 steadily stripped their access to natural resources. These were not abstract policy changes – they struck at the foundation of tribal survival. By the mid-19th century, resentment had built to a breaking point, and the first wave of organized tribal resistance was about to begin.

The Santhal Rebellion (1855-56): the first great uprising

The Santhal Rebellion, also known as the Santhal Hul – “hul” meaning “revolution” in Santhali – was an uprising by thousands of Santhal tribespeople in 1855-56 against exploitation by local moneylenders, zamindars, and British policies in the Bengal Presidency. It is regarded as one of the most significant anti-British revolts prior to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and it stands as a foundational moment in the history of tribal self-determination.

Causes rooted in dispossession

The Santhals had been encouraged by the East India Company in the 1830s to settle in and cultivate the Damin-i-Koh region in the Rajmahal Hills. The Santhal population in this estate surged from around 3,000 in 1838 to about 83,000 by 1851, and as this population grew, the Company raised tax rates, with revenue from the estate skyrocketing roughly 600 percent in that period. What began as an offer of land became a debt trap. Zamindars and moneylenders charged exorbitant interest rates, and many Santhals lost their land and were forced into bonded labour.

The uprising and its leaders

On June 30, 1855, two Santhal brothers, Kanhu and Sidhu, addressed a gathering of about 10,000 Santhals in the heart of Damin-i-Koh, claiming divine instruction to rid their territory of outsiders – including moneylenders, zamindars, and the British – and establish Santhal self-rule. Their brothers Chand and Bhairav, and sisters Phulo and Jhano, also played active roles in the uprising. The rebels used guerrilla tactics – hit-and-run attacks, targeting revenue offices and police stations – and at peak mobilization, the Santhal leader was able to mobilize roughly 60,000 Santhals across the region.



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The British responded with overwhelming military force and declared martial law in November 1855. More than 15,000 Santhals lost their lives, and over 10,000 villages were destroyed. Yet the rebellion did not end without consequence for colonial policy. The uprising precipitated the formation of a new district called the Santhal Parganas, where the Santhals were granted greater autonomy and safeguards against exploitation. The Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act of 1876 further prohibited the transfer of tribal lands to outsiders – a direct policy concession wrested from the colonial state through resistance.

The Munda Ulgulan: Birsa Munda and the vision of tribal sovereignty

Four decades after the Santhal uprising, a more radical vision of tribal self-determination emerged from the Chotanagpur Plateau. Birsa Munda (1875-1900) led the Munda Rebellion between 1899 and 1900, a landmark tribal uprising against British rule and exploitative colonial land policies. His movement – called the *Ulgulan*, or “Great Tumult” – was not merely a revolt against taxes or landlords. It was a comprehensive assertion of tribal identity, spiritual sovereignty, and the right to self-governance.

The dismantling of the Khuntkatti system

The root cause of the Munda uprising was a direct assault on their traditional land system. When the British introduced new land settlement systems like the zamindari system in Chota Nagpur and replaced the existing tribal system “Khuntkatti” – which allowed the entire community to hold ownership of the land – the living and working conditions of tribals were significantly impacted. The new class of landlords, known as Thikadars, extracted maximum revenue from tribal cultivators, reducing free farmers to landless labourers on their own ancestral fields.

Birsa Munda: leader, reformer, and spiritual figure

What made Birsa Munda exceptional was the convergence of political, spiritual, and social dimensions in his leadership. He fought for the rights and autonomy of tribal communities, seeking to protect their land, resources, and cultural heritage from encroachment and exploitation, emphasizing their right to self-determination and a dignified existence. He founded a new faith – Birsaism – that drew followers away from missionary Christianity and called for a return to tribal customs and traditions. His followers, known as Birsaites, openly declared the British their adversaries.

Birsa was also a social reformer within his own community. He mobilized the tribal communities to resist the imposition of external cultural practices, called for the rejection of alcoholism and stereotypical norms, encouraged the wearing of sacred threads according to tribal customs, and urged his people to maintain cleanliness and sanitation to become self-reliant. His famous declaration – “*Abua raj seter jana, maharani raj tundu jana*” (Let our rule prevail, let the Queen’s rule end) – captured the essence of tribal self-determination and is still remembered in areas of Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh.

The rebellion and its aftermath

On Christmas Eve of 1899, the Ulgulan entered its armed phase. Birsa’s followers attacked symbols of colonial authority – churches, police stations, and the homes of local contractors. The British deployed forces to suppress the rebellion, and Birsa Munda was arrested in March 1900 while he and his followers were sleeping in a forest. He died in jail a few months later, with the CNT Act of 1908 enacted by the British in direct response to the uprising. This legislation restricted the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals and recognized community control over land and forest resources – a policy concession that bore the direct imprint of the Munda struggle.



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Birsa died at just 25, but his legacy outlived him. His rebellion inspired a broader movement for tribal self-determination, and the creation of the state of Jharkhand in 2000 was deeply rooted in the legacy of his fight for autonomy. In 2021, the Indian government declared November 15 – Birsa's birth anniversary – as *Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas* (Tribal Pride Day), a national recognition of indigenous contributions to India's freedom struggle.

Other significant tribal revolts

The Santhal Rebellion and the Munda Ulgulan were the most prominent, but they were part of a much broader pattern of tribal resistance across colonial India. The Bhil Revolt in the Western Ghats was among the earliest tribal movements against colonial authority, with the Bhils opposing British interference in their socio-political structure and resisting heavy taxation – a struggle that influenced later peasant movements in the region.

In Andhra, the Rampa Rebellion led by Alluri Sitarama Raju in the early 1920s brought tribal resistance into the 20th century, combining traditional guerrilla warfare with a broader nationalist consciousness. The Khonds of Odisha also launched a significant movement against British revenue policies and the suppression of their cultural practices – emphasizing that tribal movements were not just about land, but about dignity, identity, and social justice.

Mechanisms of resistance: how tribal movements organized

Tribal resistance was not spontaneous or uncoordinated. It employed creative mechanisms of mobilization rooted in local culture. The Santhal leaders spread the word about their plan through uniquely folded sal leaves – a communication system called *Dharwak* – to mobilize thousands of people across villages. Leaders invoked spiritual authority to unite communities: both Sidhu-Kanhu and Birsa Munda claimed divine instruction, using religious legitimacy to overcome tribal divisions and inspire collective action.

While many tribal uprisings were confined to specific regions, they shook British confidence and disrupted local administration. Tactically, tribal rebels relied on their intimate knowledge of terrain – forests, hills, and rivers – to conduct effective guerrilla warfare against better-armed colonial troops. The movements also combined armed resistance with cultural assertion: festivals, rituals, and communal gatherings became spaces where political consciousness was cultivated alongside identity.

The socio-political awakening and its long-term impact

Initially focused on socio-religious oppression, many of these tribal movements eventually merged with the broader national independence movement. They demonstrated to India's nationalist leaders that resistance to colonial rule was not the exclusive domain of the educated urban elite – that peasants, forest-dwellers, and indigenous communities had their own sophisticated traditions of political organization and revolt.

The impact on colonial policy was tangible and direct. The Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act of 1876, the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, and various district-level administrative reforms were all responses – however inadequate – to the pressure exerted by tribal uprisings. These policy changes did not end exploitation, but they acknowledged tribal agency in a way the colonial administration had not anticipated. After independence, provisions in the Constitution such as the Fifth and Sixth Schedules were designed to safeguard tribal rights, drawing direct inspiration from these historical uprisings.

The Fifth and Sixth Schedules to the Indian Constitution play an important role in protecting the rights and interests of Scheduled Tribes, providing a framework for the administration of scheduled areas and ensuring that tribal communities have a voice in the decision-making process. Yet, as contemporary scholars note, the gap between constitutional promise



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and lived reality remains significant – a reminder that the struggle for tribal self-determination did not end with independence, but continues in new forms.

A philosophy of resistance and self-determination

What unites these movements across time and geography is not just a common adversary but a shared philosophical conviction: that a community has the right to govern itself according to its own traditions, to manage the land and forests it has lived with for generations, and to refuse systems imposed from outside that strip away both livelihood and dignity. From colonial-era rebellions to contemporary constitutional engagement, tribal political consciousness has evolved significantly while maintaining core concerns about dignity, rights, and cultural survival.

Birsa Munda, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, and the countless unnamed fighters of these movements did not leave behind philosophical treatises. But their actions articulated a clear and powerful idea: that self-determination is not a privilege granted by a colonial administration but an inherent right of any people with a living culture, a relationship with their land, and a will to remain free. Their legacy is inseparable from any honest account of what India's freedom struggle truly meant.

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