



Research Paper

From Rebellion to Recognition: Tribal Freedom Fighters of Odisha and Their Place in Indian History

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Abstract:

The history of India's freedom struggle is often narrated through the actions of prominent national leaders and organized political movements. However, numerous tribal communities across the country played a significant role in resisting colonial domination long before the emergence of mainstream nationalism. Odisha, one of India's most tribal-dominated regions, witnessed several tribal uprisings against British rule, exploitative revenue systems, forest regulations, and interference in indigenous socio-cultural practices. Tribal leaders such as Chakra Bisoi, Rendo Majhi, Laxman Naik, Nirmal Munda, Dayanidhi Dharua, and others mobilized their communities to challenge colonial authority and defend their traditional rights. Despite their immense contributions, these tribal freedom fighters remained largely absent from mainstream historiography for decades. This paper examines the historical role of Odisha's tribal freedom fighters, analyzes the causes of their marginalization in Indian historical narratives, and explores contemporary efforts to recognize and commemorate their contributions. The study argues that tribal resistance movements were not isolated local rebellions but integral components of India's broader anti-colonial struggle.

Keywords: Tribal Resistance, Freedom Fighter, Colonial Movement, Indigenous history, Odisha

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I. Introduction:

Historical data indicates that numerous tribal movements and uprisings against the rulers for giving independence occurred during the British regime. Some tribal people have made significant contributions to India's independence through nationwide and state-level movements and uprisings, but many tribal leaders have also given their lives at the hands of the British colonizers. Tribal movements eventually integrated with the national movement and the anti-tax campaign, despite having started against foreign rulers and focusing on social and religious issues. In addition to imposing protective administration in tribal areas, the colonial authorities forced the tribesmen to adopt British policies. The colonial overlords, however, brutally put an end to most of the movements (Sethy 2015, p.52). It is a well-known fact that a series of movements spearheaded by India's War of Independence of 1857 rocked the British Empire to its foundations.

A famous social worker V. Raghvaiah, who did a lot of research on tribal freedom fighters and tribal uprisings writes that "The tribals too initiated struggles to safeguard their honor, to protect their cherished freedom and to get redressal against money-lenders during the British regime, the Zamindars and other parasitic landholders, who tried to deprive them of all they had" (Raghvaiah 1972). The annexation policies, the defective land revenue system, the oppressive colonial rule, and the administrative vagaries of the British rulers caused discontentment among the people of India. Consequently, so many movements and armed rebellions broke out all over the sub-continent against the British as India's freedom movement. It turned into one of the biggest mass movements in which an overwhelming participation of people including tribals throughout the country brought to its knees the mighty imperialist forces (Rath 2019, p.119). The tribes in India are generally freedom-loving people. They are heavily dependent on land and forests for their subsistence. So, when the British imposed taxes on land frequently they took it as a challenge to their age-old rights and revolted against the local administration.

The British East India Company arrived at Ganjam, Odisha, in 1759, and took control of the coastal region of Odisha in 1803 to begin colonial rule. The Odishan people were subjected to harsh revenue rules that infringed upon their customary rights, exploitative laws and regulations that were established by foreign rulers,

and new socioeconomic and political structures that were imposed. The actions of the foreign rulers during the British era, whose policies destroyed the tribal polity, society, and culture, led to dissatisfaction among the tribal people, who had suffered great humiliation at the hands of their oppressors. Under the charismatic leadership of their leaders, the tribespeople initiated persistent uprisings and activities against their rulers to defend their interests. Many tribal movements and uprisings against the government occurred during this time in various parts of Odisha (Sethy 2015, p.52).

II. Literature Reviews:

The literature on tribal freedom fighters of Odisha highlights a rich tapestry of resistance against colonial rule. From early historical accounts to contemporary analyses, scholars have illuminated the struggles, contributions, and legacies of these pivotal figures. As research continues, there is a growing recognition of the need to integrate tribal perspectives into the broader narrative of India's independence movement. Understanding the role of Odisha's tribal fighters not only enriches the history of the region but also contributes to a more inclusive historical discourse.

Sethy, S. (2015). In her work *Tribal Leaders of Odisha and their contributions in political and social movements*, explains the various policies of colonial administration in social, political, and economic spheres of Indian people particularly among the Tribal people. Such policies of the Britishers bound the leaders to act against. Freedom movement led by the mainstream of the Society which later, made an impact among the tribal leaders to participate and raised voices against the evil practices of the Britishers. The contributions of tribal leaders made impact at the local level to protect and preserve their traditional socio-cultural practices.

Rath, R.N. (2019) Author has explained the historical narratives of the dynastichistory, struggle for autonomy in political spheres from the king Kharavela to the modern nationalism. His work *Tribal Freedom Fighters of Odisha* highlights the autonomy demanded by the downstream sections of the society. Basically, the freedom fighters' role in creating awareness among the tribals, support the cause of Individuals to make their own contributions in the National struggle.

Panigrahi, N.P. (2011). The author in his work *Tribal Resistance movement in Orissa: Some Reflections*, has explored the historic struggle and the heroic role played by notable tribal leaders in the freedom movement against the British imperialism.

Panda, P.K. (2018). Highlighting the history of tribal resistance in his work *A Review on the Role of Tribal leaders in resistance movement of Odisha during Colonial period*, brings the issues concerning social, cultural, and economic and narrates the forgotten history of past and present.

Rath, R. (2010). Author has tried to put the theme like Ordinary to extraordinary and wakeup call in his work. The work highlights about Sandi Sabar of Kujendri of Rayagada district Odisha, who hailed from a Tribal background. Her contribution in the national struggle was inspiring for the local tribals due to her personality. She worked as the social worker among the tribal women and she was never imprisoned. Her contribution was seen during the peak moment of the national movement and took responsibility of promoting the Khadi in her area.

Colonialism and the Emergence of Tribal Resistance:

British rule brought profound transformations to tribal regions of Odisha. Traditional systems of land ownership and resource management were replaced by colonial administrative structures. Forest laws restricted access to forest produce, while revenue policies increased economic burdens on tribal populations. Missionary activities and colonial attempts to reform tribal customs often generated resentment among indigenous communities.

The tribal worldview was deeply connected to land, forests, and customary institutions. Therefore, colonial interference was perceived not merely as political domination but as an assault on their cultural identity and social organization. Tribal resistance emerged as a defence of both livelihood and autonomy. These struggles reflected a strong desire to preserve indigenous ways of life while resisting external control.

Notable Freedom Fighters:

In Odisha, the Freedom Movement was directly influenced by the tribal resistance movement. Notable tribal leaders like Laxman Naik of Koraput, Ratna Naik of Keonjhar, and Kamala Lochan played heroic roles in this historic campaign. Dora Bisoyee, Chakra Bisoyi and Nabaghana Kanhar from Ghumsur, Dayanidhi Dharua from Mayurbhanj, Rendo Majhi from Kalahandi, Tama Dora from Malkangiri, Dharanidhar Nayak from Keonjhar, Madri Kalo and Nirmal Munda from Sundergarh, and Veer Surendra Sai from Sambalpur, who made significant contributions to both the independence of India and Odisha, are the people who merit recognition (Panigrahi 2011, p.52).

Kamala Lochan Dora Bissoyi: Born in Binjigiri village, close to Kullad of the lower Ghumsar area, now called Bhanjanagar in the Ganjam district of Odisha, Benniah Kandha, popularly known as Dora Bissoyi.

He led the Kandha rebellion, which began in September 1835 and lasted until February 1837, leaving a lasting mark on the annals of contemporary Odisha history. In the Paik revolt of 1817, the first tribe to take up arms against the British were the Kandhas of Odisha. However, it was the Second Kandha Rebellion of 1835 that made Odisha's first tribal independence fighter, Kamala Lochan Dora Bissoyi, well known.

Chakra Bissoyi: A brave, fearless, and daring member of his family emerged to wreak havoc on the British in the hill tracts of Odisha in the exact year that the great Kandha commander Dora Bissoyi passed away. His life and deeds constituted yet another remarkable chapter in the history of contemporary Odisha.

Rendo Majhi: The Kandhas of Kalahandi also revolted against the colonial rulers under the leadership of Rendo Majhi who was born at Urladani, in a tribal family. After the British captured Kalahandi, the Kings and Zamindars of Kalahandi collected tax from the Kandhas, and their age-old tradition of Meriah sacrifice was banned. The aggrieved Kandhas rose in revolt against the foreign rulers. The tribals rallied around their Borikiya Kandha leader Rendo Majhi. Though he was aware of the power and strength of the British forces, he never hesitated rather repeatedly attacked them and their supporters.

Veer Surendra Sai: Veer Surendra Sai of Sambalpur was an illustrious freedom fighter of Odisha. He started his revolt earlier against British rule long before 1857 and fought his guerrilla war from 1837 to 1864 with the support of local Zamindars and Gountias against the British. He was a tribal leader belonging to the Raj Gond tribe. One of the major causes of his revolt was the exploitation of tribals for which many local tribal Zamindars joined with him. Surendra Sai revolted against British rule vigorously challenging the motives of the British Government on the grounds of the Doctrine of Lapse when Narayan Singh, an old and incapable scion of the Barpali Zamindar family was elevated the king of Sambalpur by the Britishers in 1833 A.D.

Ratna Naik: He was a revolutionary tribal leader of the Bhuyan tribe of Keonjhar. He was born in 1820 at Banspal in Bhuyan Pirth of Keonjhar (Odisha). Being a dynamic personality, he dreamt of establishing a democratic set-up in which every individual in the society would enjoy his rights without any hassles setting aside the old traditions.

Dharanidhar Nayak: He fought against slavery for the tribal communities. He strongly instigated the Bhuyans and other tribals like Juang, Bathudi, Kolha, and Saunti to rise in revolt against the tyrannical rule of the Raja. He led the tribal people against British oppression and dominance. The Bhuyans looted the granaries and procured guns and cannons to wage war. The revolt took a violent turn. But at last, he was arrested and imprisoned for 7 years in Cuttack jail. He was released in 1897 and led the life of a Sanyasi (saint) till his death.

Madri Kalo: A tribal Gauntia (village headman) of Kureibaga village, organized this movement against the king of Gangapur, who was being supported by the British. Gangpur, one of the biggest princely states of Odisha, experienced a violent upsurge of tribal peasants in 1897. The new land revenue settlement which was introduced by King Raghunath Sekhar Deo ignited the tribal flareup under the leadership of Madri Kalo.

Nirmal Munda: Another tribal uprising called the "Munda Rebellion of 1939" occurred in the Gangpur State under the stewardship of Nirmal Munda. He was born in 1893 in a gaunt family in Bartoli village of Biramitrapur in Sundergarh district of Odisha. The general complaint in the State of Gangpur was mostly the exorbitant land rent. The tribals of Gangpur appealed against the abnormal increase, but no relief was granted. It gave rise to popular discontent. The tribals started a no-rent campaign and it spread all over the state. Their demands included not only restitution of the land rent and forest rights of the 1910 settlement but also the abolition of the "Choukidari Tax" and monopoly on the trade of hides. Total abolition of "Bethi, Bheti, Rasad and Magan" was also demanded.

Laxman Naik: Malkangiri attracted national attention when a charismatic leader of the Bhumia tribe named Laxman Naik led the tribals in this movement against the British. Laxman Naik was deeply influenced by the National Movement. He subscribed to the Congress doctrine being influenced by the Congress leaders of the district like Radhakrushna Biswas Roy, Radhamohan Sahu, and Sadashiba Tripathy. He became a disciplined member of the Congress Party, gave up hunting as a measure of non-violence, and became a complete vegetarian. He introduced cotton growing in the locality and started spinning Khadi.

Dayanidhi Dharua: The Tribal uprising in Mayurbhanj tributary mahal in 1857 led by the Dharua tribal leader named Dayanidhi Dharua was another important resistance movement in the history of freedom struggle of modern Odisha. The Dharua tribe rose in rebellion on account of their unwillingness to submit to any form of exploitation and started a movement against the Raja of Mayurbhanj and the British authority.

Tama Dora: He was born in 1838 in Kondapalli village of Padia Block in Malkangiri district of Odisha in a Koya family. He emerged as a revolutionary in the Champakhari War in 1860 and the Rampa Revolution in 1862. Further, the tribal people of Malkangiri district especially the Koya tribe rose in revolt in 1870 Jeypore Palace against the unjust and oppressive policies of the feudal chief and British rulers who exploited the tribal people socially and economically.

Sandi Sabar: In history, very little is known about Sandi Sabar of Kujendri, Rayagada District of Odisha. She had never known about the freedom struggle nor did she know about India's Independence movement. Their early life was surrounded by illiteracy, ill health, and hunger like her fellow tribals. But her life

changed when she met Biswanath Pattnaik and found herself in the path of a revolutionary. Later, met with other leaders of a national movement, discussing activities to be undertaken and implemented in the village. Though in her short duration from 1941 to 1946 as a tribal women leader and social worker, kept promoting Khadi. Shehad never been imprisoned in her lifetime and took responsibility for the freedom struggle in her areas.

Tribal Resistance and the National Freedom Movement

Although tribal movements often emerged from local grievances, they shared common objectives with the broader anti-colonial struggle. Both sought freedom from oppressive governance and exploitation. Tribal leaders challenged colonial authority, defended community rights, and inspired collective action against injustice.

The participation of leaders such as Laxman Naik demonstrates the convergence of tribal resistance and mainstream nationalism. Tribal struggles expanded the social base of the freedom movement and contributed to the development of anti-colonial consciousness in remote regions. These movements reveal that India's freedom struggle was not confined to urban centres but extended into forests, hills, and tribal territories.

Historical Marginalization of Tribal Freedom Fighters

Despite their contributions, tribal freedom fighters remained largely absent from dominant historical narratives. Several factors contributed to this marginalization. First, colonial records often described tribal movements as disturbances or law-and-order problems rather than legitimate political struggles. Second, nationalist historiography tended to emphasize elite leaders and organized political institutions. Third, many tribal histories survived primarily through oral traditions rather than written documentation.

As a result, the sacrifices of tribal heroes received limited attention in textbooks, academic research, and public memory. This exclusion reflected broader patterns of marginalization experienced by indigenous communities in Indian society.

From Rebellion to Recognition

Recent decades have witnessed growing efforts to recover and celebrate tribal contributions to India's freedom struggle. Government institutions, scholars, museums, and cultural organizations have increasingly highlighted the role of tribal freedom fighters. Publications by SCSTRTI and initiatives of the Ministry of Culture have documented the lives of leaders such as Chakra Bisoi, Rendo Majhi, and Laxman Naik. Their stories have also been included in educational and commemorative projects.

The observance of tribal heritage celebrations and the establishment of memorials have further contributed to the recognition of indigenous heroes. These efforts signify a broader shift in Indian historiography toward inclusivity and the recovery of marginalized voices. Contemporary recognition acknowledges that tribal communities were not passive subjects of colonial rule but active participants in shaping India's path to freedom.

The strategy adopted against the Britishers:

The tribal freedom fighters of Odisha employed several strategic approaches in their resistance against British colonial rule. Their strategies were shaped by their deep understanding of local geography, traditional practices, and community structures.

Guerrilla Warfare: Tribal leaders used guerrilla tactics, leveraging their knowledge of the dense forests and rugged terrains of Odisha. This included ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, and utilizing the natural environment to their advantage. Such tactics were effective in harassing British forces and disrupting colonial operations.

Mobilization of Tribal Communities: Leaders like Chakra Bisoi and Rani Dudamani mobilized their communities by tapping into existing social and cultural networks. They united various tribal groups, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared purpose against the common enemy.

Cultural Resistance: Many tribal leaders integrated cultural and religious elements into their resistance efforts. For instance, some used traditional rituals and festivals to galvanize support and reinforce tribal solidarity against colonial rule.

Strategic Alliances: The freedom fighters often formed alliances with other local leaders and groups who shared their opposition to the British. These alliances helped in pooling resources, coordinating efforts, and amplifying the impact of their resistance.

Disruption of Colonial Administration: By targeting administrative centers, communication lines, and supply routes, the tribal freedom fighters sought to undermine the British administrative machinery and create administrative chaos.

These strategies were not only effective in challenging British control but also demonstrated the adaptability and resilience of Odisha's tribal communities in their struggle for autonomy and justice.

Socio-culture and Historical Significance:

A significant aspect of the tribal freedom fighters of Odisha is their profound impact on both historical and contemporary socio-political landscapes. These leaders played crucial roles in resisting British colonial rule, advocating not just for political independence but for the preservation of tribal cultures and autonomy. Their resistance movements were deeply rooted in the socio-economic disruptions caused by colonial policies, which threatened their traditional ways of life and access to resources. Their legacies are crucial in understanding modern tribal rights movements and regional politics in Odisha. The recognition of their struggles has influenced contemporary policy frameworks aimed at addressing the needs of tribal communities, highlighting issues of marginalization and socio-economic disparity.

Moreover, their stories serve as powerful symbols of resilience and cultural pride, inspiring ongoing efforts to improve the welfare and rights of indigenous populations. The continued commemoration and integration of their contributions into educational and cultural narratives underscore the enduring relevance of their fight. Their significant role in shaping both historical perspectives and contemporary tribal advocacy illustrate how their lives and legacies continue to influence and inspire movements for justice and equality.

III. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the tribal freedom fighters of Odisha have left an indelible mark on the region's history and ongoing socio-political landscape. Their relentless struggles against British colonial oppression not only highlight the resilience and bravery of Odisha's indigenous communities but also underscore the broader quest for justice and autonomy that characterized the Indian independence movement. Examining their lives and legacies reveals the profound impact these freedom fighters had on historical and contemporary contexts. Their resistance laid the groundwork for future advocacy and policy changes aimed at improving the lives of tribal populations. As Odisha continues to navigate the complexities of development and cultural preservation, the spirit of these tribal freedom fighters remains a source of inspiration and a guiding force for ongoing efforts towards justice and equality. Their enduring legacy is a testament to Indigenous voices' power in shaping history and continuing to influence societal progress.

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