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TRIBAL RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS AGAINST COLONIAL RULE

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Abstract:

The tribal resistance movements against British rule were among the most important struggles in Indian history. These movements were led by tribal communities who fought to protect their land, culture, and independence. British laws and systems took away tribal rights over forests and land, leading to displacement, poverty, and exploitation by landlords and moneylenders. This created widespread anger, which resulted in revolts across different regions of India.

Major uprisings included the Santhal Rebellion (1855–56), the Munda Uprising (1899–1900) led by Birsa Munda, the Kol Rebellion (1831–32), the Bhil Revolt, and the Rampa Rebellion in Andhra Pradesh. These were not random acts of violence but organized efforts to defend tribal land and traditions. Leaders inspired their communities to resist unfair colonial policies and the destruction of their way of life.

Religion and community played a key role in these movements. Leaders like Birsa Munda used spiritual ideas to unite people and strengthen resistance. Although most tribal movements were local and separate from elite nationalist politics, they reflected the same desire for freedom and justice.

Though the British suppressed these revolts violently, tribal resistance forced them to introduce reforms such as the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908), which offered limited protection to tribal land. Overall, these movements show that India's freedom struggle was not only led by urban elites but also by Indigenous communities who bravely fought to defend their identity, rights, and way of life.

Keywords: *Tribal Resistance, British Rule, Indigenous Movements, Freedom Struggle, Cultural Identity*

Introduction:

The history of colonial India is often told through imperial expansion and elite nationalism, but this overlooks a crucial dimension: the sustained resistance of Indigenous and tribal communities. Long before organized nationalist politics, Adivasi groups across India confronted colonial authority through revolts, everyday defiance, and cultural survival. These were not marginal episodes but some of the earliest and most persistent forms of anti-colonial struggle, rooted in deep connections to land, ecology, and collective identity (Singh, 1978; Kennedy & King, 2013).

Tribal resistance emerged from concrete experiences of dispossession. British land revenue systems, forest laws, and legal reforms transformed communal land relations, criminalized traditional livelihoods, and weakened Indigenous authority structures (Devalle, 1990; Kulkarni, 1979). These interventions produced daily experiences of loss—of land, autonomy, and dignity.

Across regions, these pressures generated organized resistance. Movements such as the Chuar, Kol, and Santal rebellions in eastern India challenged exploitative intermediaries, while Bhil and Gond struggles opposed forest restrictions, and communities in the northeast resisted colonial expansion in defence of political sovereignty and ecological balance (Dasgupta, 2013; Bhattacharya & Bhattacharya, 2021; Nilsen, 2015; Misra, 2021).

Once dismissed as irrational, these uprisings are now understood as structured political responses grounded in Indigenous ideas of justice and moral order (Singh, 1978; Chattopadhyay, 2015). For many communities, land was sacred rather than economic, making resistance a defence of cultural worlds as much as material survival (Verghese, 2016). Indigenous women also played central roles as organizers and custodians of memory, challenging narrow definitions of political action (Anand, 2025). This study therefore places Indigenous resistance at the centre of India's anti-colonial history, as a conscious political tradition offering alternative visions of sovereignty, justice, and coexistence.

1.Colonial Encounters and the Transformation of Tribal Society:

1.1 The Colonial Invention of the "Tribe":

When the British arrived, they encountered an India full of communities whose lives were deeply tied to their forests, rivers, and hills. These communities lived by systems of kinship, exchange, and ecological balance that had evolved over centuries. Yet, to colonial administrators, they appeared as "tribes"—a word that quickly became shorthand for "primitive" or "backward."

As anthropologist S. B. C. Devalle (1990) points out, the "tribe" was not a neutral label but a colonial invention—a convenient category that allowed the British to classify and control groups they did not fully understand. Once labelled, these people could be studied, mapped, taxed, and "civilized." The British ethnographic gaze froze dynamic, adaptive communities into static museum exhibits of "traditional" life.

K. S. Singh (1978) noted that this process of classification went hand in hand with the census, surveys, and bureaucratic paperwork that defined colonial rule. It turned fluid cultural identities into rigid administrative boxes. This way of seeing people—as data and as difference—helped justify control. As Sayantani Das Gupta (2019) later observed, this colonial image of the "tribe" as an innocent but uncivilized people would continue to shape even post-independence governance. The category survived in the modern Indian bureaucracy as Scheduled Tribes, showing how colonial ways of knowing could outlive colonial power itself.

1.2 Land and Law: Dispossession by Design:

If colonial knowledge reduced Indigenous identity to a category, colonial land policies stripped that identity of its material foundations. For most Indigenous societies, land was not simply an economic resource but the very basis of life, tied to ancestry, spirituality, subsistence, and collective memory (Singh, 1978). Land provided food, shelter, and social belonging, and was governed through communal systems that emphasized shared access and responsibility rather than private ownership. British colonial rule fundamentally disrupted these relationships by treating land primarily as a source of revenue (Devalle, 1990).

The introduction of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 marked a decisive shift in this regard. Colonial administrators imposed private property rights and fixed taxation, transforming land into a marketable commodity and turning Indigenous communities into tenants on their own territories. Singh (1978) argues that this system dismantled long-standing communal land arrangements that had regulated inequality and ensured social stability. Over time, large portions of tribal land were transferred to outsiders—moneylenders, traders, and landlords known locally as *dikus*—who exploited Indigenous unfamiliarity with colonial legal systems to consolidate control (Kulkarni, 1979).

This pattern of dispossession did not remain confined to the nineteenth century. Rao, Deshingkar, and Farrington (2006) demonstrate that similar processes persisted into the twentieth century, particularly in Andhra Pradesh, where legal mechanisms facilitated land alienation under the guise of formal transactions. Many Adivasi farmers, trapped in cycles of debt and unaware of complex legal procedures, lost their lands through court-sanctioned "transfers" that they neither fully understood nor genuinely consented to (Rao et al., 2006). In this sense, law functioned less as a system of protection and more as an instrument of dispossession.

Colonial forest policies further intensified this process. British forest laws introduced in the mid-nineteenth century criminalized everyday practices such as shifting cultivation, grazing, hunting, and the collection of forest produce. Activities that had sustained Indigenous communities for generations were suddenly declared illegal, and forests were reclassified as state property (Chattopadhyay, 2015). Kennedy and King (2013) argue that these measures transformed forests from spaces of belonging into zones of surveillance and punishment, producing deep resentment and moral outrage among affected populations.

The consequences of these policies were especially visible in regions such as the Santal Parganas. Dasgupta (2013) recounts how the Santals, once prosperous cultivators with strong communal institutions, were reduced to indebted labourers under exploitative intermediaries. Land, previously sacred and collectively managed, became collateral in systems of extraction and debt (Dasgupta, 2013). The colonial state's relentless pursuit of revenue not only impoverished Indigenous communities but also disrupted their cultural and spiritual relationships with territory.

Overall, colonial land law did more than redistribute property; it restructured Indigenous life itself. Dispossession was experienced not merely as economic loss but as a profound rupture in social identity, moral order, and ecological belonging (Devalle, 1990; Singh, 1978). The transformation of land into a commodity created enduring conditions of alienation and injustice that would later fuel widespread resistance across tribal regions of India.

1.3 How the Colonial Economy Rewired Tribal Life:

Colonial policies did not just dispossess; they restructured society itself. Before British interference, tribal economies were largely self-sustaining, based on sharing and cooperation. Under colonial rule, they were pulled into global markets they did not understand and did not benefit from. S. D. Kulkarni (1979) observed that the introduction of market relations and taxation created new divisions within tribal society. Some individuals became intermediaries—liaisons between their communities and the colonial state—while the majority sank into poverty. Class divisions, largely absent before, began to appear.

In the North-East Frontier Agency (now parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam), P. N. Luthra (1971) found that British rule intensified earlier Ahom systems of tribute but added surveillance and bureaucratic oversight. Traditional leaders were turned into salaried officials, answerable not to their communities but to British officers. Over time, this system hollowed out Indigenous governance, eroding the authority of village elders and ritual specialists.

Das Gupta (2019) argues that this was part of a larger colonial logic: domination through knowledge. By labelling certain communities as "backward," the British justified their control as benevolent. Their rule was framed not as exploitation but as "upliftment". Yet behind this rhetoric was a system that replaced Indigenous autonomy with bureaucratic dependency.

K. S. Singh (1998) adds that this transformation had long-term political consequences. Leadership, once grounded in moral and ecological authority, was replaced by hierarchy and coercion. Village headmen (manjhis), traditionally chosen by consensus, were turned into state-appointed agents—a shift that redefined power within communities and fractured their internal solidarity.

1.4 Cultural Disruption and the Loss of Continuity:

Colonial domination was not only economic or political but also deeply cultural and spiritual. State interventions reshaped everyday life, disrupting the songs, rituals, and stories that connected Indigenous communities to their land.

Chattopadhyay (2015) explains that colonial mapping transformed forests, villages, and hills into administrative zones. Spaces of belonging became spaces of control, producing not only territorial loss but also a loss of meaning, as the unity between the sacred and the political was broken.

The impact was especially severe for women. Anand (2025) shows that Indigenous women, traditionally custodians of oral traditions and rituals related to fertility, harvest, and healing, were

displaced by patriarchal land laws and missionary norms. This weakened matrilineal systems and reduced women's cultural authority.

Misra (2021) and Verghese (2016) argue that cultural disruption often generated resistance. In regions such as the Garo Hills and Bastar, spiritual leaders mobilized deities and ancestral memory to legitimize revolt, turning suppressed cultural traditions into powerful forms of political defiance.

1.5 The Forest as Frontier: Ecology and Control:

Perhaps nowhere was the violence of colonial transformation more visible than in the forests. When the British established the **Indian Forest Department in 1864**, they effectively nationalized vast tracts of land that had always belonged to local communities (Verghese, 2016). Forests that had once been sacred became commodities—timber for railways, resin for trade, and land for tea plantations.

Alf Nilsen (2015) writes that in the Bhil regions of western India; forest control became a central cause of resistance. Deprived of access to their traditional resources, communities were forced to break laws to survive, which in turn justified further repression. The forest became both a prison and a battleground.

Yet, even under constant surveillance, Indigenous communities found ways to resist. In Bastar, Verghese (2016) describes how villagers refused to cooperate with logging operations and revived forgotten rituals as acts of protest. The forest thus became a living symbol of both oppression and freedom—a place where colonial power met Indigenous endurance.

1.6 From Colonized Subjects to Political Actors:

By the late 19th century, the combined effects of land loss, cultural disruption, and political marginalization had reshaped Indigenous life across India. The British had hoped to turn these communities into compliant subjects. Instead, they created the conditions for rebellion.

As Singh (1978) and Devalle (1990) remind us, colonialism did not merely exploit—it produced new forms of awareness. When the state took their forests and fields, Indigenous peoples began to see their struggles not as isolated grievances but as part of a larger moral and political battle. The people the British called "tribes" were becoming something else: subaltern actors with a shared sense of injustice and a growing consciousness of resistance.

This transformation—painful, disruptive, and incomplete—would set the stage for the waves of Indigenous uprisings that followed, from the Santals and Bhils to the Chuars and the Garos. The British remade the landscape, but in doing so, they also awakened the very forces that would one day rise against them.

2.Forms and Dynamics of Indigenous Resistance:

2.1 Peasant-Tribal Uprisings and Rebellions:

The early resistance movements in colonial India were not mere spontaneous outbursts of

anger—they were deeply grounded in lived experiences of dispossession and betrayal. Among the most significant of these was the Santal Rebellion of 1855–56, one of the largest organized uprisings against British rule in eastern India. As A. Dasgupta (2013) recounts, the rebellion arose from the Santals' growing resentment toward dikus—moneylenders, traders, and zamindars—who, empowered by colonial land laws, systematically usurped tribal lands. The Santals' traditional moral economy, based on reciprocity and communal ownership, was replaced by debt, taxation, and forced labour. What began as a local grievance soon turned into a war for dignity and autonomy, as tens of thousands of Santals took up arms under their charismatic leaders Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu.

Similarly, the Chuar Rebellion of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, centred in the Jungle Mahal region, reflected a similar fusion of peasant and tribal resistance. Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya (2021) emphasize that the Chuars—largely forest-dwelling cultivators—rebelled against exploitative land settlements that reduced them to criminals in their own territories. These uprisings, often labelled as "banditry" or "lawlessness" by colonial officers, were in fact forms of popular sovereignty—attempts by marginalized communities to reclaim their right to govern their lands and lives.

Both the Santal and Chuar rebellions demonstrated the emergence of a shared political consciousness among Indigenous peasants and forest communities. Their defiance was not just against taxation or authority—it was a rejection of the colonial worldview that denied their humanity. The British sought to depict them as primitive, but their resistance revealed a sophisticated sense of justice rooted in community ethics and collective memory (Singh, 1978; Verghese, 2016).

2.2 Localized Resistance and Everyday Defiance:

Beyond the spectacular uprisings lay another form of resistance—quiet, persistent, and deeply local. While large-scale revolts captured the attention of colonial chroniclers, everyday acts of defiance sustained Indigenous resilience over generations.

Soumitra Chattopadhyay (2015) argues that Indigenous resistance must be read not only through open conflict but through the small, ritualized gestures of non-cooperation. When colonial administrators banned traditional forest practices, villagers responded by continuing them in secret. Rituals once performed in open groves were relocated to hidden shrines deep within forests. Women continued to sing agricultural songs that celebrated ancestral guardians even as missionaries sought to replace them with hymns. These acts, though seemingly modest, were radical in their refusal to surrender cultural sovereignty.

In regions such as Bastar, Verghese (2016) records how villagers used ritual processions to reclaim forbidden spaces, blending religious devotion with protest. The act of carrying sacred symbols through forest paths reclaimed not only territory but also memory. Similarly, in the Garo Hills, Misra (2021) documents how local communities resisted the intrusion of British officials through collective refusal to supply labour or tribute. Such everyday refusals created moral boundaries within which

communities preserved their dignity.

These "micro-resistances," as Chattopadhyay (2015) describes them, remind us that rebellion was not limited to war. It was woven into the fabric of daily life—into the songs, harvests, and prayers of people who refused to forget. They represent what James Scott might call "the weapons of the weak": subtle, moral, and enduring forms of defiance that colonial power could neither suppress nor fully comprehend.

2.3 Longue Durée of Rebellion: The Bhil Heartland:

Resistance in India's tribal regions was not episodic—it unfolded over centuries as part of a long durée of struggle. In the Bhil heartlands of western and central India, colonial rule encountered a social landscape already marked by long histories of negotiation and assertion.

Alf Nilsen (2015) characterizes the Bhil experience as a "rebellious century," a continuous cycle of uprisings, truces, and reorganizations of power. The Bhils did not fight a single, unified war; rather, they engaged in a series of localized insurgencies, each adapting to shifting political and ecological pressures. This long-term resistance was sustained by deeply rooted networks of kinship, clan loyalties, and shared ecological dependence.

For Nilsen, the endurance of Bhil resistance challenges the colonial narrative that portrayed tribal movements as irrational or short-lived. Instead, it reveals an evolving political rationality—one that combined survival strategies with assertions of sovereignty. Bhil leaders often engaged in selective negotiation with the colonial state, agreeing to peace on their own terms while retaining control over forests and routes. In doing so, they carved out spaces of semi-autonomy that persisted despite imperial attempts at assimilation.

This century-long struggle, stretching from the early 1800s to the 1900s, shows how Indigenous communities learned to navigate power rather than simply submit to it. Their rebellions were less about overthrowing the Empire and more about maintaining the rhythms of life—forests, rituals, kinship—that the Empire sought to erase.

3. Gender, Agency, and the Role of Women:

3.1 Women as Leaders and Organizers:

Indigenous resistance movements were not only collective struggles—they were also profoundly gendered. Yet, for decades, historical narratives have overlooked the role of women who sustained, led, and reimagined resistance.

Veena Anand (2025) brings this hidden history into focus, documenting how women were central to Indigenous movements across colonial India. In many cases, they served as organizers, spiritual intermediaries, and mobilizers of collective action. During the Santal Rebellion, women not only supported fighters but also carried messages, prepared food, and performed rituals that bound communities together. In the forests of Chotanagpur and Bastar, women's groups organized collective

refusals to pay tribute or surrender land.

Anand (2025) argues that colonialism imposed patriarchal norms that disrupted these forms of female leadership. Nevertheless, Indigenous women resisted both colonial domination and gender subordination. They redefined political participation through care, ritual, and communal labour, reminding us that resistance was as much about nurturing life as defending it.

3.2 Gendered Forms of Resistance:

Resistance was not always expressed through battle cries or armed revolt. For Indigenous women, cultural practices themselves became sites of defiance. Songs, rituals, and festivals—often dismissed as folklore by colonial observers—were, in fact, vehicles for preserving memory and asserting agency.

As Anand (2025) and Chattopadhyay (2015) highlight, matrilineal traditions in several tribal societies placed women as moral anchors of the community. Their authority derived from their roles as storytellers, ritual leaders, and custodians of the land's fertility. Even as colonial laws undermined women's property rights, they maintained power through symbolic and spiritual means—invoking ancestral mothers in ceremonies that reaffirmed belonging and defied dispossession.

In this sense, gendered resistance was cultural survival through continuity. It preserved not only traditions but the values of equality and reciprocity that colonial patriarchy sought to erase.

3.3 Feminist Reinterpretations of Tribal Revolts:

Recent feminist historiography challenges the tendency to see tribal women merely as victims or supporters. Instead, it recognizes them as agents of transformation within anti-colonial struggles.

Anand (2025) and Varughese & Mukherjee (2024) both suggest that modern reinterpretations of these movements expose how women's resistance was often multi-layered—spiritual, ecological, and political. By centring women's voices, feminist scholarship reframes Indigenous revolts as movements for both decolonization and gender justice.

These reinterpretations also invite a broader understanding of power: not as domination, but as the capacity to sustain community in the face of destruction.

4.Religion, Cosmology, and the Spiritual Foundations of Revolt:

4.1 Prophecy, Millenarianism, and Sacred Sovereignty:

Religion played a central role in shaping the idioms of Indigenous resistance. Rebellion was often framed not as a political act but as a sacred duty. Prophets and shamans became revolutionaries in their own right, invoking divine authority against empire.

During the Santal Rebellion, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu proclaimed that Thakur, the supreme deity, had sanctioned their uprising (Dasgupta, 2013). Similarly, in Bastar, prophetic leaders declared that the spirits of the forests demanded resistance against colonial intrusion (Verghese, 2016). These millenarian visions transformed rebellion into an act of cosmic restoration—a fight to reclaim a moral

order disrupted by foreign rule.

4.2 Ecological and Spiritual Cosmologies:

For Indigenous peoples, the struggle against colonialism was inseparable from the struggle to protect the ecological and spiritual order. As S. Misra (2021) argues, the Garo rebellions linked sovereignty not to political independence but to the preservation of sacred landscapes. The forest, the river, and the hill were all living entities, and to defile them was to violate the sacred covenant between humans and nature.

This ecological cosmology infused resistance with moral depth. The defence of land was the defence of life itself—a resistance rooted in ethics rather than mere survival.

4.3 Ritual, Memory, and Sacred Landscapes:

Rituals, songs, and sacred sites became repositories of historical memory. Even after military defeats, communities continued to commemorate rebellions through ritual performances and oral narratives. These acts of remembrance preserved collective identity long after the colonial state sought to erase it (Chattopadhyay, 2015; Misra, 2021).

Through ritual, the past remained alive—not as nostalgia, but as prophecy. The stories of resistance told around fires and festivals ensured that future generations inherited not just trauma, but pride and purpose.

5.Indigenous Resistance and Nationalism:

5.1 Interaction with the 1857 Uprising:

The Revolt of 1857 has long been framed in Indian historiography as the "First War of Independence," yet this nationalist lens often obscures the complex and uneven participation of Indigenous communities. Tribal groups did not uniformly align with the sepoys or princely elites who led the revolt; instead, their responses were shaped by local histories of dispossession and confrontation with colonial authority.

K. S. Singh (1998) demonstrates that many Indigenous communities-particularly in central and eastern India-engaged with the 1857 uprising on their own terms. For groups such as the Santals, Bhils, and Kol tribes, resistance to British rule had begun well before 1857 and was rooted in land alienation, forest laws, and the erosion of customary governance. When the revolt broke out, some of these communities saw it as an opportunity to intensify their own struggles against colonial encroachment rather than as a nationalist project aimed at restoring Mughal or princely authority.

In regions like Chotanagpur and the Bhil heartland, tribal groups attacked colonial outposts, revenue offices, and symbols of state power during 1857–58 (Singh, 1998). However, their objectives differed from those of the sepoys. They sought the restoration of ancestral lands and autonomy rather than the creation of a centralized nation-state. In this sense, Indigenous participation in 1857 was situational and selective, driven by local moral economies rather than abstract nationalist ideals.

Singh (1998) argues that this divergence has often led historians to either marginalize tribal contributions or misinterpret them as mere extensions of elite-led rebellion. In reality, Indigenous engagement with 1857 reveals an alternative political imagination-one that prioritized sovereignty over territory rather than sovereignty over a nation.

5.2 Divergences from Indian Nationalism:

As Indian nationalism consolidated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its leadership increasingly emerged from urban, educated, and upper-caste elites. This trajectory created significant distance between nationalist politics and Indigenous aspirations. While nationalism spoke the language of citizenship, rights, and constitutional reform, many Adivasi communities were grappling with more immediate concerns: land loss, displacement, and survival.

Kennedy and King (2013) argue that Indigenous resistance movements followed trajectories largely independent of mainstream nationalism because the nation-state itself appeared as another external authority threatening local autonomy. For many Adivasi groups, colonial exploitation was experienced not only through British officials but also through Indian intermediaries-moneylenders, contractors, and landlords—who later became embedded within nationalist politics.

This disconnect explains why several Indigenous movements articulated autonomous agendas rather than nationalist ones. In central India, tribal mobilizations focused on reclaiming forests and resisting state intrusion, often refusing to align with nationalist parties or leaders (Kennedy & King, 2013). Even when nationalist rhetoric reached tribal regions, it was frequently filtered through local cosmologies and reframed in terms of ancestral rights rather than national unity.

Thus, Indigenous resistance cannot be read as a "failure" to embrace nationalism. Instead, it represents a parallel political tradition-one that questioned whether independence from colonial rule would truly dismantle structures of domination. This scepticism would later prove prescient in postcolonial India, where many colonial patterns of extraction continued under a national banner.

5.3 The Politics of Representation:

Both colonial and nationalist discourses played a significant role in shaping how Indigenous resistance was represented and misrepresented. Colonial administrators often portrayed tribal rebellions as irrational, violent, or driven by superstition. Such depictions justified repression and reinforced the idea that Indigenous peoples were incapable of political reason (Devalle, 1990).

Nationalist narratives, while more sympathetic, frequently appropriated tribal resistance as a precursor to the freedom struggle without acknowledging its distinct goals. Indigenous revolts were celebrated when they could be folded into a linear story of national awakening, but marginalized when they challenged the nation-state itself (Singh, 1998; Das Gupta, 2019).

This politics of representation silenced Indigenous voices by translating them into languages they did not speak-nationalism, modernity, and development. As a result, Adivasi struggles were

remembered selectively, stripped of their ecological, spiritual, and communal foundations. The history of Indigenous resistance thus became a contested terrain, shaped as much by who narrated it as by who lived it.

6.Knowledge, Culture, and Epistemic Resistance:

6.1 Colonial Knowledge Systems and Ethnographic Control:

Colonial domination relied not only on military power but also on knowledge production. Through ethnography, censuses, and surveys, the British constructed Indigenous peoples as "non-modern" and "pre-political." This knowledge did not merely describe tribal societies—it actively reshaped them.

S. B. C. Devalle (1990) argues that the colonial category of the "tribe" functioned as an epistemic tool of governance. By portraying Indigenous communities as timeless and static, colonial ethnography erased their histories of adaptation, negotiation, and resistance. This framing legitimized paternalistic policies, presenting colonial rule as necessary guidance for "backward" peoples.

Such knowledge systems were not innocent. They transformed living societies into objects of study and control, denying Indigenous peoples the status of historical agents. The stereotype of the "non-modern tribal" became a powerful justification for dispossession—one that continues to echo in postcolonial governance.

6.2 Oral Traditions and Indigenous Knowledge Systems:

Against the written archives of colonial power stood another archive—oral, embodied, and performative. Songs, myths, folktales, and rituals preserved histories that colonial records ignored or suppressed.

Veena Anand (2025) emphasizes that oral traditions, often maintained by women, functioned as repositories of resistance memory. Stories of rebellion, loss, and survival were passed down across generations, ensuring that colonial violence was neither forgotten nor normalized. Similarly, Das Gupta (2019) highlights how folklore preserved alternative understandings of time and history—ones rooted in cyclical renewal rather than linear progress.

These traditions did more than remember the past; they shaped political consciousness. By linking present suffering to ancestral struggles, oral narratives sustained a sense of moral continuity and collective identity. They remind us that resistance is not always archived in documents—it lives in voices, rhythms, and shared remembrance.

6.3 Reclaiming Epistemic Sovereignty:

In recent scholarship, Indigenous knowledge is increasingly recognized as a form of political thought rather than cultural residue. Reclaiming epistemic sovereignty means challenging the dominance of colonial ways of knowing and affirming Indigenous worldviews as legitimate frameworks for understanding justice, land, and community.

Anand (2025) and Das Gupta (2019) both argue that Indigenous epistemologies offer a critique of modernity itself. Their emphasis on relationality, ecological balance, and collective responsibility stands in contrast to colonial and capitalist logics of extraction. By asserting these knowledge systems, Indigenous movements enact a form of decolonial resistance—one that refuses not only political domination but epistemic erasure.

7.Continuity of Resistance in Postcolonial India:

7.1 Development-Induced Displacement:

Independence did not mark the end of Indigenous dispossession. Instead, many colonial practices were rebranded as development. Large-scale mining, dams, and industrial projects displaced millions of Adivasis in the name of national progress.

Roy and Monippally (n.d.) describe contemporary Indigenous struggles against coal mining in Jharkhand as forms of "procedural violence," where legality masks injustice. Much like colonial land transfers, displacement today occurs through bureaucratic processes that exclude Indigenous consent. The continuity is striking: land is still taken, forests are still cleared, and communities are still expected to sacrifice for a progress they rarely benefit from.

7.2 Neoliberalism and the Re-Colonization of Tribal Land:

Neoliberal reforms have intensified these processes by opening tribal regions to global capital. Rao, Deshingkar, and Farrington (2006) show that land alienation in Andhra Pradesh continues through market mechanisms that echo colonial revenue systems. Privatization, contractual farming, and mining leases replicate older patterns of extraction under new economic regimes.

In this sense, neoliberalism represents a re-colonization of Indigenous spaces, where the state acts as facilitator rather than ruler. The language of growth replaces the language of empire, but the outcomes—dispossession and marginalization—remain hauntingly familiar.

7.3 Adivasi Movements and Environmental Justice:

Contemporary Adivasi movements draw explicitly on ancestral resistance legacies to challenge these injustices. Varughese and Mukherjee (2024) argue that Indigenous activism today is deeply interwoven with environmental justice, literature, and cultural expression. Protest slogans, songs, and narratives frequently invoke past rebellions, framing modern struggles as part of a historical continuum.

These movements resist not only displacement but the very logic that separates development from ecology. By asserting the inseparability of land, culture, and survival, Adivasi mobilizations articulate an alternative vision of justice—one rooted in memory, dignity, and ecological ethics.

In doing so, they reaffirm a central theme of Indigenous resistance in India: that the struggle against domination did not end with colonialism. It continues wherever land is taken, voices are silenced, and histories are denied.

8.Class, Caste, and Internal Dynamics of Indigenous Resistance:

8.1 Class Formation within Tribal Societies:

Colonial rule did not encounter Indigenous societies as blank or uniform spaces. Instead, it gradually reshaped their internal structures, often producing inequalities where relatively egalitarian relations had existed earlier. Prior to colonial intervention, access to land and resources in many tribal societies was regulated by custom, kinship, and collective responsibility. While differences in status existed, they were rarely consolidated into rigid class hierarchies.

The introduction of monetized revenue systems, however, destabilized this balance. Kulkarni (1979) demonstrates that colonial taxation and market integration created conditions for class formation within tribal communities. Individuals who could mediate between colonial officials and local society—such as village headmen, moneylenders, or traders—accumulated wealth and influence. Over time, this group emerged as a local elite, often benefiting from colonial stability and therefore hesitant to support rebellion.

In contrast, small cultivators, forest-dependent households, and land-poor families experienced intensified exploitation. Debt, forced labour, and loss of customary rights pushed them into positions of vulnerability. These material conditions shaped resistance unevenly: while poorer groups often led insurgent movements, internal elites sometimes acted as buffers for colonial power. Resistance, therefore, was not only directed outward against colonial rule but also involved internal contestations over authority, loyalty, and moral responsibility.

8.2 Caste Penetration and Fragmentation:

Alongside class differentiation, colonial governance enabled the penetration of caste hierarchies into tribal societies that had historically existed outside or at the margins of the Hindu caste order. Colonial ethnographic surveys and censuses sought to categorize Indigenous communities within fixed social hierarchies, often imposing identities that were neither historically accurate nor socially meaningful.

K. S. Singh (1978) argues that this process fragmented Indigenous solidarity. Some communities attempted to assimilate upward by adopting caste practices, distancing themselves from forest-based livelihoods and ritual traditions. Others were assigned stigmatized positions, reinforcing inequality and exclusion. Caste thus became a new axis of differentiation, reshaping social relations and weakening collective resistance.

This penetration of caste also introduced new forms of competition over recognition, resources, and respectability. Instead of confronting colonial power collectively, communities were often drawn into struggles against one another. Colonial rule thus operated not merely through coercion, but through social reengineering—reordering Indigenous societies in ways that undermined shared political action.

8.3 Inter-Tribal and Peasant Alliances:

Despite internal divisions, Indigenous resistance history is marked by moments of remarkable coalition-building. When dispossession intensified, boundaries between tribal groups and non-tribal peasants often became porous. Shared experiences of land loss, taxation, and state violence created conditions for collective action that transcended ethnic and occupational identities.

The Chuar uprising in Jungle Mahal exemplifies this convergence. Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya (2021) show how forest communities, displaced peasants, and marginal cultivators forged alliances against exploitative revenue systems. These alliances challenged colonial portrayals of tribal revolts as isolated and irrational, revealing instead a shared political consciousness rooted in lived experience.

Such solidarities were fragile but significant. They demonstrate that Indigenous resistance was capable of imagining broader political communities—grounded not in abstract nationalism, but in everyday struggles over land, dignity, and survival.

9.Historiography and the Rewriting of Indigenous Resistance:

9.1 Colonial and Nationalist Historiography:

How Indigenous resistance has been written about reveals much about power and knowledge. Colonial historians routinely described tribal uprisings as outbreaks of savagery, criminality, or religious fanaticism. These representations denied Indigenous people's political rationality and justified violent repression as a civilizing mission (Devalle, 1990).

Nationalist historiography, while critical of colonialism, often reproduced similar silences. Tribal revolts were acknowledged only when they could be folded into a narrative of Indian nationalism. Autonomous Indigenous struggles—those that did not align with nationalist objectives—were marginalized or ignored altogether (Singh, 1998). In both traditions, Indigenous actors appeared as footnotes rather than historical subjects.

9.2 Subaltern and Decolonial Reinterpretations:

This historiographical silence began to fracture with the rise of Subaltern Studies and decolonial scholarship. These approaches rejected elite-centred narratives and insisted on recovering the political consciousness of marginalized groups.

Chattopadhyay (2015) emphasizes that Indigenous resistance often unfolded through everyday practices—rituals, refusals, and cultural continuity—that escaped colonial archives. Nilsen (2015) situates tribal rebellions within a longue durée of negotiation, showing how resistance persisted through cycles of repression and accommodation.

Together, these scholars recast Indigenous resistance as strategic, reflective, and historically grounded. Resistance emerges not as episodic violence but as a continuous political practice embedded in daily life.

9.3 Feminist and Environmental Historiography:

Feminist and environmental historiography has further transformed the field by shifting attention to gender and ecology. Anand (2025) foregrounds Indigenous women's leadership, ritual authority, and memory work, challenging masculinist accounts that equate resistance with armed rebellion alone.

Simultaneously, Verghese (2016) demonstrates that forests and sacred landscapes were not passive settings but active sites of political struggle. Resistance was ecological as much as political, rooted in the defence of land as a living entity. These approaches compel historians to rethink power beyond the state and recognize care, ecology, and memory as political forces.

10.Toward a Decolonial Future:

10.1 Rethinking Sovereignty and Autonomy:

Indigenous resistance challenges dominant understandings of sovereignty based on territorial control and centralized authority. For many tribal communities, sovereignty was relational—emerging from reciprocal obligations between humans, land, ancestors, and non-human life.

Misra (2021) shows that Indigenous struggles sought autonomy over ways of life rather than control over the state. This vision unsettles modern political theory, offering an alternative grounded in responsibility rather than domination.

10.2 Lessons from Indigenous Ethics for Modern Governance:

In the context of contemporary ecological crises, Indigenous ethics acquire renewed relevance. Tribal cosmologies emphasize balance, restraint, and collective stewardship—values fundamentally opposed to extractive development.

Misra (2021) argues that these ethical systems question the assumption that progress requires environmental destruction. Indigenous resistance thus offers not only critique but guidance, pointing toward more sustainable and just forms of governance.

10.3 Decolonizing Indian History:

Decolonizing Indian history requires more than adding Indigenous revolts to existing narratives. It demands recognizing Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate forms of theory. Oral traditions, rituals, and ecological practices are not merely cultural artifacts—they are epistemologies (Anand, 2025; Das Gupta, 2019).

Such recognition disrupts colonial hierarchies of knowledge and expands the boundaries of historical imagination.

Conclusion:

This study shows that Indigenous resistance in colonial India cannot be understood as a series of isolated or spontaneous uprisings. Rather, it was a continuous historical process rooted in everyday struggles over land, culture, gender, and knowledge. Indigenous communities were not passive victims

but actively challenged the moral and political foundations of colonial rule by drawing on collective memory, ecological ethics, and relational forms of sovereignty (Devalle, 1990; Singh, 1978).

Colonial domination worked on multiple levels. Land alienation, forest laws, and revenue systems produced material dispossession, while administrative categories such as the "tribe" reshaped Indigenous identities and systems of governance. In response, resistance took diverse forms: armed revolts by the Santals, Bhils, Chuars, and Garos confronted exploitation directly, while songs, rituals, and sacred landscapes preserved political awareness and cultural autonomy beyond military defeat (Dasgupta, 2013; Bhattacharya & Bhattacharya, 2021; Misra, 2021).

Gender and spirituality further complicate our understanding of resistance. Indigenous women played crucial roles in sustaining movements and transmitting memory, challenging masculinist definitions of politics (Anand, 2025). At the same time, spiritual and ecological worldviews framed rebellion as a defence of sacred worlds, where land was tied to identity and sovereignty rather than economic value (Verghese, 2016; Misra, 2021).

Finally, Indigenous resistance continues in the postcolonial period, as Adivasi communities face ongoing displacement under development policies. Contemporary movements draw on historical traditions of resistance, showing that Indigenous struggle remains an ongoing ethical and political practice rather than a closed chapter of the past (Rao et al., 2006; Varughese & Mukherjee, 2024).

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