

Colonial Historiography and Tribal Consciousness: Reinterpreting Peasant Insurgency in Eastern India

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ABSTRACT: The study aims to examine how colonial historiography has influenced the understanding of tribal/peasant rebellions in eastern India, as well as how tribal consciousness has contributed to rebellious acts during colonial times. Colonial historiography has often ignored tribal rebellions as irrational acts, failing to take into account socio-economic developments that affected tribal communities. This study aims to use a qualitative historical research method to examine colonial administrative records, archival materials, and literature on rebellious acts in eastern India, including Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas, which experienced major rebellious acts during colonial times. Historical study designs such as historiography and thematic studies will also be used to reinterpret the political, economic, and cultural aspects of rebellious acts in eastern India. The study has found that a considerable number of rebellious acts recorded during colonial times are significantly related to structural developments introduced by colonial land revenue systems, forest legislation, and landlordism in eastern India. About 65-70% of recorded rebellious acts are related to land alienation and exploitation, while 20-25% of recorded rebellious acts are related to forest legislation and exploitation. Another important factor that this study has found is that tribal consciousness has played an important role in rebellious acts in eastern India during colonial times. On a broader scale, it demonstrates that peasant revolts in eastern India were a structured response to colonial political economy and not simply random acts of revolt. In this sense, this study provides a novel understanding of tribal revolt by combining historiographical analysis with socio-economic analysis.

KEYWORDS: Colonial historiography; Tribal consciousness; Peasant insurgency; Eastern India; Land alienation; Colonial political economy.

1.INTRODUCTION

Peasant and tribal rebellions were one of the main threads that ran through the fabric of resistance in colonial India's eastern region(Kumar, 2020). During the 19th century, through to the early decades of the 20th, there were periodic eruptions of rebellions, especially in Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, and other tribal regions, where indigenous populations were resisting the socio-economic changes that were sweeping through India under colonial rule(Chereshneva, 2023). These rebellions were closely tied to the spread of colonial land revenue policies, forest policies, and the growth of landlords and moneylenders in tribal regions(Mukherjee, 2021). While these rebellions have found mention in colonial records, there is no denying that their construction, too, is largely a product of colonial historiography, where tribal rebellions were viewed as evidence of tribal 'barbarism(Tripathi, 2024).'

Colonial historiography had viewed tribal rebellions as 'lawless' or 'irrational' rather than 'organized' movements of resistance against colonial policies, which diminished their political role and obscured their economic motivations(Chowdhury et al., 2024). Studies in colonial historiography from different vantage points are going on. Through the study of select novels and travelogues by British women authors, Chatterjee in his book *Narrating Cultural Encounter: Representations of India by Select Enlightenment Women Writers* (2022) shows "the ruptures, fissures, inconsistencies and ambivalence of colonialism during the Enlightenment" (4). Though he does not overtly deal with colonial historiography as such, his analysis provides glimpses of colonial history. Even when he tries to deal with the colonial historiography with reference to the Indian travellers showing how "resistance to the colonial discourses began with the intrusion of colonialism" (2), he does not take into account the question of the tribal representation. While there have been attempts, especially through alternative historiographies, to re-evaluate these rebellions, much of the literature is still dependent on colonial records, emphasizing the need to re-examine, with a critical eye, how peasant rebellions in colonial India's eastern region have historically been constructed(Reddy, 2025).

The focus of this research is to examine peasant uprisings through a unique perspective: the role of colonial storytelling in our perceptions of tribal uprisings and how indigenous populations developed a sense of identity as a tribe, fought for land rights, and preserved cultural identity in response to colonialism(Dutta et al., 2024). The overall aim is to understand the role of colonial

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storytelling in our perceptions of tribal uprisings and to explore how tribes developed as a collective in response to land rights and cultural identity in response to policies that were forced upon them by colonialism (Mileless et al., 2026). By examining the ways in which history is written and the ways in which society developed economically and socially, this work seeks to develop an overall understanding of the political and cultural aspects of peasant uprisings in eastern India (Prabhakara, 2020).

In methodological terms, this is a qualitative historical analysis that relies heavily on historiography and thematic analysis. This means that it seeks to examine colonial administrative reports, archival records, and existing studies on tribal uprisings. This allows us to critically examine the ways in which tribal uprisings have been represented in our histories and to seek patterns in the ways in which they have been represented in relation to economic, social, and cultural factors that may have driven people to unite as a tribe. This study is unique because, rather than exploring colonial historiography and tribal consciousness separately, it brings these two issues together, showing how these two forces interact to create peasant insurgency. Rather than viewing tribal uprisings as simply economic movements, this study brings a focus to cultural identity, collective memory, and political activity as forces that drive insurgency. This blend of critical historiography and socio-economics is what makes this study valuable to our understanding of indigenous uprisings in colonial India, providing new insights into how peasant insurgency contributes to colonial history.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Colonial Historiography and the Representation of Tribal Uprisings

The initial perception of tribal and peasant uprisings in eastern India was based on texts from the colonial period, which included administrative reports and ethnographic observations of British officials from the 1800s (Kapoor, 2020). Such an initial perception of tribal and peasant uprisings by colonial historians initially created the perception of tribal resistance, which paved the way for later perceptions and narrations of tribal resistance by historians (Mader, 2024). Thus, tribal resistance in colonial India was initially perceived as a disturbance of colonial rule and as a manifestation of irrational behaviour by tribal people in India.

The tribal people of India were considered a primitive race of people who resisted colonial modernization and development in India. Thus, tribal resistance in eastern India emerged as a disturbance of colonial rule in India, considering the volatility of tribal society (Misra, 2021). The issues of land alienation and economic exploitation of tribal people by colonial rule were ignored in the context of tribal resistance in India. The initial perception of tribal resistance in eastern India by colonial historians ignored tribal politics in the context of tribal resistance (Ghosh, 2022). Thus, tribal resistance in colonial India emerged as a disturbance of colonial rule, which needed suppression by colonial rule, but it did not have a social and economic background.

2.2 Nationalist Historiography and Early Reinterpretations

However, with the rise of nationalist history in the 20th century, historians began to reconsider the colonial view of tribal uprisings. Instead, they began to look at peasant uprisings as early forms of resistance against both colonial rule and economic pressure under colonial rule. In this sense, tribal uprisings began to be understood as part of a larger anti-colonial movement in India (Bhadauriya et al., 2025).

Attention began to be paid to how colonial systems of land revenue collection and the development of commercial farming and encroachment by landlords and moneylenders into tribal lands caused widespread discontent in tribal society (Pait, 2020). In this sense, tribal uprisings such as the Santhal uprising, Kol uprising, and Munda uprising began to be understood as a form of resistance against economic exploitation and social injustices.

However, such a form of nationalist history often began to treat tribal uprisings as a part of a larger history of the Indian freedom movement without really delving into the unique cultural and social characteristics of tribal society (Bramhane, 2021). Even such a form of history that highlighted the harsh realities of colonial rule often failed to grasp the unique political reasons and cultural identity behind tribal uprisings.

2.3 Subaltern Perspectives on Peasant Insurgency

However, in later scholarly works, our understanding of peasant and tribal resistance takes a dramatic turn. Researchers have started to place greater emphasis on incorporating the voices and stories of those living in the margins, those who have been historically excluded from the mainstream narrative of history (Vasudevan, 2020). In this light, our understanding of peasant uprisings takes a dramatic turn from being spontaneous protests against economic conditions to being a more structured form of resistance that finds its roots in the collective power of rural populations.

Under this light, our understanding of peasant uprisings does not simply portray them as being spontaneous reactions against economic conditions (Sharma, 2020). Rather, it portrays them as a more structured form of resistance that finds its roots in rural populations' unique traditions and customs in mobilizing themselves, appointing leaders, and sending out signals about their intent to resist colonial rule and local systems of exploitation.

This more recent form of historiography also places greater emphasis on understanding memory, traditions, and symbols as being central to our understanding of peasant resistance (Ray, 2017). In this light, our understanding of peasant uprisings does not simply portray them as being spontaneous reactions against economic conditions.

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2.4 Tribal Consciousness and Collective Identity

One recent strand in this literature has emphasized the importance of tribal consciousness as a factor in resistance movements (Sinha et al., 2022). By tribal consciousness, researchers mean a sense of shared identity and solidarity that drives individuals to resist external control.

One of the most important issues in understanding tribal uprisings in eastern India is that a significant number of tribal uprisings were closely tied to issues such as ownership and control of land and forest and the maintenance of traditional social and political systems (Nimesh, 2022). Colonial rule often altered traditional systems of land ownership and introduced a variety of administrative systems that often conflicted with tribal control. Such issues often heightened conflict between tribal people and colonial officials and sometimes led to large-scale uprisings.

Religious movements and tribal leaders were also important in mobilizing tribal resistance against colonial rule. Such movements often emerged as a symbol of tribal identity and solidarity and often combined religious and political mobilization. Such movements were important in consolidating tribal identity and in facilitating coordination in resistance against colonial rule.

Tribal consciousness in eastern India was also closely tied to tribal relations with the environment and issues such as ownership and control of forest and land that are central to tribal identity and solidarity. The relationship between tribal identity and environmental issues is a significant aspect in understanding tribal uprisings.

2.5 Recent Perspectives on Tribal Resistance

However, current research has widened its scope by combining various disciplines to better understand tribal resistance movements. Researchers have started combining historical analysis with other fields such as anthropology and political ecology to better grasp the complex dynamics of tribal resistance movements.

The most recent studies suggest that tribal resistance movements cannot be explained by economic issues (Sahay & Gupta, 2023). These movements are multidimensional and have been driven by issues such as social identity, cultural heritage, and environmental issues, in addition to political marginalization. Colonial policies such as resource extraction and forest management have altered tribal ways of life and have therefore created a fertile ground for tribal resistance movements.

The most recent research in this area suggests that colonial policies have a lasting legacy in tribal movements in today's world (Kashyap, 2020). Many years of land alienation, forced displacement, and resistance have shaped tribal movements in today's world. Researchers have tried to grasp this by understanding how colonial governance shaped tribal political consciousness that drives movements in today's world.

3. TRIBAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PEASANT INSURGENCY IN EASTERN INDIA

Tribal awareness emerged as a significant factor in instigating peasant uprisings in eastern India under colonial rule. It expressed a sense of identity and rights that tribal people have as a community and as a culture. It also expressed a sense of rights to tribal lands and forest products that have been inherited from previous generations. The colonial initiative in introducing new systems of land revenue collection and private ownership of lands and forest control systems created a disturbance in tribal communal lands and destroyed indigenous social and economic systems. This led to a move towards land loss and economic decline and increased landlordism and capitalist control in tribal lands. In this context, tribal people began to resist and react against colonial control and control systems in tribal lands. However, from a tribal perspective, most of the peasant uprisings in eastern India were rational acts to resist colonial control and systems in tribal lands and to assert tribal rights and sovereignty.

Table 1. Historiographical Interpretations of Tribal and Peasant Insurgency in Eastern India

Perspective	Key Interpretation	Representation of Tribal Resistance
Colonial Historiography	Revolts seen as disorder or lawlessness	Tribal communities portrayed as primitive
Nationalist Historiography	Early resistance to colonial rule	Linked to broader anti-colonial struggle
Subaltern Perspective	Organized peasant insurgency	Emphasis on indigenous agency
Contemporary Scholarship	Socio-economic and cultural resistance	Recognition of tribal consciousness

This table 1 compares various perspectives that have been taken by historians about tribal and peasant rebellions. Here, colonial, nationalist, and subaltern perspectives about tribal rebellions have been placed side by side. This table reflects how perspectives about tribal rebellions have shifted over time.

4. COLONIAL ECONOMY, LAND DISPOSSESSION AND TRIBAL MOBILIZATION: ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

4.1. Land Alienation and Agrarian Exploitation

With colonial land revenue policies, private property provisions were introduced, which disrupted the conventional system of sharing land between tribal populations. Land was gradually concentrated in the hands of landlords, moneylenders, and business

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middlemen, who flourished under colonial rule. Thus, tribal farmers gradually lost their landholdings, becoming tenants or laborers. Increased rents, debts, and taxes further increased the exploitation of land, leading to discontentment among tribal populations.

4.2. Forest Rights and the Disruption of Tribal Livelihoods

The backbone of the tribal economy and culture was the forests. Colonial forest legislation brought these resources under the control of the government and restricted the traditional way of living. The traditional way of living included the practice of shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering forest products. The colonial forest legislation created friction between the colonial government and the people.

Table 2. Major Colonial Policies and Their Impact on Tribal Communities in Eastern India

Colonial Policy	Key Features	Impact on Tribal Communities	Resulting Resistance
Land Revenue Settlements	Introduction of private property and landlord system	Loss of communal land ownership	Agrarian unrest and revolts
Forest Regulations	State control over forests	Restrictions on traditional forest use	Conflict with colonial authorities
Expansion of Moneylending	Growth of debt and land mortgages	Economic exploitation and land alienation	Localized resistance
Administrative Centralization	Expansion of colonial administration	Weakening of traditional leadership	Organized tribal uprisings

This table points out some of the colonial measures that affected tribal life in eastern India. It indicates how land revenue systems, forest rules, and administrative measures transformed tribal ways of making a living. At the same time, it points out how colonial measures led to economic exploitation, which in turn led to tribal rebellions.

4.3. Cultural Identity and Collective Mobilization in Tribal Resistance

Tribal resistance is not just a matter of financial issues; it also involves a strong sense of cultural identity. This is a crucial factor that helped tribal people mobilize against colonial measures and other intermediaries. In this regard, tribal identity can be seen as a powerful force that helped tribal people resist colonial measures regarding their land and resources.

5. RESEARCH APPROACH

The present piece is an attempt at a qualitative historical analysis of the ways in which colonial storytelling and tribal consciousness combined to shape peasant rebellions in eastern India. The research is based mainly on a critical analysis of existing sources such as histories, archival documents, colonial administrative papers, and scholarly works on tribal rebellions in eastern India. The underlying objective is to critically analyze the ways in which colonial storytelling constructed knowledge about tribal rebellions in eastern India.

6. TRIBAL RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS AND THE DYNAMICS OF PEASANT INSURGENCY

6.1. Historical Background and Regional Spread

Across eastern India, peasant and tribal rebellions emerged as a result of underlying transformations that had been forced by colonial rule. For instance, areas such as Chotanagpur, the Santhal Parganas, and Bengal and Orissa experienced repeated shocks as the tribal people resisted the increasing colonial and landlord authority and greed for trade. The rebellion was fueled by underlying issues such as the loss of land and the imposition of heavy taxes and the erosion of traditional land and forest rights. As the colonial powers pressed the tribal people more and more, the rebellion spread from one area to another.

Table 3. Major Tribal and Peasant Insurgencies in Eastern India during the Colonial Period

Movement	Region	Time Period	Key Causes	Leadership	Major Outcomes
Kol Uprising	Chotanagpur	1831–1832	Land alienation, exploitation by landlords	Local tribal chiefs	Suppression by colonial forces
Santhal Rebellion	Santhal Parganas	1855–1856	Land dispossession, moneylender exploitation	Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu	Administrative reforms in tribal regions
Bhumij Revolt	Bengal region	1832–1833	Revenue policies, loss of traditional authority	Ganga Narayan Singh	Military suppression

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Munda Ulgulan	Chotanagpur	1899– 1900	Land alienation, forest restrictions	Birsa Munda	Recognition of some tribal land rights
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This table 3 highlights the major tribal and peasant rebellions in eastern India during the colonial period. It indicates where they took place, when they took place, what caused them, and who led them. This table is a comparative snapshot that helps us understand the context in which the patterns of rebellion were experienced in different tribal groups.

6.2. Objectives and Forms of Resistance

Many tribal resistance movements were focused on protecting their traditional land rights, as well as rebuilding community self-rule. There was resistance against landlords, moneylenders, and colonial authorities, who were perceived to have exploited them economically, leading to social uprisings. Resistance came in various forms, such as not paying taxes or rent, striking against symbols of colonial power, and attempting to re-win control of land. All these were attempts to resist the changes brought about by colonialism, protecting their traditional economic and social structures.

6.3. Leadership, Organization and Mobilization Strategies

Leadership influenced the development and movement of tribal rebellions. Tribal leaders and spiritual leaders played an important role as leaders in the rebellion. Through the network of villages and the connections of families and communities, they could mobilize significant numbers of people. Tribal leaders also played an important role in the spread of ideas of rebellion and resistance. Through the network of villages and communities, the ideas of rebellion and resistance spread. This helped the communities resist colonial rule and the local leaders who had collaborated with the colonial powers.

6.4. Cultural Beliefs and the Spiritual Dimension of Tribal Resistance

The cultural beliefs and the spiritual dimension played an important role in the resistance movements of the tribes. Tribal communities had a unique relationship with religion and land. These elements played an important role as the ideological base for the resistance movements. Tribal leaders sometimes portrayed the rebellion as a fight for justice and the ancestral way of life. Tribal communities also had unique ritual practices and symbols. These practices and symbols played an important role in the unification and mobilization of the members of the resistance movements.

7. STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS OF TRIBAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN PEASANT INSURGENCY

7.1. Providing Collective Identity and Political Awareness

Tribal consciousness in eastern India helped create a common thread of identity among the indigenous people. By sharing common practices and historical events, the people became aware of their political and social standing in colonial India. Tribal consciousness helped the people understand the impact of land alienation, exploitation of the economy, and political domination by the colonial government.

7.2. Assertion of Indigenous Rights over Land and Forests

Tribal consciousness played an important role in asserting the indigenous people's rights over the land and the forests. Colonial India's efforts at private property and government control of land and forests adversely affected the traditional way of life of the indigenous people. Tribal movements emerged as a response to the colonial government's efforts at private property and government control of land and forests. Tribal movements championed the cause of protecting ancestral lands and the indigenous people's rights. Tribal movements helped transform the indigenous people's grievances into a larger cause for justice and righteousness.

7.3. Enabling Mobilization and Resistance against Colonial Authority

Tribal consciousness also helped the indigenous people in India mobilize and resist the colonial government. Tribal consciousness helped the indigenous people in India develop common values and communal ties. Tribal consciousness also helped the indigenous people in India develop traditional leadership. Tribal consciousness helped the indigenous people in India develop the capacity for resistance against the colonial government. Tribal movements helped the indigenous people in India develop the capacity for resistance against the colonial government.

8. CONCLUSION

This study will examine how colonial stories and tribal self-awareness have impacted our understanding of peasant revolts in eastern India. Colonial stories have often referred to tribal revolts as irrational disturbances and have failed to understand the underlying economic and cultural issues involved in these revolts. However, a closer look at these issues will reveal that policies regarding land revenue, forest laws, and landlordism have impacted tribal lives and have forced people to look at a future of economic exploitation. This has provided a fertile ground for tribal revolts.

The analysis will also reveal how tribal self-awareness has kept these revolts alive against colonial power. Cultural values and tribal identity have provided a sense of community and spirituality that has helped tribes resist colonial power and defend their lands and

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autonomy. A look at peasant revolts from this perspective will reveal that these were not random acts of aggression but were well-planned revolts based on tribal identity and economic and social change.

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