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# HISTORIOGRAPHY OF RESISTANCE: REVISITING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ADIVASI FREEDOM FIGHTERS

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## ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a critical reassessment of how Adivasi freedom fighters have been represented in Indian historiography from the colonial period to the present. It argues that their absence from mainstream accounts is not accidental but structurally produced. The article traces the construction of indigenous resistance as criminal disturbance in colonial records, its selective symbolic incorporation by nationalist historiography, and its partial recovery in subaltern studies scholarship. Two extended case studies are examined: the Santhal Hul of 1855-56 and the Munda Ulgulan of 1899-1900. These case studies demonstrate that major Adivasi uprisings embodied sophisticated political theories of sovereignty, land rights, and ecological governance. The article also addresses the historiographical problem of Northeast India's frontier movements and the postcolonial continuity of resistance under development regimes. It concludes with a call for a fundamental methodological shift. Adivasi actors must be recognised not as peripheral heroes but as foundational architects of India's anti-colonial political imagination.

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## Introduction

The writing of India's freedom struggle has long been organised around a structured hierarchy of visibility. At its apex stand national leaders, constitutional negotiations, and the organised mass movements of elite political institutions. Beneath this layer lies a vast but unevenly documented terrain of peasant uprisings, regional rebellions, and indigenous resistances. At the very margins of this already marginal category lie the Adivasi freedom fighters. These communities' struggles were foundational to anti-colonial resistance, yet they remain conceptually underrepresented in mainstream Indian historiography. This absence is not accidental. It is the product of deliberate choices embedded in how colonial archives were constructed, how nationalist historiography was subsequently written, and how postcolonial academic traditions have selectively privileged certain forms of political action over others. The Adivasi freedom fighter appears intermittently in historical records, typically as a "rebel," a "disturber of peace," or a "tribal insurgent." Rarely does the Adivasi appear as a political thinker, institutional innovator, or foundational actor in India's anti-colonial formation. Revisiting this historiography is not merely an act of inclusion. It is a methodological correction. It requires rethinking the very categories through which resistance, nationalism, and political modernity have been defined. If political action is understood only as formal, textual, and led by educated elites, Adivasi resistance will always appear as its inadequate echo. If, however, political action is understood to include collective governance, ecological rights assertion, oral ideological frameworks, and organised territorial sovereignty, then Adivasi movements emerge as among the most sophisticated and enduring expressions of anti-colonial thought in the subcontinent. This article proceeds in eight analytical sections. It first traces how colonial knowledge systems constructed Adivasi resistance as criminal rather than political. It then reinterprets early Adivasi uprisings as forms of proto-political rights claims. Two detailed case studies are examined: the Santhal Hul and the Munda Ulgulan. The article then turns to nationalist historiography's selective incorporation of Adivasi agency, the frontier problem in Northeast India, and the postcolonial continuity of resistance. It concludes with a programme for historiographical reorientation. Criminalising Indigenous Resistance The earliest systematic records of Adivasi resistance were produced not by neutral observers but by colonial administrators, military officers, missionaries, and ethnographers. Their professional interests were intertwined with the maintenance of imperial order. These accounts were shaped fundamentally by the logic of control and classification. Adivasi societies were categorised as "tribes," a term that encoded assumptions about isolation from civilisation,

distance from political modernity, and incapacity for rational, self-directed political organisation. Resistance movements emerging from these societies were consequently interpreted through a criminological rather than a political lens. The Santhal uprising of 1855-56, for instance, was described in British administrative correspondence as a violent disturbance against the established order. It was not recognised as a structured response to documented patterns of economic exploitation, systematic land alienation, and administrative intrusion into customary governance. The political content of the movement was invisible to the bureaucratic gaze. The conceptual frameworks through which that gaze operated could not accommodate the idea that tribal communities were capable of generating independent political thought. Bernard Cohn has argued influentially that colonial knowledge systems did not merely document India but actively constructed the categories that made its governance possible.[ Bernard S. Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–15.] The category of "tribe," as administered in India, was not a neutral description of pre-existing social reality. It was a classificatory technology that simultaneously justified special administrative treatment and imposed a developmental hierarchy. Under this hierarchy, tribal communities were positioned as requiring civilisational uplift before they could qualify for political recognition. Colonial ethnography compounded this distortion by reducing complex socio-political movements to what it termed "primitive rebellions." This phrase stripped them of ideological depth and historical causation. Anthropological accounts of Adivasi customs, governance systems, and ritual practices were harvested for administrative utility while their political dimensions were systematically evacuated. In this framework, Adivasi resistance was not recognised as political theory in action but as an administrative problem requiring suppression. This categorisation has had lasting consequences for how these movements have been studied ever since.

**Early Adivasi Resistance as Political Formation**

Contrary to colonial interpretations, the major Adivasi uprisings of the nineteenth century were deeply political in structure, motivation, and articulation. The Kol Rebellion of 1831-32, the Santhal Hul of 1855-56, the Bhil uprisings across western India, and the Munda Ulgulan of 1899-1900 were not isolated eruptions of frustration. They were interconnected, organised responses to the structural transformations that colonial rule imposed on Adivasi political economies. These transformations can be identified with precision. They included the privatisation of communal land under new revenue systems, the expansion of zamindari intermediary structures that penetrated customary tenure arrangements, the criminalisation of

shifting cultivation, systematic forest enclosure policies that severed communities from their primary ecological and economic resources, and the imposition of forced labour and debt bondage regimes.[ Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 18–76.] The political demands articulated by these movements can be understood as proto-political rights claims. Even when expressed in idioms drawn from indigenous cosmology rather than colonial legal language, they asserted the right to control over ancestral land, the right to autonomous local governance grounded in customary law, the right to ecological access, and protection from the extractive violence of intermediary classes operating under colonial sanction. The Munda khuntkatti system of collective land tenure represents perhaps the clearest example of Adivasi institutional political thought. Under khuntkatti, land rights were vested collectively in the founding lineage of a village. This arrangement prevented alienation to outsiders and ensured that governance remained embedded in the community's own social structures.[ K. S. Singh, Birsa Munda and His Movement, 1874-1901: A Study of a Millenarian Movement in Chotanagpur (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1983), 55–90.] The colonial revenue system's assault on khuntkatti was understood by Munda communities not merely as economic dispossession but as a destruction of their constitutional order. It dismantled their fundamental system of rights and governance. Similarly, Gond and Baiga ecological management systems encoded sophisticated principles of sustainable resource governance. These included rotational cultivation cycles, sacred grove protection, seasonal harvesting rules, and community-regulated forest access. These were not merely cultural practices but institutional frameworks. They organised collective life around ecological sustainability.[ Nandini Sundar, Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-2006, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45-80.] The historiographical failure lies in interpreting the absence of written theory as the absence of political theory itself.

**Table 1: Major Adivasi Uprisings in Colonial India**

| Uprising | Community | Period | Region | Primary Grievance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kol Rebellion | Munda, Ho, Oraon | 1831-32 | Jharkhand | Land alienation; zamindari expansion |
| Santhal Hul | Santhals | 1855-56 | Jharkhand, Bengal | Moneylender exploitation; colonial administration |
| Bhil | Bhils | 1818-1913 | Rajasthan, | Forest restrictions; |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Uprisings | | | Gujarat, MP | revenue demands |
| Rampa Rebellion | Koya Adivasis | 1879-1880 | Andhra Pradesh | Forest laws; forced labour |
| Munda Ulgulan | Munda | 1899-1900 | Jharkhand | Land dispossession; missionary intervention; forced labour |
| Bhumkal Uprising | Maria, Muria Gonds | 1910 | Bastar, Chhattisgarh | Forest policy; cultural displacement |

Source: Compiled from K. S. Singh, Tribal Movements in India (1982); Biswamoy Pati, ed., Adivasis in Colonial India (2011); and district gazetteers.

**The Santhal Hul (1855-56)**

The Santhal Hul of 1855-56 stands as one of the most significant and historiographically instructive Adivasi uprisings in colonial India. Led by the brothers Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairav Murmu, the movement mobilised tens of thousands of Santhals across what is today Jharkhand and West Bengal. It was directed against the interlocking systems of moneylender exploitation, fraudulent landlordism, and colonial administrative indifference. Colonial narratives framed the uprising as a violent outbreak. They presented it as a sudden eruption of tribal fury constituting a threat to the order of newly settled territories. A more careful examination of the available evidence tells a different story. Both British administrative records and the oral histories preserved within Santhal communities reveal a movement of considerable organisational complexity. The mobilisation was structured around village-level decision-making assemblies, a clear leadership hierarchy, coordinated communication across a wide geographical area, and a relatively articulate statement of political demands. Ranajit Guha, in his foundational analysis of colonial India's peasant insurgencies, argued that the Hul represented not spontaneous chaos but organised political action rooted in collective grievance and mediated through shared cultural frameworks.[ Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, 77–108.] The uprising's invocation of divine sanction, specifically the claimed communication with the deity Thakur, did not make it less political. It was the idiom through which Santhal political community expressed its collective will and justified departure from the authority of the existing order. The Hul's political content is visible in its targeting. Moneylenders (mahajans), zamindars, and colonial police and officials were the specific objects of organised action, while Santhal

villages themselves maintained a disciplined internal order. This selectivity demonstrates political rather than criminal motivation. The uprising aimed to destroy the specific institutional mechanisms of exploitation rather than to engage in generalised violence. The Hul's suppression involved the deployment of regular military forces and the killing of several thousand Santhals. However, it did not extinguish the movement's political legacy. The Hul permanently transformed the relationship between the colonial state and Santhal communities. It directly contributed to the creation of a separate Santhal Parganas administrative district in 1856. This concession represented implicit recognition of the political legitimacy of Santhal territorial claims.[ Ajay Skaria, Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3–22.] The historiographical significance of the Santhal Hul is precisely that it challenges the boundary between the political and the pre-political. The movement was conducted in the name of divine authority, without written manifestos, and without formal organisational structures modelled on European political parties. It was conducted entirely by communities the colonial state classified as backward. Yet it possessed a clarity of political vision, an organisational coherence, and a legacy of institutional change that rival any formally recognised political movement of the same period.

**The Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900)**

The Ulgulan, meaning "great upheaval" or "world turned upside down," was led by Birsa Munda between approximately 1895 and his arrest and death in 1900. It presents an even more complex historiographical case. The movement has frequently been described as millenarian or religio-political in character, and these dimensions were certainly present. Birsa claimed prophetic authority, established a new religious movement centred on reformed Munda spiritual practice, and articulated his political vision partly through the language of divine mission. However, reducing the Ulgulan to millenarianism fundamentally misrepresents its political content and historical significance. The movement emerged directly from the structural crisis of Munda society produced by colonial land policies. The destruction of the khuntkatti collective tenure system through the operations of the colonial court system, zamindari expansion, and missionary land acquisition had produced a generation of Munda communities dispossessed of their ancestral lands. They faced the twin pressures of colonial authority and missionary cultural transformation.[ Singh, Birsa Munda and His Movement, 1874-1901: A Study of a Millenarian Movement in Chotanagpur, 55–90.] Birsa's call for "Abua Raj," meaning "our own rule" or "our own kingdom," was not a millenarian fantasy of divine intervention. It was a coherent political

proposition. It asserted that the Munda people possessed an inherent right to sovereignty over their ancestral territories. This sovereignty had been illegitimately displaced by colonial power and its intermediaries and must be restored through organised resistance. This assertion of indigenous sovereignty, grounded in the Munda community's own political and cosmological traditions, constitutes a theory of political legitimacy. It parallels in significant respects the contractarian and nationalist theories being articulated simultaneously in elite Indian political discourse. The Ulgulan also explicitly targeted missionary activity as a form of cultural and political intrusion. Some historians have interpreted this as evidence of irrationality or religious fanaticism. However, it reflects a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between cultural transformation and political power. It demonstrates a recognition that the missionary project was inseparable from the colonial project of dispossession, and that cultural sovereignty was a precondition of political sovereignty.[ Archana Prasad, Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity (New Delhi: Three Essays, 2003), 1–25.]

The movement's suppression in 1900 and Birsa's death in colonial custody did not end the Ulgulan's political afterlife. The movement contributed directly to the enactment of the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908. This legislation provided significant protections for Munda land rights and represented one of the most substantial legislative responses to an Adivasi uprising in colonial Indian history. The legal recognition of khuntkatti rights, even in attenuated form, was a direct concession to the political demands that Birsa had articulated.

**Table 2: Key Adivasi Freedom Fighters**

| Leader | Community | Period | Movement | Political Contribution |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu | Santhal | 1855-56 | Santhal Hul | Structured mass mobilisation against colonial-capitalist order |
| Birsa Munda | Munda | 1895-1900 | Ulgulan | Indigenous sovereignty theory; critique of land dispossession and missionary intrusion |
| Tantya Bhil | Bhil | 1870s-1889 | Bhil Resistance | Armed resistance to colonial revenue extraction; forest-rights assertion |
| Alluri Sitarama Raju | Koya (allied) | 1922-24 | Rampa Rebellion | Linked Adivasi forest rights to broader nationalist anti-colonial struggle |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gundadhur | Maria Gond | 1910 | Bhumkal Uprising | Resistance to colonial forest policy; defence of customary governance in Bastar |

Source: Compiled from K. S. Singh, Birsa Munda and His Movement (1983); David Hardiman, The Coming of the Devi (1987); and regional histories.

**Nationalism and Symbolic Tribal Inclusion**

Indian nationalist historiography, particularly in its formative phases from the 1920s through the 1960s, faced the challenge of constructing a national historical narrative capacious enough to encompass India's social diversity. This narrative also had to remain coherent enough to serve the political purpose of legitimising the independence movement and the post-independence state. The result was an inevitably selective narrative. It privileged certain forms of political action, namely the educated leadership, the formal organisation, and the non-violent constitutional method, as the authentic expression of Indian nationalism.

Within this framework, Adivasi resistance could be acknowledged but not easily integrated. It was acknowledged because its scale, duration, and evident connection to anti-colonial sentiment made it impossible to ignore entirely. Birsa Munda was incorporated into the nationalist pantheon, and the Santhal Hul was noted as an early expression of anti-colonial spirit. Figures like Alluri Sitarama Raju, who led the Rampa Rebellion of 1922-24 and explicitly connected Adivasi Forest rights claims to the broader Gandhian nationalist movement, provided convenient bridges between tribal resistance and mainstream nationalism.

However, this incorporation was fundamentally symbolic rather than conceptual. Adivasi leaders entered the national pantheon as heroes and martyrs. Their courage warranted remembrance, but their intellectual frameworks were not seriously engaged as contributions to the theory of nationalism or political philosophy. Partha Chatterjee has analysed how nationalist historiography constructed its own forms of exclusion. It incorporated subaltern energies while refusing to allow subaltern epistemologies to reshape the nationalist project's foundational assumptions.[ Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 156–175.]

What resulted was a pattern of symbolic inclusion combined with conceptual exclusion. The Adivasi freedom fighter was honoured while being intellectually marginalised. The political theories embedded in the Ulgulan, the Hul, and the Bhumkal were not engaged as intellectual contributions. They were treated as cultural artefacts of an admirable but pre-modern political consciousness. These theories addressed the nature of legitimate sovereignty, the relationship between ecology and politics, and the foundations of collective rights. They deserved serious scholarly engagement.

Ranajit Guha's intervention through the Subaltern Studies project challenged this framework directly. He argued that Indian nationalism could not be adequately understood without recognising the autonomous domain of subaltern political action. This domain operated on its own terms and generated its own forms of political consciousness.[ Ranajit Guha, "On some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India 1," in Imperialism (Routledge, 2023), 53.] This was a crucial methodological advance. However, even within subaltern studies, Adivasi histories have remained relatively underexplored in comparison with studies of peasant insurgencies, working-class movements, and women's resistance. The specific epistemological frameworks of Adivasi political thought have received less systematic analytical attention than they deserve.

**Table 3: Historiographical Frameworks and Their Treatment of Adivasi Resistance**

| Framework | Dominant Lens | Treatment of Adivasi Resistance | Key Limitation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Colonial Administration | Criminological / Order-maintenance | "Tribal rebellion"; threat to peace | Strips political content; denies agency |
| Early Nationalist | Elite-led mass movement | Symbolic inclusion; hero-worship without theory | Conceptual exclusion of indigenous epistemology |
| Subaltern Studies | Autonomous subaltern politics | Partial recovery; peasant focus over Adivasi | Adivasi histories remain relatively underexplored |
| Postcolonial / Decolonial | Knowledge systems; epistemic justice | Oral, ecological, and ritual forms recognised as theory | Still emerging; limited policy uptake |

Source: Comparative assessment of four major historiographical frameworks. Based on Guha (1982), Cohn (1996), Chatterjee (1993), and Xaxa (1999).

## Northeast India and the Frontier Historiography Problem

The historiographical underrepresentation of Adivasi freedom fighters is compounded by a structural geographic problem. There has been a systematic separation of Northeast India from mainstream Indian historical scholarship. Colonial administrative classification established the northeastern frontier as a distinct regulatory space governed under separate legal frameworks, including the Inner Line Regulation and the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas provisions. This administrative separation was reproduced in postcolonial historiography.

Yet the resistance traditions of Naga, Mizo, Khasi, Garo, Bodo, and other northeastern Adivasi communities reflect histories of anti-colonial struggle entirely continuous with the movements examined elsewhere in this article. The Naga resistance to British pacification campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the complex negotiations of the Khasi chieftainships over sovereignty and administrative subordination, and the Mizo lal deng resistance of the 1960s all represent sophisticated political responses to the encounter between indigenous governance systems and an encompassing state power.[ Virginius Xaxa, "Tribes as Indigenous People of India," Economic and Political Weekly 34, no. 51 (1999): 3589–3595.]

The frontier historiography problem is not merely one of geographical omission. It reflects a deeper conceptual issue. There is an assumption that the only politically relevant frame for interpreting Indian history is the frame of Indian nationalism itself. Under this assumption, northeastern Adivasi movements that contested incorporation into the Indian nation-state appear as separatist aberrations. They are not recognised as legitimate expressions of the same principles of indigenous sovereignty that animated mainland Adivasi movements.[ Biswamoy Pati, ed., Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance and Negotiation (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011), 1–20.] A genuinely comprehensive historiography of Adivasi freedom fighters must move beyond this frame. The question is not whether particular movements aligned themselves with Indian nationalism but whether they embodied principled resistance to colonial and postcolonial state authority. The relevant criterion is whether that resistance articulated coherent claims about governance, sovereignty, and rights. By this standard, northeastern Adivasi movements are not peripheral to Indian historiography but central to any adequate understanding of the subcontinent's political history.

## Development, Displacement and Indigenous Resistance

The formal end of British colonial rule in 1947 did not end Adivasi resistance; it transformed its conditions. The language of colonial exploitation was replaced by the language of national development. However, the structural dynamics of land alienation, resource extraction, and the marginalisation of customary governance rights persisted with remarkable continuity. The primary agents of dispossession changed from the colonial state and its intermediaries to the postcolonial development state and private capital. The fundamental pattern nevertheless remained: Adivasi communities were repeatedly displaced by outside interests claiming superior authority over their territories. Large-scale dam construction, mining operations, industrial corridor development, and conservation-driven displacement have repeatedly generated Adivasi resistance in the postcolonial period.[ Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010), 1–30.] The Hirakud Dam displacement in Odisha, the mining conflicts in Jharkhand's Singhbhum and Hazaribagh districts, and the ongoing forest rights conflicts in Chhattisgarh represent direct continuations of the dynamics that produced the Kol Rebellion, the Santhal Hul, and the Ulgulan. The institutional forms of resistance have changed. They now operate through legal advocacy, electoral politics, and civil society organisations as well as through direct action. However, their foundational orientation remains consistent: the assertion of Adivasi rights to land, ecology, and self-governance against external authority. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, the anti-mining movement in the Niyamgiri hills, and the forest rights campaigns following the passage of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 represent modern expressions of these older resistance traditions.[ Biswas Sudipta, “Implementation of PESA: Issues, Challenges and Way Forwards,” International Research Journal of Social Sciences 4, no. 12 (2015): 49–54.] What is particularly significant is that these contemporary movements have developed increasingly sophisticated articulations of the connection between cultural identity, ecological rights, and political sovereignty. These are precisely the dimensions that earlier colonial and nationalist historiographies struggled to recognise as political. The historiographical recognition of postcolonial Adivasi resistance as continuous with colonial-era freedom struggles is not merely an academic matter. It has direct implications for how the Indian state's constitutional commitments to tribal welfare and self-governance are understood and implemented. If the Santhal Hul and the Ulgulan are recognised as foundational moments in the making of Indian democracy, then their postcolonial successors cannot be easily dismissed as anti-national or obstructive of development.

**Rewriting Historiography**

Revisiting the historiography of Adivasi freedom fighters is not a matter of adding new chapters to an otherwise adequate account. It requires a more fundamental methodological reorientation and a transformation of the conceptual tools with which historical evidence is gathered, assessed, and interpreted. Three major shifts are required. The first is a move from event-based to structural historical analysis. Adivasi resistance has too often been studied as a series of discrete uprisings, each treated as a bounded event with a beginning, a course, and an end. This event-based approach systematically obscures the continuities that connect these movements. It hides the shared structural causes, the persisting institutional frameworks of Adivasi governance, and the accumulated political traditions that shaped subsequent generations of resistance.[ Ramachandra Guha, The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya, expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 3–28.] The second required shift is an expansion of the definition of political theory to include oral, ecological, and ritual forms of knowledge production. This is perhaps the most demanding methodological requirement. It asks historians

trained in the analysis of textual sources to develop the capacity to read non-textual sources as political documents. The oral epics preserved in Santhal, Munda, and Gond communities are not merely folklore. They are repositories of political history, constitutional memory, and theories of legitimate governance. The third shift is a decentring of elite nationalism as the sole legitimate interpretive framework for anti-colonial struggle. This does not require dismissing the importance of the independence movement's elite political leadership or denying the centrality of figures like Gandhi, Nehru, or Ambedkar to the making of modern India. It requires, rather, recognising that these figures operated within a political landscape fundamentally shaped by decades of Adivasi resistance. That resistance had established, often at enormous cost, the practical limits of colonial power and the enduring reality of popular sovereignty. Such a reorientation does not diminish the mainstream nationalist movement. It completes it, by restoring the suppressed foundations on which the visible architecture of nationalist politics was constructed.

**Conclusion**

The historiography of Adivasi resistance is not merely an academic field. It is a question of

historical justice. The construction of a national historical narrative that marginalises the contributions of Adivasi freedom fighters is not a neutral scholarly choice. It is an act of erasure with ongoing political consequences. It shapes which communities are understood as the authentic authors of Indian democracy, which knowledge systems are recognised as legitimate sources of political wisdom, and which forms of resistance are regarded as constitutive of national identity. This article has argued that the Santhal Hul and the Munda Ulgulan were not peripheral episodes in India's colonial history. They were foundational moments in the long process through which the legitimacy of colonial rule was challenged, its institutional contradictions exposed, and the political consciousness of resistance communities sharpened and transmitted across generations. Figures like Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, Birsa Munda, Tantya Bhil, and Gundadhur were not merely brave rebels. They were political theorists and institutional innovators whose contributions to the theory and practice of anti-colonial resistance deserve to be taken as seriously as those of any figure in the mainstream nationalist canon. The methodological challenge this recognition poses is real and demanding. It requires historians to develop new tools for reading non-textual sources, new frameworks for understanding political theory in oral and ecological forms, and new ways of narrating continuity across movements that colonial and nationalist categories have artificially separated. However, this challenge is not insuperable. A growing body of scholarship in subaltern studies, environmental history, legal anthropology, and indigenous studies provides resources for the task. The future of Indian historical consciousness will depend significantly on whether it can move beyond its inherited hierarchy of visibility. This is a hierarchy that places constitutional negotiations above armed uprisings, written theory above oral tradition, and educated leadership above collective community governance. Adivasi freedom fighters did not write constitutions or deliver speeches at national assemblies. They organised communities, governed territories, articulated theories of sovereignty, and resisted colonial power at enormous personal cost. Their struggles were not footnotes to India's freedom movement. They were part of its structural foundation, and it is past time that historiography recognised them as such.

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