

# Effects of Native Indian Military Strategy on Native Colonial Indian Insurgency

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## **Abstract:**

This paper looks at the strategic and tactical elements of tribal insurgencies in colonial India. It showcases the native warfare that became a part of the resistance movements that occurred in the mid-eighteenth through the twentieth centuries. It talks about such major rebellions as the Santal Hul of the four brothers Murmu, Sidhu, Kanhu, and Chand, together with their sisters Phulo and Jhano (1855-56), the Kol rebellion and Khond rebellion, the Rampa revolts, and the Munda Ulgulan led by Birsa Munda (1899-1900). This paper has argued that indigenous strategies, including the use of terrain-based warfare, ambushing using small units, decentralized leadership, mobilization through rituals, and the use of low-logistics warfare were critical in prolonging conflicts. Such strategies led to changes in colonial administrative, legal and military strategies. Instead of perceiving tribal revolts as unplanned or primitive in terms of military organization, this paper places indigenous warfare in the frameworks of ecological knowledge system, social structure, and political consciousness. It also describes the development of colonial counterinsurgency policies, more specifically forest policy and punitive expeditions as a direct response to these operational problems. These changes brought perennial effects on the land law, forest policy and tribal political identity.

**Keywords:** Tribal Insurgency: Indigenous Warfare: Santal Hul: Birsa Munda: Guerrilla Tactics: Colonial Counterinsurgency: Forest Frontiers: Chotanagpur: Military Anthropology.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

In the colonial era, the administrative and ethnographic term, Tribe was used by the British to classify native forest and hill communities as being pre-political and primitive. Such categorisation was used to legitimize authoritarian style of ruling and suppressing opposition. The problem of tribal insurgencies in India was one of the most challenging and long-term in terms of colonial rule. Since the end of the eighteenth century, revolutions and attempts to revolt were constant in forested and hilly areas that were difficult to administer due to the hilly terrain. Although the socio-economic factors behind these uprisings have been widely studied by historians- including land alienation, logging of forests, payment of revenues, the invasion of moneylenders and missionaries- little has been examined on the military side of tribal defiance. The tribal warfare was frequently disregarded in colonialist stories as irrational, primitive, or a criminal move that did not reflect the tactical reasoning of the native opposition.

This article suggests an alternative viewpoint that indigenous military strategies played a critical role in the tenacity, magnitude, as well as political relevance of tribal insurgencies in colonial India. The tribe warriors devised and used war tactics that utilized ecological knowledge, kinship structures, ritual control

and locomotion to overcome the technologically advanced colonial military. These strategies were not just reactive ones; they constituted a coherent repertoire and were conditioned by the long-term affiliation to the land, forest and the community.

This study incorporates the field of environmental history, the field of military history and the field of tribal studies by analyzing the manner in which such practices of tactic existed and the reaction of the colonial state to them. It also adds to a growing literature on re-evaluating the formation of colonial states based on the study of resistance, and not necessarily on the basis of administrative design.<sup>1</sup>

## **Background: Tribal Revolutions in Pan-Indian Colonialism.**

### **Colonial Growth and Frontiers of the tribes**

India has its tribal or Adivasi people, the term which denotes the fact that they are the eldest inhabitants of the land, and are attached much to it. These tribes settle on certain regions and are united by social organizations according to blood ties, alike cultural, a similar scheme of deities, common ancestors and dialects full of folklore. Their unique location and tradition make them feel free and identify with themselves, and are respected, which gives them the strength to rebel against exploitation, oppression, and harassment by outside forces such as zamindars, kings, and the British. Consequently, the Indian tribal history is replete with narratives of fighting back against these exploiters whenever they got a chance (Wilson 1973).

Later on, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the East India company and then the British Crown, began to encroach much further into the tribal regions to collect some revenue, timber and mineral deposits. Surveys, forest settlement and codification of the law converted forests and uplands, which had been governed by customary regimes, to become the battlefields of imperial control.<sup>2</sup>

The development of these changes led to large opposition within tribal societies. Societies that subsisted on shifting cultivation, forest resources, hunting and collective ownership of land were criminalized or harshly limited. Introduction of commercial forestry, introduction of other bodies, and introducing of the private property undercut the social autonomy and sparked violent conflicts.

### **Major Waves of Tribal Revolt**

- Kol Insurrection (1831-32) in the Chotanagpur area was against the revenue settlements and supremacy of outsiders.
- The Santal Hul, or Santal Insurgency (1855-56), the chief causes of this revolt were the system of oppressive zamindars, excessive taxation, moneylenders (Dikus) and corruption among the police officers; organized tens of thousands against the landlords and moneylenders.
- Khond Rebellions (1837-1856): In Odisha the state tried to exercise control over their religious practices and land management, which was faced by Khand Rebellions. The primary cause of such revolt against the British was their effort to prohibit the Meriah system which according to the Khand's was imperative in order to placate their Goddess Earth.
- One of the most notorious tribal rebellions in the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, that is, Godavari Agency was the Rampa Rebellion (1922-1924) or the Manyam Rebellion. The rebellion was instigated by Alluri Sitarama Raju and came up to confront the British colonialism. It was majorly caused by the repressive and restrictive forest laws by the British which endangered the traditional livelihood of the tribal population.
- The traditional khuntkatti (joint land ownership) system was destroyed by the British, zamindars, and

moneylenders (dikus) which was the overriding factor in the Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900), as led by Birsa Munda.

These movements differed in their leadership and ideology, but they all depended on the indigenous traditions of tactics that were closely linked to the ecological knowledge and the mobilization as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

### **Native Military Maneuvers: Systems and Ideologies**

#### **1. Warfare on terrain and Ecological Knowledge**

The familiarity of tribal insurgents with the local terrain was one of the biggest skills that they possessed. Forests, hills, ravines and riverbanks were not just physical spaces; but cultural landscapes full of meaning and usefulness. Insurgents knew about the blind routes, the time of years, waters and ambush spots that could go undetected by the colonial forces.

Such ecologic knowledge enabled insurgents to control the intensity of war. They would choose to engage selectively and they usually attacked colonial patrols when they were alone or weak. The exits were planned beforehand, and fighters could flee fast once attacks happened. Colonial forces, dependent on roads and supply routes, on the contrary, were slow and dangerous to follow these insurgents.<sup>4</sup>

#### **2. Simple Unit Organization and Ambush Tactics**

Tribal warfare favored small and mobile units of fighting as opposed to large formations. Teams consisted of members of a family or a village but worked towards common objectives. They used ambushes of patrols, police stations, and raids of revenue offices, as they needed to cause psychological effects as much as possible with the minimal direct conflict. Such strategies worked well to interfere with the colonial intelligence and create a sense of indecision. These actions had high administrative, moral costs even in the face of military suppression forcing the colonial state to redistribute resources unequally in line with the intensity of the uprising.<sup>5</sup>

#### **3. Arms, Booby Traps and Low-Logistics Warfare**

The weapons that were found in the Indigenous arsenals were mostly locally made weapons like bows, arrows, axes, spears and blades with the added addition of poison or fitted to local conditions. They used mechanical traps and pits with spikes and firearms to disable the troops and beasts. Notably, these strategies did not need a lot of logistical support. With food and shelter provided by the community, fighters could keep fighting without having to supply them formally. This was in sharp contrast to the colonial armies, whose movements were highly dependent on regular supply.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. The Military Infrastructure of Social Networks**

Intelligence networks and recruitment mean included kinship ties, clans, markets and festivals. The flow of information on troop movements was vigorous and faster through the oral communication. The villages provided protection and supply lines and the colonizers could not tell the difference between civilians and warriors. Ranajit Guha argues that the rebels were tribal and this was the result of elementary forms of insurgency, which involved communication not in the form of written orders, but in the form of symbolic acts, gestures in the form of rituals, and oral traditions. According to him, items such as arrows, Sal branches and marked trees were political indications that even tribal moral structures understood instantly but were unclear to the colonial officials. The insurgency expanded its social base by colonial measures to destroy these networks by collective punishment and burning of villages which tend to deepen resentment and increase the insurgency social base.<sup>7</sup>

#### **5. Ritual Authority and Morale**

Rituals gurus and charismatic leaders played an important role in sustaining morale in various uprisings.

Promises of divine sanction or protection by millenarian beliefs and especially through the Munda movement gave legitimacy to resistance and also a stronger group cohesion.

Consequently, ritual was a force multiplier because it raised the tactical efforts to a moral conflict and widened the mobilization beyond materialist grievances.<sup>8</sup>

### **Indigenous Tactics in Practice Case Studies.**

#### **The Santal Hul (1855-56): The Mass Organization and the Tactical Organization**

One of the most significant tribal rebellions in colonial India is the Santal Hul (1855-56) one of the key examples of the indigenous military strategy on a large scale. The uprising broke out in the Raajmahals Hills and other places and organized tens of thousands of Santals against zamindars, moneylenders, railway contractors and colonial officials. Although colonial sources tend to call it a sudden outburst the Hul displayed a fair amount of organizational ability and tactical planning.

The Santals employed mass attacks and ambush of isolated police station and revenue offices. Their strategic edge was a coordinated mobilization at the village level, the speedy concentration of the fighting forces and strategic destruction of the markers of the colonial power, like debt and revenue books. The wooded landscape enabled fighters to assemble, attack and dissipate ahead of colonial reinforcements responding. British troops, used to suppress minor unrests, were initially crushed by the magnitude and movement of the uprising.<sup>9</sup>

Regular troops and artillery, prolonged punitive campaigns had to be resorted to as a means of colonial conquest. The villages were burned down, and the communal punishments were practiced. It is true the Hul was controlled in the end, but it forced the colonial state to restructure administration in the Santhal Parganas, which led to the creation of a separate district that had known rules. This result proves the potential of indigenous strategies to convert a rebellion into an administrative crisis into a permanent issue.<sup>10</sup>

Guha reveals that the Hul possessed their own leadership (Sidhu and Kanhu), their own enemies, and their own system of morality (based on justice and autonomy), which is never acknowledged by the colonial discourse. The colonial discourse, by classifying the Santals as a tribe, undermined their insurgency to a further level of irrational group action and thus warranted a widespread military suppression.<sup>11</sup>

**The Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900): Charisma, Symbolism and Tactical Resistance** The Munda Ulgulan, headed by Birsa Munda, is a special kind of insurgency in which the ritual power and tactical opposition are closely interrelated. Birsa developed his movement as a reaction to land alienation, forced labour, missionarization and the loss of traditional khuntkatti land rights in Chotanagpur.

The movement used a strategic attack on thikedars (contractors), missionaries and police posts. The Mundas used the topographical roughness and the forest cover to escape the capture and the burning of the legal documents was a symbolical way of defying the colonial property systems. This was enabled by the decentralized leadership that enabled actions to be done at various levels in the village at one time, making it difficult to respond on the part of the colonials.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the fact that the immediate uprising was curtailed by the arrest and following death in custody of Birsa, the influence of this movement was felt even beyond the military defeat. Colonial rulers knew that the level of unrest was high, so they passed the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) designed -though flawed- to protect tribal land rights. The Ulgulan, in turn, demonstrates that even in situations when the native strategies were suppressed by the military, it might exert some pressure to result in the changes of the law and the administration.<sup>13</sup>

### **Rampa and Hill Rebellions (1922-1924): Guerrilla Survival on a Pieced Land**

The success of the long-duration guerrilla warfare was demonstrated in the Eastern Ghats and other hill areas by tribal revolts such as the Rampa rebellions (1922-1924). The resistance against colonial powers was carried out effectively by fighters who used steep hills, forests, and ravines to lead a prolonged fight. They also resorted to ambushing patrols and communication lines, as well as took refuge in local villages which provided refuge and intelligence.

The colonial powers in turn responded by increasing irregular levies, constructing roads, and scorched-earth campaigns. Nevertheless, their suppression attempts were not cheap but were not full. These revolts emphasize that with terrain-based strategies even small forces could afford the protracted nature of their counteroffense, ridiculing the idea that the state of technological advantage would grant a quick colonial triumph.<sup>14</sup>

### **Colonial Counterinsurgency: Military, Administrative as well as Legal Responses. Governance through militarization**

The colonial power had to reconsider its approach towards domestic security in response to that of the indigenous strategies. The traditional military units could not be used in woodlands and hilly areas. As a result, colonial rulers became more dependent on small patrols, locally hired auxiliaries and spy networks. Administrative purposes were met by the building of roads, police posts and cantonments but with the sole aim of denying insurgents safe havens.<sup>15</sup>

### **Counterinsurgency as Forest Governance**

In colonial counterinsurgency, forests were very important. The colonial government intended on dismantling the ecological foundations of tribal resistance by making forests state property and limiting access to them. Historians have demonstrated that forest legislation was not a simple conservation policy, but it was an instrument of control, which criminalized the customary traditions and helped to create surveillance.<sup>15</sup> But these measures had a counter effect. Through dismantling subsistence systems and food security, forest restrictions provided a new basis of grievance and a larger social base of insurgency. Consequently, forest governance became not only a source of rebellion, but also a reaction to rebellion.

### **Accommodation under the Law and its Limitations**

The reform of the law that followed great rebels- special acts in the Santhal Parganas and tenure regulations in the Chotanagpur were an effort of stabilising frontier zones. However, these policies were incomplete and not fairly implemented. They formed the state power and offered minimal concessions, but the underlying disparities remained the same.<sup>16</sup>

### **History of Legacies of Indigenous Military Resistance in the Long Term.**

#### **Formation of States and Frontier Governing**

The practice of the indigenous tactics also had a great impact on the formation of colonial states practices in the interior parts. The need to crush insurgency hastened the development of administration infrastructure and surveillance process bringing about greater assimilation of tribal regions into colonial rule.

#### **Political Memories and Identity**

Tribal insurgencies have caused permanent wounds on collective memory. Such leaders as Birsa Munda became an identity figure and symbol of resistance, which was later used in nationalist politics and postcolonial politics. This was a tactical opposition not only to the short-term clashes, but also to the long-term formation of the tribal political consciousness formation.

### **Environmental and Social Effects**

The landscapes and forests were militarized, changing the ecological relations. Hunting, shifting cultivation as well as the access to forests all interfered with food systems and social organization and this impact extended into the postcolonial period.

### **Warfare and Military anthropology of indigenous people**

Military anthropology can be used effectively in the analysis of tribal insurgencies in colonial India, whereby warfare is perceived as a cultural form of practice, as compared to a technical one. Social organization, cosmology, and moral economy as well as material constraints were determinants to indigenous military tactics. War was usually woven into the fabric of rituals, subsistence and territory.

According to anthropological research about small-scale societies, decentralized warfare is usually focused on defending the territory, honor, and autonomy, instead of conquering the territory. Therefore, the tribal warfare of colonial India was mostly defensive and restorative and concerned the restoration of moral order that had been broken by the colonial encroachment.<sup>17</sup> The ambushes, the symbolic attacks on administrative buildings and the burning of records were not only the means of tactics but also the element of culture that reestablished control over the area and social relationships.

The European trained colonial officials often misunderstood these types of war receives as primitivism. Such misconception impeded the proper reactions and helped create cycles of overreactions such as punitive expeditions and collective punishment. Accordingly, the gap between native military rationality and colonial military rationality also became a conflict itself.

### **Gender, Warfare and Subsistence Disruption.**

#### **The Logistics of women in Insurgency**

Although the history of colonial conflicts mainly focuses on men who were fighting, women contributed significantly to the survival of insurgencies. They were logistical aids, messengers of intelligence, ritual assistants and food providers. Plants and seasonal cycles played a crucial role in the economies of forests based on supporting fighters in long term campaigns.

Counterinsurgency initiatives were punitive and women were disproportionately affected. Food security, childcare, and household labor were interfered with due to the village burning, forced relocations, and access to forests. The erosion of the women subsistence functions increased their susceptibility to famine and social pressure was aggravated.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Food Systems, Militarization**

Subsistence networks were purposely targeted in military campaigns conducted by the colonies. The burning of grain homes, the confiscation of animals, and restriction of movement of forests were strategies to starve the rebels to capitulate and thus the weapon of war was hunger.

The structural food insecurity in the tribal areas was the long-term effect. Even following rebellions, forest laws and land occupations prevented the reinstatement of the past subsistence. This history can explain why most tribal regions remained plagued by chronic susceptibility to famine and malnutrition later on into the postcolonial era.

### **Differences in Regional Indigenous Tactics.**

#### **Eastern India (Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Jungle Mahals)**

In eastern India, revolution greatly relied on mobility in forests, mass action and signature with regard to symbolic annihilation of power. There was the ability to coordinate in large geographical regions such as

the Santal Hul and Munda Ulgulan movements using the networks of kinship and ritual. Forests were not only spaces of tactical reasons, but also cultural homelands.

### **Gonds, Baigas, Bihls: Central India**

In central India wars were more diffuse and protracted with less scale and more concern on evasion. Colonial forestry was an important factor in the continued rebellion, as people who depended on hunting and forest products were now criminalized under conservation regulations.<sup>19</sup>

### **Montes Hill (Rampa, Khonds, Nagas)**

The strongest level of tactical resilience was observed in the cases of insurgencies in the hill regions. The rugged landscape limited movements of colonists and also made guerrilla warfare quite viable in the long term. The colonial policy of scorched-earth warfare in those regions emphasizes the difficulties of keeping the natives down, in which the geographical advantage heavily went on the side of the rebels.

### **Colonial Knowledge, Ethnography, and Counterinsurgency**

Colonial ethnography was a measuring rod of counterinsurgent success, and the authorities' classified tribes in terms of their martial ability, loyalty and susceptibility to insurrection. These categories were used to influence colonial militias recruitment, surveillance policies, and administrative policies. This ethnographic knowledge, however, tended to simplify complicated societies to a set of inert stereotypes. The assumption that tribes were tied to the tradition and could not reason politically did not allow administrators to see the insurgent tactics in the strategic light. This lack of intellectualism gave way to forceful reactions instead of bargaining solutions.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Indigenous Tactics and The Limits of Colonial Power**

Although the colonial state had overwhelming technological superiority it never managed to establish full control to the tribal regions. Indigenous strategies demonstrated the restraint of the empire, to preserve the control, it was necessary to be observed constantly, to be coerced, and spent money. The prevailing uprisings highlighted the point that sovereignty in the frontier regions was never permanent. These restrictions are manifested in repeated periods of uprising and reformation. All the rebellions were followed by the small-time concessions, restructuring of the administration, or even a change in the law, but none of the actions helped resolve the major contradictions of colonial domination. Indigenous strategies in this way exposed the weakness of imperial powers under its brand of superiority.

### **Postcolonial Continuities**

Several military formations that were witnessed in the colonial revolts have reappeared in the tribal uprisings that take place in the postcolonial period. The modern conflicts in central and eastern India are still marked by guerrilla warfare, mobilization on forest grounds, and support of the community. The persistence of these strategies points to the incompleteness of colonial legacies of land rights, forest administration and tribal sovereignty. Therefore, it is essential to learn about indigenous strategies of the colonial time not only because of historical research but also to be able to explain the conflicts of today which involve the tribal population and the state.

### **Conclusion:**

It has been shown in this article that indigenous military methods played a central role in tribal insurgencies in colonial India. Instead of being unsophisticated, tribal resistance was strategic and employed profound ecological knowledge, loose organization, strong social networks and ritual authority with success in challenging colonial authority. These strategies extended wars, were very costly to the colonial state and required the military approach, forest management and law policy to adjust.

The theory of tribal insurgency in terms of indigenous warfare helps to better understand the state formation in colonies and the resistance movements. Moreover, it highlights the necessity of the combination of the military analysis with the environmental history and social anthropology. Further studies that encompass both archival and oral history could help elucidate further on how indigenous resistance operated and the experience of indigenous peoples in further research. Through this study the essence of indigenous military strategies in the history of tribal insurgency in colonial India is renewed. These were ecological knowledge-based tactics, social organization and moral economy which helped tribal groups to fight against dispossession and undermine imperial power even when there were powerful people in great numbers.

The military, administrative and legal responses to these tactical challenges, specifically colonial counterinsurgency, reformed forest administration, land law and the frontier administration. Nevertheless, the adaptations usually escalated conflicts instead of solving them with short-term implications of food security, gender relations, and political identity. The combination of military anthropology, environmental history and social analysis allows this article to add to a more subtle perspective of the colonial resistance. Indigenous warfare does not come out as a thing of the past, but rather a strategy that has its historical roots, the legacies of which still inform modern conflicts of land, resources, and sovereignty in India.

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