

Women in Tribal Movements of Jharkhand during British Rule

Dr. Suchi Santosh Barwar

Assistant Professor

DSPMU, Ranchi

Shalini Cecilia Minj

PhD Researcher

DSPMU, Ranchi

Abstract

The first and the most intense resistance by tribal women in Jharkhand along with their menfolk was directed against British intervention in the nineteenth century. Numerous uprisings arose in response to the colonial assault on freedom enjoyed by the tribal societies, in control over land, forest and culture, an integral part of the lives of tribal women. The purpose of the research is to study the extraordinary role played by women in tribal movements deviating from their traditional duties. Despite their active role in tribal uprisings, tribal women have hardly any presence in written literature. Various texts on tribal movements have spoken about the participation of women in a passing way. Secondary sources such as official records, oral sources and other texts have to be analyzed to understand the value of their contribution to the tribal movements. The profound nature of anti-state movement called for an active role of women who engaged themselves in activities like organization of insurrections, spying for insurgents, supplying them with purchases, to taking part in raiding parties. They were not deterred even by the heavy consequences they had to pay. The growing participation of women became a great concern for the British. The presence of women in tribal revolts made the movements visible and provided these, status of rebellion than that of only a hunt. The active confrontation of tribal women with brutal, violent and military colonial state in the nineteenth century provides motivation and encouragement towards the process of greater involvement of women in decision making activities of the state.

Keywords: tribal women, tribal movement, Jharkhand, British Rule

Introduction

The tribal have endured diverse socio-economic changes for more than two centuries, much of which have been initiated by the penetration of British colonialism. With colonial ascendancy their traditional and communal way of living was encroached upon. Social and economic injustices were meted out to them as a result of the intervention of British colonizers accompanied by new settlers. The tribal women enjoyed freedom in their communal way of living and agricultural cum forest economy. With the advent of foreign rule and the coming of new settlers the communal world they were living in, changed. Freedom of the tribal women was violated and ridiculed. They also had to undergo physical aggression. It was an “assault on the very base of their pride, culture and socio-economic base”.¹ One of the main causes of tribal aggression during British rule was violence against women. The tribal of Jharkhand rebelled time and again against this intervention, in their traditional ways. The rebellions and movements against colonial rule was sustained communally, in such societies imagining a movement without the participation of women is impossible.²

The tribal women played extraordinary roles in the insurrections, taking a step away from their traditional role of gathering leaves, cutting timber and harvesting crop. The women were involved at every stage of the struggle. They participated right from organising for the insurrection. The women held secret meetings with the help of local rituals. They acted as spy for the menfolk. To generate community feeling the women with same number of children met each other. They dined together and exchanged gifts. The women combated with the enemy too. With children tied at their backs they fought with their traditional weapons. Participation of women in violent nature of movements is limited and thus participation of women in these kind of uprisings against a 'savage military force' is notable.³ By taking part in the uprisings the women challenged British domination in the area. They took part in movements against the state power.

Literature Review and Methods

No one society can demand any achievement without acceptance of women's share in it. However, the common Indian psyche still finds it difficult to embrace this truth. 'The women in India appear to be front of mass struggle but one whose voices are absent in all important customary institution and accounts.'⁴ Women have been consistently excluded from the narratives of heroic sacrifice and consciousness. This is evident not only in tribal struggles but also in the battles of various national movements. The history of sacrifice is also the history of women. Several works have been done on these movements in which various narrations on the war cry, struggle and heroism of Rudan and Konta, Tilka Manjhi, Sidhu and Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav, Bindray-Sindray, Neelambar-Pitambar, Telanga Khadia, Buddhu Bhagat and Birsa Munda are available. However there is a dearth of such works on heroic women. The literature available on tribal movements hardly indicate and describe the participation of women in the unrests. Many books such as Tribal Struggle for Freedom: Simbhum 1820 -21 by Sunil Kumar Sen, The Santhal Insurrection of 1855-57; Unrest against British Rule in Bihar- 1831-1859 by Kalikinkar Dutta and Hazaribagh Old records by PC Chowdhury give a very passing reference to the role and condition of women in tribal revolts. Nilamabar Pitambar – 1857 ke Bhrata by Dilip Tetre and Government of Bihar's, History of Freedom Movement in Bihar are silent on the role of women in the movements. The elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency of Ranjit Guha however gives in depth information on women participation in the Santhal Hul. Very few reports and gazetteers contribute in shedding light on women involvement in tribal uprising. Using and analysing the secondary sources derivations and analysis has been done

In all tribal movements women have always stood beside menfolk in protecting the society. At many times they have taken lead in the revolts. "Their contributions are studied from male perspective and their expressions get muted. The sad reality of finding women heroes in the records that are available do not carry their names and refer them as wives, widows and mothers."⁵ The writers have not done justice in establishing the heroic role of women in the movements. Existence of the rebel women persists, because the historical heritage of the tribal society still lives on in folk songs and oral traditions.

Results and Discussion

The struggles that took place in the South East Frontier from 1760 until India's independence in 1947 would have been incomplete without the participation of women.⁶ Tribal women played vital roles in the uprisings, whether it was the question of tribal identity, the protection of traditional rights over forests and land, the preservation of cultural values,

or leading the resistance against imperialism. The defeat of the Indian rulers at the hands of British East India Company in the Battle of Buxar gave way to Treaty of Allahabad in 1765. Through this treaty the British gained the diwani rights which allowed them to collect revenue from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The British entered Jharkhand from Simbhum. In 1766-67 the Raja of Ghatshila (Dhalbhum) led a fierce battle against British intrusion in the area. Lt. John Fergusan attacked to capture the Ghatshila Fort but faced fierce opposition from the revolting Raja and his soldiers. In the bloody struggle against the British intervention, the women never remained silent. Their active involvement, participation and support became a morale booster for the Raja and the soldiers. As the British moved further in the forest land, the lives of the people turned into a turmoil.

The revenue exaction by the East India Company and the settlement of new settlers in Jharkhand led to the usurpation of land and livelihood of the tribes, the encroachment of landlords, cases of abduction and rape of women. The tribal revolted violently against the landlords, moneylenders, and the British. The women aggressed too, hurling their traditional weapons in their hands they met head on with their opponents. There are no parallel narratives in the country matching the fighting spirit and the aggression of its tribal women in the uprisings against the colonial rule.

Tilka Manjhi Revolt

Aggrieved by injustices, Tilka Majhi revolted against the company rule in Bhagalpur in 1781. In 1784 he killed East India Company administrator, Augustus Cleveland for which he was hanged in 1785. He used to loot the British treasury to share the spoils with the poor. Santhal women took part in the guerrilla warfare organised by him. Tilka Manjhi was the first man in the history who organised and trained the Santhal women's group for guerrilla warfare.⁷In 1784 the tribal women got directly involved the warfare against colonial powers. In 1874, Bhagirath Majhi started a reform movement in Godda. He preached new codes and morals for the society and claimed for self-government. Women actively took part in his reform movement.

Santhal Revolt

In the period between 1854- 1857, Santhal Pargana started simmering with anger when the British continued their penetration deeper in the tribal areas. The causes of Santhal uprising was deeply rooted in the worsening socio-economic conditions of the time. The Bengalis, moneylenders and the upcountry merchants had oppressed and committed frauds on the simple minded people.⁸The mahajans and the merchants had amassed huge amounts by exhorting exuberant rents from the Santhals. Originally the movement was not anti-British in character. It was directed chiefly against the traders, merchants, mahajans and tikadars. Later gradually the movement became anti-British when the rebels directed their attacks against the oppressive Naib Suzawals, the police and the courts then working under the Company Raj.⁹The agitation was started by two brothers Sidhu and Kanhu of Bhognadih, located in Barhait. They were assisted by their siblings Chand, Bhairav, Phulo and Jhano. Two sisters, Phulo and Jhano are reported to have killed 21 soldiers during the Santhal Rebellion. In the Judicial Proceeding no. 23 dated 25 October 1855 it is mentions that the Santhals rebels had burnt down villages. During such attacks they had their women and children with them and went out daily for the purpose of plundering and returned towards evening.¹⁰

After Santhal Hul women used to follow the armed group of men with a large basket to collect loot and Sal tree branches. . “Out on a pillage, the men busied themselves in rough and heavy jobs of wrecking enemy property, while the women gathered the loot.”¹¹The versatile roles played by the women in the violent tribal uprisings ‘provided them

the status of rebellion than only a hunt.¹² But neither did their political roles get extended, nor did their position improve. Sometimes local feudal forces tutored by the British state would snatch their ornaments. Their authority was also dishonoured by unrestricted use of state power against them. Commissioner of Bhagalpur had to issue instruction regarding rebellion that the families of rebels must be spared as 'British Government does not make war against women and children'.¹³

A great number arrests were made after the uprisings. Many women were detained too. The official records mention a number of cases of trial, arrest, detention and punishment of women and young girls. Among the 19 Santhals arrested and produced before the Magistrate of Murshidabad dated July 20, 1855, are names of two women Radha and Heera who are injured. Correspondence between the Under Secretary of to the Government of Bengal and the Magistrate of Birbhum dated November 30, 1855 state the sanitary conditions of twenty Santhal women who were awaiting trial for different charges and who had been confined for a long time. Among these twenty women awaiting trial thirteen were released while seven were kept in custody. One woman among these seven detained, was sentenced by the Magistrate. She could not be brought for trial as she was lying in a 'very precarious state lying in the female ward'.¹⁴ She was accused of accompanying a santhal force which had gone forth to plunder a village at Deocha. She had been shot twice in her left leg and had been critically wounded and sick but was deemed too dangerous to be set free from detention. Even the mothers of small children were taken together with the children were kept in insanitary conditions for long detentions for crimes of non-serious nature. This not only shows the barbarity of the British state but it also shows the active engagement women in the rebellions. Sanitary report of Civil Surgeon of Birbhum jail dated 17 November 1855, reported that 49 prisoners were sick with diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery and dropsy.¹⁵ Girls of younger age when caught were punished with three to six years of imprisonment period. In late 1855 the official correspondence mentions the capture of four rebels from Mohammadbazar. Their leader Dhuna Majhi, was charged with conspiracy to illegally and riotously assemble with offensive weapons for plundering and committing breach of peace.¹⁶ He was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment with 'labour and iron'.¹⁷ He was accompanied by all woman, including two aged 14, who trailed behind the rebels clutching baskets to pick up the grains. For this the elder got one year imprisonment and fifty rupees fine. Women were also arrested and jailed for helping the insurgents to plunder villages and carry of goods. One woman was detained on the order of Magistrate himself. 'The charge was established against her of having not only acted as a spy for the insurgents, but for having been the means of frequently supplying them, by purchases from this town (Suri) and elsewhere, with tobacco salts and spirits and other necessities and provisions'.¹⁸

From October to November of the year 1855, at least forty-five women were reported to have been detained. These women included breast feeding mothers from all descriptions of life living in overcrowded and insanitary situations. People died from dropsy and dysentery too. On those occasions, the magistrate regarded their treatment as fitting punishment for their crimes. The detention and punishment of women reveal how dangerous the British authority perceived them to be. This also reflects the perplexity and challenge the colonial felt in dealing with rebel women.

Birsa Movement

After Santhal Rebellion, the movement which was huge and involved active participation of women was Birsa's Ulgulan. In the late nineteenth century Birsa Munda rose against the British domination in Chotanagpur. In the ulgulan,

women were actively involved in the fight for their land. “They acted as supporters, adherents, believers, informants, cooks and bodyguards for Birsa, preachers of Birsaism as well as ulgulan and fighters and became the backbone of the movement”.¹⁹ Parmi and Sati were engaged in taking care of Birsa. On the day of Birsa’s arrest Parmi was with him.²⁰

In the Ulgulan of Birsa Munda, women of Sail Rakab and Etkedih fought bravely. While men were busy fighting the women rolled big stones to topple down the hill on the soldiers to wound them.²¹ These women fought fiercely with conventional weapon in ‘dangerous surrounding’. The very weapons they used were tools of everyday life of a tribal woman, such as lathi, danda, hasli and tangi. Tangi was one of their main weapons used by them otherwise implemented in cutting and copping wood. Deputy Commissioner Mr. Streetfield’s report of the incident at Etkadiah during Birsa Movement mentions Maki, wife of a prominent leader and right hand of Birsa, Gaya Munda and her daughter-in-laws who attacked with lathi, tangi and dauli. His daughters Thigi, Nagi and Lembu battled fiercely with sword, axe and tangi. Maki was an elderly fierce old woman who threw an axe on Daroga Altaf Hussain and injured him. Maki continuously kept hitting the D.C.O Streetfield during his tussle with Gaya Munda. Maki and her daughters were awarded rigorous imprisonment for two years. This shows that the women had become serious threats to the British government. The report mentions the fighting tribal women as mad, stubborn, ferocious and brave.²² The Deputy Commissioner became apprehensive on such spirited activities of the women.

The level at which women were mobilised at sail rakhab made the British think of the ‘seriousness of the situation’. The British troops so incensed that they began firing even at revolutionaries in defiance of the Forbes orders of firing only in self-defence. Three women, wives of Bankan Munda, Majhia Munda, Dungdung Munda of Jhiuri were shot dead. Information was sought by higher officials of British Bureaucracy after this disturbing incident. According to the justification of the answerable officials, the long hairs of both men and women made it difficult for them to make difference from a distance. However the criticism of the British government on such action leading to the unfortunate death of these women was done in a light way. The brutality and excessiveness of arms used by the British made the tribal deeply distrustful of the alien rule. This highlighted the seriousness of participation of the women in war.

The dubious nature of British rule became evident at the Sail Rakhab when even after merciless massacre of women, large number of women rebels were captured and detained. In spite of this the rebels, especially women kept persuading others to join in the uprising. However the Birsa followers were not deterred by the incident at Sail Rakhab. An amount of Rs. 500 was announced to person who caught Champi and Sali, one of the most trusted Birsites.²³

Tana Bhagat Movement

Feudalistic elements and tendencies were one of the results of British colonialism. In 1914 the oraoons of Chotanagpur rose against the exploitative policies of the British and the oppressive practices of the local zamindars. The movement led by Jatra was initially religious but later acquired political nature. Deomani Bandhani sustained the anti zamindar movement against the feudalistic element. When Jatra bhagat was imprisoned in 1914, she boldly offered her leadership to the people’s movement.²⁴ She also inspired many tribal and some non-tribal toward Tana Bhagat movement. The participation of women in colonial uprisings became an issue for concern for the British rule.

A long chain of resistance, insurrections and movements started among the tribal with the incoming of British imperialism in Chotanagpur. The consolidation of British in the region brought great exploitation and pain to the people. Burdened by political dependence and undergoing social degradation the tribal areas seethed with anger and discontent. They were threatened by total ruin. Tribal revolted to assert their political identity over territory which they had carved out of jungle in a period of time since their arrival in the region.

The tribal had no central figure to organize the movements. The resistance were held under leadership of local leaders. There was unique communality and solidarity among the resisting tribal. This communality among them, gave way to the participation of large number of women alongside men in the popular resistances. The women were involved in every aspect on the movements. They were not only involved in the organisation of the insurrections but also in their execution. The active involvement of women was also caused by the immense exploitation they had to undergo at the hands of outsiders under the tutelage of British imperialism. They were robbed of the meagre ornaments they had when the moneylenders exacted exorbitant interests on the poor tribal families. The women were harassed and dishonoured at the hands of the new settlers. The spark leading to the Kol insurrection was the injustice against women. The tribal were seething with great anger and discontent under British rule due to their exploitative policies. This discontent which was felt in almost all of Chotanagpur plateau was fanned by the following incidents. Some outsiders not only usurped twelve villages belonging to Sinhai makni of Ranchi district Sonapur pargana, but also 'seduced or ravished two of his young sisters'.²⁵ Another incident inciting the Kol revolt was that of oppression of Surja munda of Bandgaon of Singbhum and abduction and dishonouring of his wife by a farmer of the area. The tribal denied to tolerate the humiliation and injustice on them and revolted against the British Rule in 1831.

During the resistances the women remained at village taking care of the household while the menfolk were away fighting. The women and children had to endure severe military torture in the villages too. During the attack on Larka Hos in Singbhum there had been instances of women in the villages being compelled by the British authorities to call back the men from war. The revolting villages had to face the military operation of the British troops nothing short of repeated plunder and pillage. The villages were burnt, people butchered and the innocent villagers driven away and all the grains in store was looted or destroyed and the cattle were also taken away.²⁶ Undeterred, the women not only participated in the movements but also encouraged others to take part. Through social rituals they sought to knit villagers in solidarity.

The women were also involved in raiding parties fighting with indomitable spirit with their traditional weapons. On 26 January 1837 in Singbhum when the British troops under Captain Lawrence made a surprise attack on the Barndia Larkas and succeeded in capturing many Ho men and women insurgents.²⁷ "The point, knows fully well the consequence of being a part of such violent movement, tribal women were ready for the kind of active armed participation and sacrifice the movement was asking for."²⁸

The women also became close adherents of leaders who led resistance against the British imperialism. On their call the women got ready to go beyond their traditional roles in various actions to do away with the foreign yoke. Around twenty five thousand people gathered at Bhognadih upon the call of Sidhu and Kanhu on June 30, 1855. Among them fifty percent were women and children.²⁹ Women were also part of the crowd that marched to Calcutta to place

grievance before the Governor. Large number of women became Birsait, following the new religion propounded by Birsa Munda. They were involved in all the activities of the movement.

The tribal women had to pay heavily for the active role in the insurrections. The official correspondence mentions a number women among rebels who were captured, charged and imprisoned. Among the women imprisoned many were wounded and many had small children with them. Women and children died due to overcrowding and appalling sanitary conditions of the prisons. The participation of women in tribal movements produced a perplexing situation for the British authorities. They were threatened by active participation of women in the movements.

According to folklore, Rohtasgarh was protected from the Turks by the Oraon women thrice around four hundred years ago. Brave women Kaili Dai and Singri Dai are remembered during Sarhul festivals. They inspired and strengthened women during anti-state resistance. The tribal men and women were not a part of the revolt of 1857 as they could not relate to it. They could not join hands in the movement with the zamindars and other feudal elements who had been oppressive towards the tribal. After the violent anti-colonial resistance women in large numbers got involved in peaceful Jharkhand movement closely linked to tribal identity and land. Series of anti-colonial movements did indeed instigate a ethnic feeling in those groups which the political parties later used in their electoral politics.

Conclusion

During the anti-colonial movements, the tribal women got first stage of opportunity for political roles. However, tribal women warriors were always ignored as role models in history. Their part in the tribal revolts brought the movement to light and gave it visibility. The involvement of women in tribal movements placed the British in a very precarious position. Women were employed because 'all strength resources [were] required by tribal to fight British imperialism'.³⁰ From political nature its consequence had been political also, in these events tribal women had been also significant contributors. Women through their involvement in the tribal movements during British rule, got in the process of challenging and restructuring the mighty imperial superstructure. These movements should serve as a wellspring of motivation and inspiration. Looking into the participation of women in tribal movement gives a better understanding of tribal history. Their participation in the tribal uprisings publicized the movement and made it visible. The tribal movements thus presented the gravity of situation for the British. Tribal women took part in events of political nature which resulted in political events. Motivation should be taken from these movements. It is important to look into history of tribal women in Jharkhand in search of identity. It demands greater acknowledgment of their role in shaping the history of India.

References:

1. Singh S. (2010) Anti-colonial Movements in Jharkhand and Gender Visibility, AshaMishra, Chttaranjan Kumar Paty(ed), Tribal Movements in Jharkhand (1857-2007), Concept Publishing Company PVT. LTD. New Delhi, p. 59.
2. Singh A. (2024), Birsa's Ulgulan: Unsung Female Heroes of Popular Revolt, Journal of Adivasi and Indegenous Studies(JAIS), Vol.XIV, No.1, February 2024: 39-55, p. 40.
3. Singh S. (2010) Anti-colonial Movements in Jharkhand and Gender Visibility, AshaMishra, Chttaranjan Kumar Paty(ed), Tribal Movements in Jharkhand (1857-2007), Concept Publishing Company PVT. LTD. New Delhi , p. 59
4. Singh A. (2024), Birsa's Ulgulan: Unsung Female Heroes of Popular Revolt, Journal of Adivasi and Indegenous Studies(JAIS), Vol.XIV, No.1, February 2024: 39-55, p. 40.
5. Ibid. p. 40.
6. Vasavi. (2002), Ulgulan Ki Auraten, Harivansh(ed), Disum Muktigatha aur Srijan ke Sapne, Rajkamal Publication, Delhi, p. 143.
7. Sahu C. (2018), The Santhal Women, Swarup Publisher, New Delhi, p. 85.
8. Datta K.K. (1940), The Santhal Insurrection of 1855-57, Calcutta University Press, p.5.
9. Ibid. p.10.
10. Sahu C. (2018), The Santhal Women, Swarup Publisher, New Delhi, p. 169.
11. Guha R. (1983), Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. 130.
12. Singh S. (2010) Anti-colonial Movements in Jharkhand and Gender Visibility, AshaMishra, Chttaranjan Kumar Paty(ed), Tribal Movements in Jharkhand (1857-2007), Concept Publishing Company PVT. LTD. New Delhi, p. 67.
13. Ibid. p. 67.
14. Sahu C. (2018), The Santhal Women, Swarup Publisher, New Delhi, pp. 165-66.
15. Ibid. p. 68.
16. Guha R.(1983), Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 131.
17. Ibid. p. 131.
18. Ibid. p. 132
19. Singh A.(2024), Birsa's Ulgulan: Unsung Female Heroes of Popular Revolt, Journal of Adivasi and Indegenous Studies(JAIS), Vol.XIV, No.1, February 2024: 39-55, p. 45.
20. Sahu C. (2018), The Santhal Women, Swarup Publisher, New Delhi, p. 106.
21. Ibid. 107.
22. Singh K.S. (1983), Birsa Munda and His Movement 1874-1901, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, pp107-108.

23. Singh S. (2010) Anti-colonial Movements in Jharkhand and Gender Visibility, AshaMishra, Chttaranjan Kumar Paty(ed), Tribal Movements in Jharkhand (1857-2007), Concept Publishing Company PVT. LTD. New Delhi, p. 70.
24. Ibid. 74.
25. Datta K.K. (1957), The Kol Insurrection of 1831-33 in Chotanagpur, K.K. Datta (ed), Unrest against British Rule in Bihar 1831-1859, p.13.
26. Sen S K. (2008), Tribal Struggle for Freedom Singhbhum 1820-1858, , Concept Publishing, New Dehi, p. 66
27. Ibid. p. 69
28. Singh S. (2010) Anti-colonial Movements in Jharkhand and Gender Visibility, AshaMishra, Chttaranjan Kumar Paty(ed), Tribal Movements in Jharkhand (1857-2007), Concept Publishing Company PVT. LTD. New Delhi, p. 71.
29. Sahu C. (2018), The Santhal Women, Swarup Publisher, New Delhi, p.160.
30. Singh S. (2010) Anti-colonial Movements in Jharkhand and Gender Visibility, AshaMishra, Chttaranjan Kumar Paty(ed), Tribal Movements in Jharkhand (1857-2007), Concept Publishing Company PVT. LTD. New Delhi, p. 61.