

Freedom Movement in Central India

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Indian Independence movement was a people's movement that gained strength as it progressed. This transcended regional and class differences and became an expression of the collective resolve of the people of the entire country. Generally, the history of the freedom movement is described from the defining moments of the first freedom struggle of 1857. The noticeable feature of our historiography is the repeated mention of some regions and classes in the freedom movement, but the contribution of tribal areas and its people is often ignored.

Even before 1857, the tribal people had revolted against the British in India time and again. The British had to struggle to establish their authority in the tribal areas. References to such revolts are not easily available. Although the contribution of tribals was significant in the freedom movement that took place before and after 1857 across the country, the movements that took place especially in present-day Chhattisgarh in central India are touched upon here.

Tribal Uprisings before 1857

After winning the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and acquiring the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa in 1765, the East India Company began efforts to annex Chhattisgarh. Most of the central part of Chhattisgarh was under the control of the Maratha rulers of Nagpur, and the rest of the area was ruled by different Princely States. The British got their first success in 1800, when the Raja of Raigad signed a treaty with the Company and made Raigad a part of the Government. They annexed the Maratha empire after its defeat in the war at Nagpur in 1818, and began to rule the central region of Chhattisgarh. However, in Bastar, the south of Chhattisgarh and Surguja in the north, several tribal rebellions arose to save tribal people from the slavery of the Company's Government.

The Halba rebellion against the British (1774-1779) was marked by bloodshed and daring attacks. To capture Bastar, the British, with the help of the King of Jeypore and the younger brother of the King of Bastar, Dariyavdev Singh, formed a joint army and attacked

Ajmer Singh, King of Bastar in 1774. Ajmer Singh's army of Halba tribesmen conclusively defeated the British army. This war lasted until 1779, but the British were not successful. Later, Dariyavdev Singh killed Ajmer Singh by deceit. In this genocide, an attempt was made to wipe out the entire tribe. It can be said that this



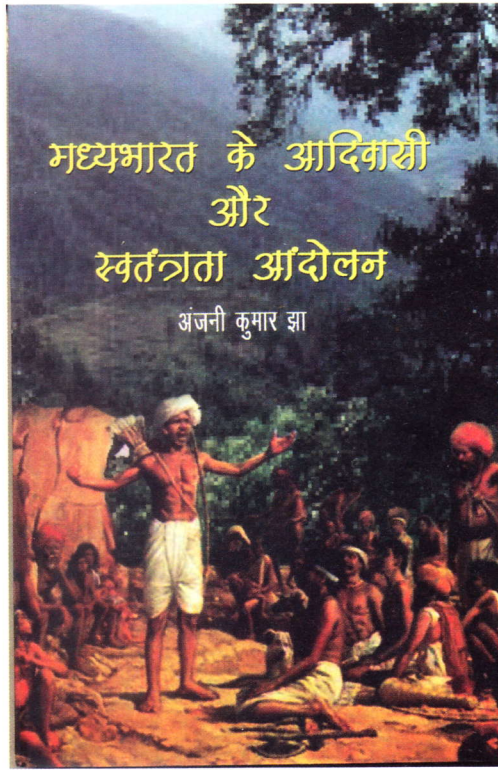
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was the first rebellion against the British in India, and King Ajmer Singh of Bastar was the first martyr.

The fifth rebellion began in the Chota Nagpur region in December, 1831, when Kol tribesmen rose in revolt because of the discontent arising from the forcible occupation of tribal lands. This rebellion lasted till 1832, and then the British suppressed it by deploying a big army. It was followed by the sixth rebellion in 1833 when the British wanted to capture Bargarh. Under the leadership of Ajit Singh, ruler of Bargarh, the tribal people of Raigad fiercely opposed the British army. In this struggle, Ajit Singh was martyred.

After that, the seventh rebellion took place in the Tarapur region in Bastar in 1842. Dalganjan Singh, brother of Bhupaldev, the ruler of Bastar, was the administrator of Tarapur. Dalganjan Singh refused to raise the annual tax in his area. It was considered an act of rebellion by the British, and an army was sent from Nagpur to suppress it. The tribal people faced the British army under the leadership of Dalganjan Singh who was defeated and imprisoned. The eighth rebellion took place in Dantewada in South Bastar in 1842 by the tribals against the order of the British regarding the custom of human sacrifice. The British army from Nagpur was called to suppress this revolt. The tribal people fought fiercely with this army. After a struggle, the custom of human sacrifice was stopped and a permanent military system was established in Dantewada.

The new system for collection of rent, steps taken to change the traditional social, religious and political system, new rules implemented for forest management, and restrictions imposed on the production of liquor, all affected the unique tribal culture associated with their rights to water, forest and land. By resorting to these measures, the British also bruised the independent tribal consciousness. The tribals resorted to these revolts to protect their culture and autonomy, which is the historical legacy of the freedom



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struggle against the British in Chhattisgarh. In the history of India, there is no mention of these eight tribal revolts of Chhattisgarh before 1857. Still, these revolts are evidence of the relentless and revolutionary struggle of the tribal people against the British.

First Revolt of 1857 in Sonakhan

In 1857, Narayan Singh, the tribal landlord of Sonakhan of Raipur, revolted uniquely. A drought occurred in his zamindari area. The paddy deposited with a moneylender was looted and distributed by Narayan Singh to save his people from starvation. He had informed about it to the British officers posted in Raipur. At the same time, the moneylender complained to the British officials describing the act of Narayan Singh as robbery.

The British took no administrative measures to save the public from drought. Still, on the complaint of the moneylender hoarding grain, self-respecting Narayan Singh was arrested and imprisoned in Raipur jail. He managed to escape prison with the help of the native British infantry deployed in Raipur, and after reaching Sonakhan, he formed an army of tribal youth. The British sent a large army contingent to Sonakhan to arrest him. After fierce fighting, Narayan Singh was arrested and publicly hanged at Raipur on 10 December 1857. He was declared the first martyr of 1857 in Chhattisgarh by conferring the title of 'Veer' in independent India.

In 1858, tribal people revolted in Udaipur in the Raigad district. Following this rebellion, the brothers of the King of Udaipur were arrested and sent to the Andaman jail. The people of the Muria tribe of Bastar revolted in 1876. A large British army from the Orissa region was sent to suppress the rebellion. After a siege of about a month, the British succeeded. In 1878, the Rani of Bastar started a struggle against the British to protect her rights, lasting until 1882.

Bhumkal of Bastar

In 1910, there was a fierce people's uprising in Bastar itself, known in modern history as 'Bhumkal of Bastar.' The Muria tribesmen of Bastar defeated the British state and

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took up an armed revolution to establish the 'Muria Raj.' Led by Gundadhur, this rebellion was meticulously planned and it rattled the entire Bastar region. The tribals targeted the British and attacked the government buildings. The flame of this rebellion, which started on 1 February 1910, continued to blaze for three months. Initially, Muria Raj was established in the whole of Bastar for some time, but Gundadhur's army could not sustain itself against the large army of British. Hundreds of tribal people were put to death in this struggle and thousands suffered harsh punishments.

The Northeast region of Chhattisgarh witnessed the Tana Bhagat movement, which started in 1916 and lasted till 1918. In its initial phase, this movement was violent but later, the followers of this movement joined the non-violent, non-cooperation movement and became a part of the mainstream freedom movement of India.

Jungle Satyagraha

Another movement of Chhattisgarh— Jungle Satyagraha was launched in 1922 in a place named Nagari of Dhamtari district. It holds a unique place in the entire freedom struggle. The tribals had staged a 'satyagraha' against the authority, protesting over the low wages given by the forest department and the ban on carrying wood for use in cooking at home. Large-scale arrests were made in this movement, and satyagrahis

were punished. Later, the Forest Department brought changes in its functioning, and this movement was called off. However, in August, 1930, Jungle Satyagraha started again at different places in Chhattisgarh. During one such satyagraha, thousands of people gathered at a place called Tamera, and when the authorities tried to control the crowd, a woman named Dayavati slapped the officer. The situation was saved from worsening by the authorities. Some people were arrested. At one place, the police opened fire in which a person died. This movement continued till March, 1931, and it ended with the comeback of the Civil Disobedience Movement in India.

The history of the freedom movement is not just a description of events or a mere counting of incidents. Neither is it about describing the character of its heroes. The freedom movement is an analysis of the currents and counter-currents that formed the structure of the agitating society at that time. The collective consciousness of the people to be free was being expressed in the form of struggle, and it is necessary to recognise that consciousness and its expression. However, the consciousness of the common people about attaining freedom— especially of the tribal people in areas away from the major centres— is often not considered by historians. The history of India's freedom movement is incomplete without recognising the tribal consciousness. □

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