

Precursors of Indian Independence- Tribal and other Marginalised Women

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Abstract

The contribution of women of all classes and hues to the Uprising of 1857 was phenomenal. However, they have received a cursory mention in most writings on the Revolt. Women who played a commanding role have been erased from the records of history. These women epitomised bravery and female power, and were authoritative in demeanour. They were not confined to any particular part of the country or society but were role models for the heroes who challenged the British during 1857 or thereafter. Their participation was extremely commendable in an era when resistance, or governance, were considered male prerogatives. The precursors of Indian independence were marked by the significant contributions of tribal and other marginalized women, whose efforts often went unrecognized in mainstream historical narratives. These women played pivotal roles in the struggle against colonial rule, challenging both gender and social hierarchies. Tribal women, in particular, brought unique perspectives and strategies to the independence movement, leveraging their traditional knowledge and community networks. Their participation not only advanced the cause of national liberation but also laid the groundwork for future social reforms. This abstract, highlights the indispensable yet often overlooked contributions of tribal and marginalized women in the fight for Indian independence, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive historical recognition.

The role of tribal and other marginalized women in India's independence movement is often overlooked in mainstream narratives, yet their contributions were significant. These women fought against colonial rule, oppressive local systems, and socio-economic exploitation, often laying the groundwork for later movements.

Keywords- *Precursors, Contributions, Unrecognised, Mainstream, Social hierarchies, Indispensable Contribution, Historical Recognition.*

Here's an overview of some key figures and movements:

1. Tribal Women in Resistance Movements

Tribal communities played a crucial role in early resistance against British rule. Many tribal women actively participated in uprisings, often leading from the front.

a) Rani Gaidinliu (1915–1993)

- A Naga spiritual and political leader from Manipur, she led an armed resistance against British rule in the 1930s.
- She was arrested in 1932 and spent 14 years in prison.
- Jawaharlal Nehru called her the "Rani of the Nagas" and later honoured her contributions.

b) Helen Lepcha

- A freedom fighter from Sikkim, she opposed British rule in the region and fought for women's rights.
- She played an active role in anti-colonial protests and supported nationalist movements.

c) The Santhal Rebellion (1855-1856)

- While led by Sidhu and Kanhu, Santhal women played a key role in resisting exploitative policies.
- Women actively participated in guerrilla warfare against British officials and landlords.

2. Marginalized Women in Peasant and Labor Movements

Women from lower castes and marginalized communities played a significant role in peasant and labor movements that challenged British policies.

a) Uda Devi (1857)

- A Dalit warrior who fought against the British during the Revolt of 1857.
- She led a group of Dalit women soldiers and was martyred in battle.

b) Veerangani Jhalkari Bai (1830–1858)

- A Dalit woman who was a close ally of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi.
- Disguised herself as the queen to mislead British forces during the 1857 revolt.

c) The Tebhaga Movement (1946-47)

- Women from sharecropping communities in Bengal fought for land rights.
- Peasant women actively resisted landlords and British-backed policies.

3. Role in Revolutionary and Nationalist Movements

Tribal and marginalized women also played roles in organized nationalist struggles and underground resistance.

a) Matangini Hazra (1870–1942)

- A poor peasant widow who led protests against British salt taxes.
- She was shot dead by British police while leading a march in 1942.

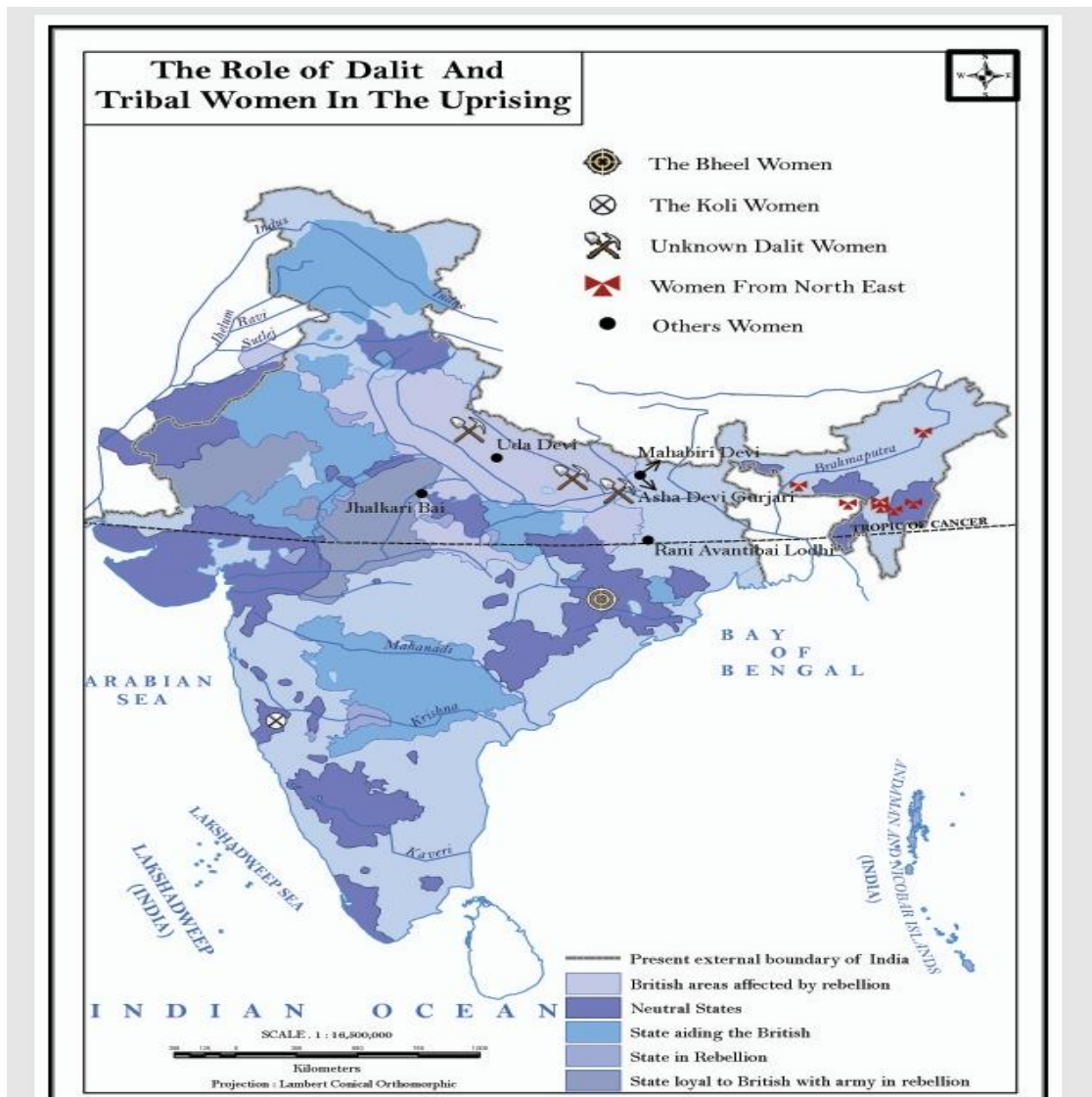
b) Kamladevi Chattopadhyay (1903–1988)

- Though from a higher caste, she worked extensively with tribal and marginalized women.
- She promoted self-reliance and women's economic independence through handicrafts.

The contributions of tribal and marginalized women in India's independence struggle were remarkable but often underrepresented in historical accounts. Their involvement in armed uprisings, peasant revolts, and nationalist movements

demonstrates their commitment to justice and self-rule. Recognizing their role ensures a more inclusive understanding of India's fight for independence.

The participation of tribal men has not been sufficiently documented; hence the presence of tribal women was naturally ignored and their active role in the Revolt relegated to unexplored corners of history. However, tribal groups were an important and integral part of Indian life. Before their annexation and subsequent incorporation in the British territories, they had their own social and economic systems. These systems were traditional in nature and satisfied their needs. Each community was headed by a



chief who managed the affairs of the community. They also enjoyed freedom with regard to the management of their affairs. Land and forests were their main sources of livelihood and survival. The tribal communities remained isolated from the non-tribal, but tribal women were in a position of strength in their community and family. They were responsible for hunting and gathering food.

British policies proved harmful to tribal society, as they destroyed their self-sufficient economy, which proved to be a major contributor to creating disturbed tribal communities. The tribal groups of different regions revolted against the British. Their movements were directed against the colonial administration. These tribal groups used traditional weapons, mainly bows and arrows, and often turned violent. A natural consequence to this was that the British dealt with them severely. They were declared criminals and anti-social elements; and their property was confiscated. Many were imprisoned and many hanged. The tribal movements in India remained confined to some regions only. However, these movements were as consequential as the organized opposition of other social groups against the colonial government. The major tribal revolts that took place against the British rule were worthy of mention and authentic documentation.

The Santhal Rebellion 1855-57

The area of concentration of the Santhals was called Daman-i-Koh or the Santhal Pargana. It extended from Bhagalpur in Bihar to Orissa in the south, stretching from Hazaribagh to the borders of Bengal. The Santhals, like other tribes, worked hard to maintain their existence in forests and wild jungles. They cultivated their land and lived a peaceful life. This continued till the British inflicted traders, money lenders, zamindars and merchants on them. They were made to buy goods on credit and forced to pay back with a heavy interest during harvest time. As a result, they were sometimes forced to give the moneylenders not only their crops, but also ploughs, bullocks and ultimately their land. Very soon, they became bonded labour and per force had to serve only their creditors. Consequently, the peaceful tribal communities went up in arms against the British officials, zamindars and money lenders, who were exploiting them. Sidhu and Kanu were the leading rebel leaders of the Santhal tribe. Their women were strong and fearless, and organized themselves into groups that extended support to the leaders.

The Bhils and the Kolis

Koli rising in Taranga Hills

Instigated by Maganlal Shroff, a leading merchant of Patan, Govind Rao Gaikwad, half-brother of the ruling Gaikwad of Baroda, conspired with others to rebel. He was supported by Raja Bhosle, a sardar of the ruling Gaikwad. They proceeded to Ahmedabad in October 1857, but failed to get support from the Ahmedabad cantonment. However, they proceeded to Taranga Hills and began purchasing horses and engaging men for combat. The Kolis were residents of the area and they collected 2000 men and 150 horses for them. As they advanced towards Vijapur, their forces increased daily. Maganlal took charge of the army which was advancing from the north towards Ahmedabad and he promised to reward the Kolis by giving them a share in the government. Then they advanced towards Mansa and came to Lodhra. The villagers of Lodhra fought against the Kolis in self-defence. The village was plundered and a few soldiers were captured by the Kolis. They begged for mercy and two soldiers sought service with Maganlal. Their strategy was to first attack Baroda on Diwali – October 16 – and, after overthrowing the Maharaja, proceed to Ahmedabad for the final assault. The Kolis asked Maganlal about the forces expected to come from the north to capture Ahmedabad. They did not receive a satisfactory answer, hence the Koli women cautioned their husbands against Maganlal. The Koli women were strong and independent thinkers and their opinions mattered to the men in the community. Delhi had fallen on September 20 and the repercussions were gradually felt. A wave of despondency swept across Gujarat. Observing the helplessness of Maganlal, the two soldiers who had taken service with him, reported against him to the thanedar of Samau. Information of the plan was leaked to the Maharaja of Baroda who was celebrating the victory of the British against the rebels. The combined army of the Maharaja and the British confronted the rebels and in no time, they were captured. Except Govind Gaikwad (sometimes referred to as Bapu Gaikwad) and Raja Bhosle, all the rebels were tried. Three were blown from guns, three, including Maganlal, were hanged and the rest proceeded to the Andamans. Towards the end of 1857, Koli villages were burnt down by the combined forces of Baroda and the British, and their leaders punished. The Koli-Bhil rebellion in Northern Gujarat spearheaded by Koli taluqdars, continued till end of 1858, when they attacked Gaikwadi villages near present day Gandhinagar. Unlike the North, the Revolt in Gujarat was not of the sepoys. It was led by the taluqdars and thakurs and jagirdars but aided by the fighting communities of the Kolis, the Pathans and the Bhils, who rebelled against the Gaikwad and the British.

The Bhil Rising

The manner in which the Koli and Rohilla tribes had revolted against the British was followed by rising of Bhagoji Naik, Bhīma Naik, and some other Bhils, who were

the prominent leaders of this Revolt. The repercussions of the Bhil Revolt were felt in southern Ahmadnagar, Nasik district, and some parts of the Hyderabad State, where similar revolts occurred.

Rising of the Naikdas of Rewakantha and Sankheda Mewas took place between October 1858 and March 1860. Preparations were made by certain leaders in Baroda and the adjoining districts of Panch Mahals and Rewakantha to receive Tatya Tope and to provide for him a strong support from Naikdas, a war like tribe of Bhils hailing from Baglan. Their predatory instincts were aroused because of promise of plunder and loot made to them if they rose in revolt. Their women were as sharp and strong as the men and they were active participants in all matters concerning the tribe. The women were also warriors and knew the tactics of self-defence and warfare. Bhil women were fearless and good group leaders. They, along with the men, provided support to many prominent leaders of the Revolt.

In the Panchmahals district the tribal Nayakadas attacked the British army at Sankheda. This attack was led by Rupa Naik and Kewal Naik, both of whom had been encouraged to carry out this attack by Bhausaheb Pawar. The tribal Nayakadas was defeated at Jambu Ghoda by colonial troops led by Capt. Bates. Ganpatrao, the representative of Bhausaheb, was arrested and Rupa and Kewal Naik surrendered in March 1859. "The Bheel leaders received Purwannahs either directly from the King of Delhi or from some high authority in that city directing them to rise in rebellion against the British Government." Bhima Naik, the famous Bheel leader, even issued proclamations to the Khandesh police to the effect that he was acting under the authority of the King of Delhi and threatened them if they remained faithful to the government. Thus, inspired by the risings in the north and fortified by the Purwannahs from the King of Delhi, the Bheels under the leadership of Kajee Singh, Bhagoji Naik and others raised the standard of rebellion and directed their attack on the British Government in Khandesh.ⁱⁱ From the accounts of the British officers it was revealed that the Bhils offered a most determined resistance and 'fought with desperation'. They succeeded in inflicting serious wounds on Captain Birch and Lieutenant Basein. One native officer of the 9th Regiment, according to the government reports, was killed, 450 Bhil women and children were taken prisoners. Among them were the wives of Kajee Singh and Mowassiaa Naik. The niece of Bhima Naik was also caught, while Kajee Singh's only son Polad Singh was killed.

These revolts saw the active participation of Bhil women. Their contribution was evident from the Bombay Police Commissioner's letter to the Secretary of Secret

Department, dated June 1, 1857, which stated “The way Bhil men were troublesome and harassing us, so is the case with Bhil women also. They act as spies, prepare food for the men and at times have also fearlessly fought with us. That is why even they should be imprisoned.” In addition to this, Bhil women were also instrumental in misleading the enemy by providing them false information. According to government records, at least 4500 Bhil men were involved in the Uprising, and they were helped by their wives in some way or the other. Bhil women shared the responsibility of fighting against the British equally with their men folk and fought side by side with them. In general, they had great influence on Bhil males. As a result, the British adopted the policy of holding Bhil women as hostages till Bhil Naiks could be captured.

The Bhil Risings (Sept 1857 to 1858) constituted a glorious phase of the armed resistance offered to the British colonial rule in India. It had several other interesting features. In the Battle of Amba Pani (April 11, 1857) alone, more than 460 women and children were taken prisoners. Thus, it was evident that the entire Bhil population of the hills took up arms against the British. No record of the names of these Bhil women had been found, but government records with regard to their arrest were testimony to the magnitude of the role that these women played in the Revolt of 1857. One such woman was Sursi, belonging to a Bhil family of Madhya Pradesh. She was instrumental in inspiring her son, Bhima Naik, to rise up in arms against British rule. She, with the help of her son, constituted a joint front of Bhils, Bhilal, Mandlois and Naiks to challenge the British. She was held in captivity in Salodaon, and on February 8, 1849, jailed in the fort of Mandleshwar, where she died on February 28, 1859.

Koli and Bhil women, along with men, participated in the Revolt of 1857 and displayed extraordinary valour. Government records and contemporary writings have documented the participation of Koli and Bhil women along with the men in the Revolt. In the Chandap region of Gujarat, Koli leader, Nathaji, and his two sons led the Uprising. Women and men on a large scale were mobilized to help them. Their weapons were mace and swords. In the nearby region of Deogarh, Captain Nattal made a sudden raid on Bhil leader, Bhagoji Naik’s camp. In the skirmish which followed, some women, along with Bhagoji Naik’s mother, were arrested. Describing a battle fought with the Bhils, Police Superintendent, Major Hassel Wood, said that the British suffered huge losses while dealing with the Bhils. In this battle 460 Bhil women and children were arrested. Among them were wives of Kajee Singh, Mowasia Naik and Kurecha Bhau Rawal. Kajee Singh’s sister and Bhima Naik’s niece were also arrested. On the issue of release of the Bhil women from imprisonment, the Bombay government decided, “The Bhil women should never be set free from imprisonment”. The Kolis and the Bhils paid

a heavy price for rebelling against the British. Incidents of various atrocities being committed on the women in imprisonment came to light. Besides, not only were these fighting communities disarmed, they were forced to follow agriculture and were impoverished. Ultimate nail in the coffin was that they were branded as criminal tribes and to this day they are looked upon with suspicion and fear.

There are thousands of stories of valour and sacrifice which have gone unnoticed or have not been recorded due to the fact that "History mostly gives credit to the victorious", in this case, the victors were the British. They were the ones who committed gruesome atrocities and held massive killings of the marginalised section of the society comprising mainly of the Tribal and Dalit communities. The stories have been buried in the sands of time and slowly, as more and more researchers have been working on archival material, history is being unearthed through the records from the Foreign Political Paper records of the imperial government.

The researcher has done an extensive study on this particular topic as it is in the National Interest to highlight the extremely important contributions made by a section of the society which has mainly remained oppressed since ages. Today, we as a nation, look back and talk about the freedom struggle, we cannot ignore the Tribes and the lesser-known women who were the precursors of Indian Independence. History will always be grateful to them for initiating the movement and motivating the future generation.

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