

Adivasi Women: Resisting Colonialism and Patriarchy

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Tribal women are studied in the context of the tribal society, which, is widely believed, to allow its women relative freedom. They enjoy a relatively high status, autonomy and role compared with their non-tribal counterparts. In recent time this image of tribal women is being questioned by historians who have started reconstructing the history of their struggles. In this process they have resurrected tribal women from history and folklores and constructed the process of their participation in the revolt of 1857, a period on the cusp of modernity yet deeply steeped in tradition.

Recent studies attempt to contextualise the role of tribal women in the revolt of 1857 based largely on fragmentary basis. They have brought a fresh insight on the trends and response towards women's participation in the anti-colonial movement. Since colonial-capitalist interventions uprooted women from traditional patterns of livelihood leading towards a re-arrangement of their occupational roles which was certainly not conducive to their traditional culture and social practices. This interface with alien culture often came to be seen as conflicting cultures.²

The adivasi movement put serious restraints on women's agency and politics. The studies try to mark how women have been negotiating with colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy combine³ through visible and at most times in invisible ways. The exclusion of women from tribal politics allows us to explore, how tribal political systems are significantly grounded in gender and power constructs and sets limits on women's participation in the mainstream tribal⁴ movements.

History writing in recent times has been enriched⁵ by writings on anti-colonial tribal movements. For long, studies on Indian women were overtly focussed on their national and social reform movements. Historians looking at women's participation find sources on women scanty with no independent writing on women. Even within these constraints women's questions have opened up a new area of inquiry and only recently a liminal space between colonial subjection and adivasi resistance has started emerging. It is trying to explore the dialectical relation of feminism and patriarchies in the inventions of the colonial state and the tribal movements. Joan Kelly's⁶ can be cited who put forward four criteria for understanding the relative impact of women's power that determined the quality of their historical experience during the Renaissance. The parameters set by her were (i) the regulation of female sexuality as compared with male; (ii) women's and men's relative economic and political roles including women's access to property political power and the education or training necessary to do that work; (iii) women's cultural roles including ability to shape the outlook of their society and their access to education and / or institution to do this, and (iv) the prevailing ideology about women. These parameters were applicable to evaluate the status of women in any society.

Writing the history of women by generating new questions and expanding the source has broadened the entire field of historical research. In the conventional form of history writing based on written records, memoirs, diaries, compilation of laws, census records, tax lists, etc. women were either omitted through prejudice or neglect therefore, only meagre information was available having little content to indicate about their participatory role. An exploration of new sources as oral history,⁷ artefact interpretation, iconography and folklore has added to the historians repertoire — we thus need to develop critical analysis and adopt research methodologies to explore these new and alternative sources such as personal testimonies, autobiographies. At a time when history is diversified these unexplored sources need to be integrated with mainstream history writing to retain the worth of their exclusive ethnicity with an all out inclusive approach.

Tribal women remained marginalised in Indian history writing: but three

developments though largely independent in their own, gave more space to women in way of history writing. First the ‘advent of history⁸ from below’ by the early subaltern school revolving around underprivileged groups, second, a quantum leap in women’s studies, breaking the monolithic⁹ trap of narratives of women from dominant class and third, the maturing of total history and the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach that tribes began to be situated in works in history. In such attempts at expanding the domains of history the emphasis has been more on ethnographical details or the colonial experience but references still remain incidental and fragmentary on women. It is trying to explore the linkages of feminism and patriarchies in the inventions of the colonial state and the tribal movements. This relationship in the context of 1857 can be studied in adverbent / inadverbent manner. Utilising this fragmentary source on adivasi women whose involvement in the uprising has been projected more as victims than as active participants.¹⁰

This is possible while going through one of the earliest reference of tribal women in history writing. It can be seen in the occasional passages in descriptions on anti-colonial tribal revolts. The accounts of women’s participation in the resistance movements is juxtaposed between the colonial writing and the compensatory history writing. The colonial writers have understated the participation of tribal women and perceived it in a quantitative manner, looking solely at it as a law and order problem of which women formed an integral part. Although there are isolated and stray references about women fighters but the British assumption can be seen in the statement of E. T. Dalton. Taking cognisance of the fierce adivasi resistance, the English Commissioner wrote that they had to ‘fight and win’ the adivasi territories which only became possible when the women folk also shared the fields alongside the fierce *ladakas*. On the other hand the indigenous adivasi activists have sought to romanticize and overstate or even deify women’s role in the insurgent movements. The colonial writings base their arguments in the official, police and administrative records while the indigenous writings find their base on the folklore and traditions which is replete with women’s valour and gallantry.¹¹

Tribal women did respond to the various socio-political movements in spirit and in numbers. They were visible as active organizers, raiders and fighters at times sympathisers or passionate supporters in the anti-colonial resistance movements.

The dominant ideology was to agitate against capitalist development and socio-economic displacements. The patriarchal structuring of the adivasi societies was not questioned brings out the hegemonic aspects of the movements. Issues affecting women were taken up only if they were congruent with the dominant ideology of the movements and no further. The Birsa movement tried to purge Munda society of the degrading practices. Women’s dignity figured strongly in the Kol, Santhal movements but it would be considered as an outward expression of patriarchy as the sexual dominance and control over women’s sexuality remained. Hegemony works in subtle, yet alarming ways as the dominant class resorts to moral and ideological domination of the ruled. The central idea behind hegemony¹² is that the ruling class dominates not only the means of physical production but also the means of symbolic production by its control over the ideological sectors of society, culture and religion. In Gramsci’s case of class hegemony, the hegemonic class, by taking up the causes and interests of a number of allied classes, emerges as the representative of the current interests of the entire society. In doing so the dominant class also contains radical opposition by placing limits on oppositional discourse and practice. It is further added by Kellner’s¹³ that hegemonic ideologies attempt to define the limits of discourse by setting the political agenda and by excluding oppositional ideas. This also brings forth the inability of women’s leadership roles in the political arena.

Hegemony also rests on the element of consent¹⁴ and compliance¹⁵ is grounded in class and caste issues, it acts as a major deterrent in women's collective resistance and contributes to a convoluted notion of women's agency. In the adivasi societies this consensual element, ranging from acquiescence, to surrender to passive resistance, to active collusion needs to be analysed through the practice and ideology of patriarchy. Exclusion from traditional political institutions, discriminatory land rights, gendered division of labour, limited access to rights and resources, controls on sexuality witch hunts together with other tradition custom perpetuating conformism. Even the post colonial capitalist system brought new structures of oppression enforcing class subjugation which adversely affected women's economic positions and restraining women's agency though a consistent effort has been made by women to negotiate with the dominant ideology. Patriarchies function simultaneously through coercion or the threat of violence which has wide social consensus. The consent rests on economic dependence, and wide social consensualities. Kumkum Sangari cautions that unless agential structures for women and understood in all their material ramifications.

Women's active participation in anti-colonial resistance and autonomy movements continued but along with it they also contested the patriarchal structure of tribal societies. The contestation of patriarchy also ensued simultaneously and was no less grievous. Archer¹⁶ records a number of cases by widows and daughters amongst Santhals, Ho and Hunda who were trying to acquire land rights beyond customary law. The discourse¹⁷ of resistance emerged due to the insecurities faced by women on land rights. Although voice of dissent went unheard for long. Their everyday forms of resistance remained informal, which required little co-ordination and avoided direct confrontation yet the powerless¹⁸ women did gain. Consciousness about their exploitation, Scott speaks about the relatively unnoticed 'everyday forms of protest', which include foot dragging, dissimulation, passive non-compliance, pilferage, feigned ignorance, slander evasion arson, subtle sabotage etc. Guha also echoes almost similar sentiments. He draws attention to the deployment of codes of dress, speech and behaviours that landed to invert the codes through which their social superiors dominated their everyday lives.¹⁹ The focus is now being shifted to study more of non-confrontational resistances and contestatory behaviour than including in extraordinary moments of collective resistance.²⁰

During the course of the uprising, women were visible on the sites of the incidents, amidst dead bodies, holding infants and screaming²¹ aloud. The violation and abuse of women also figured prominently in the Santhal revolt which broke out in the Santhal areas around 1855-1856 over kidnapping and ill-treatment of their women and exploitation of the tribe at the hands of moneylenders, zamindars and the police. Testimonies and interrogations collected in Bidwell's report recounts that one of the railway officer (*Sahib*) had carried off two Santhal women.

Furthermore, one Mr. Thomas,²² the women of whose family were eventually killed, used to go out with a torch (*Mussual*) at night and dishonour the women of the Santhals and carry off goats, fowls, and kids by force.

To locate tribal women in the two anti-colonial movements shows the social reach and explains the event and modality adopted during this period. Women participation was a mode adopted by the rebels of Hul especially in view of an armed resistance against British Empire. It was considered essential to form a strong common front by 'ritualisation'²³ of political processes. This also confirms the theory of Hul being an organised or pre-planned affair in which women too had a role to play.²⁴ Guha comments on this perfect coordination during the course of revolt,²⁵ "Out on a pillage, the men busied themselves with the rough and heavy job of wrecking enemy property while the women gathered the loot a replication, no doubt of the standard division of labour between the sexes at the harvest time." The success of this modality lies in a distinct role

given to women – familiar and easy to follow. In fact the “loot and plunder” have been an integral part and strategy of any provisions to itself, inflicting damages on enemy and also express its resentment to the oppressive system. This particular pattern of women associating with an armed band of Santhal men, became a definite sign of disturbances later on as well. The sight of such groups, with women carrying large empty basket and branches of Sal tree apprehended the British officials.

As late as 1861, such groups were cited by intelligence in certain portions of Santhal districts. Immediately, stationing of two regiments of Native Infantry was felt necessary for the security of the country against any such approaching disturbances. It is clear that British knowledge of this pattern had increased by this time. They knew that women never accompanied men to *shikar*, rather they were supposed to welcome them on their return by washing their feet.²⁶ Hence, symbolic importance of this particular type of group structure, having both armed men and women carrying baskets and branches of *Sal* tree - a signal of war, was a serious matter. The fear was so real that the officiating Commissioner of Bhagalpur was instructed to be alert militarily.²⁷

Raising this structure of armed men and women was a novel means unlike their tradition of women being left at home. The apprehension of the British officials against such militancy made them intensify the military arrangements of this area. The tribal women had to struggle against anti-colonial oppression as well as oppressive acts of the *mahajans* and *zamindars*.²⁸ However, despite these constraints there is recorded evidence which shows female participation.

Mobilization of women was a prominent feature of tribal struggle during the colonial period. In such situation women became involved in the mobilization²⁹ of the tribe on the eve of the uprising. Women who had an equal number of children were encouraged by anonymous orders to become friends and to exchange presents. They visited each other, exchanged clothes and ate a joint meal.’ They also played an active part in the ravaging campaigns. ‘The men busied themselves with the rough job of wrecking enemy properly while the women gathered the loot — a replication, no doubt, of the standard division of labour between the sexes at harvest time.’ The Santhal folk songs are full of references to Phulon and Jhano, the brave sisters of Sidu and Kanu, the leaders of the Santhal uprising. It is said that Phulon and Jhano³⁰ once entered the English camp and mowed down twenty-one soldiers with their swords.

Further, the participation pattern for which several of them were imprisoned³¹ shows that their role had varied dimensions. They acted as the providers of the society. They were accused of shopping essential items like tobacco, salt, spirits etc. from towns.³² Nonetheless, besides carrying off the looted goods women were found to be guilty of more active and serious participation viz., plundering and spying. Actually, according to Guha the entire female population of the Santhal districts in 1855 could have been accused of acting as the eyes and ears of the rebel forces in precisely the same way.³³ In some cases they were part of plundering Santhal forces as well and in the process they suffered serious injuries. The names of such two women, Radha and Heera have been mentioned in the judicial proceedings.³⁴

In another incident, one female was shot twice in the leg while she had been accompanying an armed group to village Doecha in August. In spite of having received serious injuries, she was considered too dangerous to be released even for medical help. “It will be seen that there is one who has not been brought to the trial. She is at present lying in a very precarious state in the female ward. She had accompanied a Santhal force which had gone forth to plunder the village of Doecha in this District as far back as August with sergeant Gillen and in the conflict which ensued the women received two severe bullet wounds in the left leg. She was brought into the station and has since been as an inmate of the female ward. The dangerous state in which she has been lying has

precluded the possibility of bringing her to trial or granting her release.”³⁵

In fact, the official records mention women getting various terms of rigorous imprisonment, six months to three years depending on the age. The women accompanying one Dhuna Manjhi were captured by sergeant Gillian on 15 December near Mohammad Bazar and were sentenced to six months to one year of jail.³⁶ The condition of women prisoners in the female ward awaiting trial was still worse. The officiating magistrate of Beerbhumi, K. Thompson reported to A. N. Russel, the Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal regarding the pathetic condition of them due to long confinement. Among the forty-five Santhal women confined in Birbhumi jail some were carrying infants with them.

Due to unhygienic condition in prison many children died but the women captives were not released despite frequent requests been made by the civil surgeon. Minor girls of fourteen years were punished for participating in the loot.³⁷ One instance of the entire family of one Santhal rebel with his wife and two daughters being imprisoned and punished is found in the official records. Such cases only affirms the growing role of tribal women acquiring greater ambit of control which compelled the English officials to bring their act of rebellion under crime against the state. Women and even children were not dealt with leniency as out of 251 prisoners tried by the commissioner of Bhagalpur, forty-six were children of nine to ten years of age.³⁸ Thus, despite the British proclamation of not making this war against women and children, the punishment and the quantum of it reflected the same.³⁹

The involvement of whole family reflects the social depth and genuine grievances of an entire peasants society who had worked on the principle of collectivity with a deep sense of commitment to the cause. The struggle derived strength on this account involving the entire populace. In this process the territoriality itself became a distinguished but strong feature of Hul. Nevertheless, being an essential part of insurrection women were bound to be politicized on issues like replacement of the then political set up. The tribal women's exposure to state officials brought awareness even amongst the most illiterate about the nature of the State, their constant oppression by the *mahajan* through usury as the cheap iron ornaments were symbols of female respectability,⁴⁰ which the mahajans retained to realize their dues but to shorn them of their dignity that they looked for. It was also a mode of harassment humiliation.

Moreover, these women were an equal partner in the economic activities like “cutting of timber, gathering leaves and harvesting crop” and therefore, could easily relate to and become an integral part of a movement, which was organized to safeguard interests in these areas of activities. As their idea regarding true nature of the state, further consolidated in coming years, only making their resolve more firm for their participatory role, mobilizing themselves more for the issues identified by them. The common factor remained the anti-colonial element on local issues where tribal women had a role to play. This led to their politicization more on regional basis – a trend that strengthened through the twentieth century electoral process.⁴¹

Militarily, the Santhal women used traditional weapons or conversion of agricultural tools as weapons like axes, *tangi*, *dauli*, *lathi* etc. with quite ease for their safety and working. It was an integral part of their everyday life and culture, being their only weapon against the British Empire. In fact, they fought with their children tied to their back when attacked.⁴² The proclamation of Deputy-Commissioner of Santhal Pargana in 1856, disarming the Santhal by making it necessary to first procure a license, affected them gravely and brought them more under state control.

However, tribal women participation during the *Hul* could not be prevented as their presence in areas lying outside Santhal Pargana became a disturbing factor for the British Empire during 1857. Hazaribagh Old Records mentioned that a number of Santhal

women were imprisoned in Hazaribagh for offences like association with the rebellion.⁴³ Despite the fact that Hazaribagh was one important and active centre of the Mutiny and Santhal reaction in 1857, women do not figure much in official correspondence in comparison to *Hul* official records. Since economic distress increased in post *Hul* period the concern for the peasant society of Santhal Pargana was only a good crop.⁴⁴ According to W. C. Taylor, the Deputy Commissioner of Santhal Pargana on 4th April, 1856, “the biggest problem now was to save santhals from starvation.” They were not able to procure loans from the *mahajans*. However, the state was to collect the rent in four instalments.⁴⁵ There was total disorientation of economy. The new administrative system was yet to become deep-rooted to be able to redress the people’s problem. People had to migrate to other places in large numbers as wage labourer. Public Works Department, Railway projects, mining and particularly plantations in Bengal and Assam employed such labour in large numbers. Tribal women too were part of such groups. Consequently the population of some villages remained scanty for almost four to five years which had its impact on the cultural and geographical integration.⁴⁶ The moot point was whether the tribals were prepared to face such ordeals again.

The extension of two hundred miles of railway line skirting the Santhal area created a demand for industrious and cheap labour, which included women and children. Apart from creating a social problem between free labour earning good money and the exploited local labour tied to their land, there are reports regarding the abduction and physical exploitation of women during this period by the railway staff in the contemporary sources. Such cases of sexual harassment alleging railway employees was specific of Santhal Pargana only. Along with it, ‘embarrassing⁴⁷ pledges’ for debt also formed another mode of oppression causing hurt to their self respect. The British theory of civil population taking advantage of the present crisis of ‘political vacuum’,⁴⁸ requires more explaining when it is being discussed in the context of the Santhal participation in Hazaribagh during the revolt. They had tried to resolve the issue and this crisis gave the Santhals an opportunity to continue the *Hul*.⁴⁹ Thus the movement acquired a larger spectrum but with greater risk because the perception of the British government was that *Hul* was not an isolated movement. On the other hand, the tribal opposition turned more focussed and organised with each passing revolts. Unfortunately, their revolts were suppressed after the British victory at Chatra.⁵⁰

However, based on available facts it can be concluded that the communality of the *Hul* of Santhal Pargana remained missing during 1857, especially from the gender point of view. The dominant line of opposition was of sepoy’s in Hazaribagh. The reaction of Santhals was a mere continuation of older demands. The linkage between the two could not become strong enough to incorporate the entire community within the folds of the mass uprising in 1857. There remained non-identification of the dominant issue on the part of women. On the other hand, the presence of women had strengthened the *Hul* and the female resistance⁵¹ had made it more visible and alarming. They could identify with the subject. The trend continued through the nineteenth and twentieth century.

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