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Voices from the Margins: A Subaltern History of Everyday Resistance in Colonial India (1857–1947)

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Abstract

This research paper explores the dynamics of subaltern resistance in colonial India from 1857 to 1947, emphasizing how peasants, tribal populations, workers, and marginalized castes shaped the sociopolitical landscape despite limited representation in mainstream historiography. While elite nationalist narratives have long dominated Indian historical writing, recent scholarship—shaped by the Subaltern Studies collective—places the marginalized at the center of historical inquiry. This study analyzes subaltern agency by examining local revolts, agrarian uprisings, forest-based insurgencies, mill strikes, vernacular political consciousness, and everyday acts of defiance. Using archival records, district reports, vernacular newspapers, and major scholarly works, the paper reconstructs how these lesser-known voices challenged colonial authority. The research argues that subaltern resistance was not sporadic but continuous, varied, and deeply embedded in social structures. It identifies patterns of protest across regions and communities and shows how these movements contributed meaningfully to the broader freedom struggle. The study concludes that a subaltern-centered perspective is essential to re-interpreting colonial Indian history, capturing the multilayered nature of power, injustice, and resistance.

Introduction

Mainstream historical narratives of colonial India have been dominated by elite political leadership, constitutional debates, and the institutional progress of nationalism. However, beneath the constitutional politics, diplomatic negotiations, and charismatic leadership emerged an expansive world of marginalized protests—led by peasants, tribal communities, landless laborers, depressed castes, artisans, and women—whose contributions remain under-acknowledged. Ranajit Guha, in Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency (1983), famously argued that historians had "failed to acknowledge the autonomous domain of subaltern politics"

(Guha, 1983, pp. 1–3). His critique inspired a major scholarly shift: Subaltern Studies, which sought to restore agency to those pushed to the margins of history.

This research paper explores subaltern resistance between 1857 and 1947, situating it within broader structural transformations of colonial rule. The term subaltern refers to populations excluded from hegemonic power structures—economically exploited, politically unrepresented, and socially stigmatized. In India, these included middle and lower peasantry, tribal communities resisting forest laws, oppressed castes fighting ritual domination, women protesting patriarchal controls, and workers confronting industrial exploitation (Chakrabarty, Rethinking Working-Class History, 1989, pp. 22–26).

By examining a wide array of movements—including the Indigo Revolt (1859–60), Santhal Uprising (1855–56), Tebhaga Movement (1946–47), tribal protests across Bihar and Bengal, the Bombay textile strikes, and Dalit mobilizations—this study reconstructs a textured and multifaceted landscape of resistance. It draws upon the works of scholars such as David Hardiman (The Coming of the Devi, 1987, pp. 45–79), Shahid Amin (Event, Metaphor, Memory, 1995, pp. 11–28), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ("Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", 1985, pp. 325–330), and Crispin Bates (Subalterns and Raj, 2012, pp. 92–117).This re-centering of marginalized actors opens new pathways to understanding how national consciousness formed not only in urban centers but also in villages, forests, mines, and factories.

Observations

1. The Santhal and Kol Uprisings: Tribal Resistance to Colonial Extraction

Tribal communities, particularly in present-day Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal, and Odisha, were among the earliest subaltern groups to challenge the colonial order. The Santhal Rebellion (1855–56) stands out as a landmark movement, driven by exploitation by moneylenders, revenue officials, and zamindars. As Ranajit Guha notes, the rebellion represented "an organized challenge to the colonial state" built on indigenous systems of leadership (Guha, A

Rule of Property for Bengal, 1963, pp. 171–174). The Santhals combined traditional authority with modern grievances, demonstrating agency independent of elite influences.

Similarly, the Kol Uprising (1831–32) in Chotanagpur represented a reaction against forced labor, land alienation, and missionary intrusion. In Tensions in Tribal Society, Suresh Singh (1966) shows how clan solidarity, sacred rituals, and ancestral land memory shaped the uprising (Singh, 1966, pp. 55–63). These tribal revolts were not isolated reactions but part of a broader pattern of indigenous resistance shaped by colonial disruptions of traditional socio-economic orders.

2. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance: A Hidden Transcript

Unlike spectacular rebellions, everyday acts of defiance rarely entered official archives. Yet they were central to subaltern life. James Scott's theory of "hidden transcripts" (Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 1985, pp. 27–42) helps interpret how peasants navigated domination through foot-dragging, refusal to pay rent, sabotage of crops, and avoidance of colonial officials.

In colonial Bihar and Bengal, peasants frequently used ritualized protest, public shaming, and pilgrimage mobilization to resist landlord extraction. Shahid Amin's study of Chauri Chaura shows how rumors, folk songs, and marketplaces served as political arenas (Amin, 1995, pp. 45–53). These implicit forms of protest reveal that resistance was embedded in rural life—beyond the reach of elite nationalist discourses.

3. Agrarian Movements: From Indigo to Tebhaga

The Indigo Revolt (1859–60) was perhaps the first major peasant movement to challenge European planters. The Blue Mutiny, as characterized by historian Bipan Chandra (India's Struggle for Independence, 1988, pp. 82–87), demonstrated remarkable organizational capacity—public meetings, petitions, refusal to grow indigo, and village solidarity.

By the 20th century, agrarian protests grew sharper:

- Champaran Satyagraha (1917), though led by Gandhi, rested on peasant suffering under the tinkathia system. Local leaders such as Raj Kumar Shukla played fundamental roles (Brown, Gandhi's Rise to Power, 1972, pp. 104–113).
- Tebhaga Movement (1946–47) in Bengal saw sharecroppers demand a two-thirds share of produce. As Sunil Sen documents in The Working People and the National Movement (1979), the movement blended class struggle with political mobilization (Sen, 1979, pp. 215–229).

These movements demonstrate a subaltern capacity to articulate structured economic demands and reshape agrarian relations.

4. Factory Workers and the Emergence of Industrial Resistance

Industrialization under colonial rule produced massive inequalities. In Bombay, Calcutta, Kanpur, and Jamshedpur, mill workers confronted hazardous working conditions, long hours, and low wages. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that working-class politics developed through neighborhood ties, kinship bonds, and regional identities (Chakrabarty, 1989, pp. 85–102).

Key worker uprisings included:

- Bombay Textile Strike (1928)
- Jamshedpur Labour Protests (1920s–1930s)
- Calcutta Jute Mill Strikes (1937)

Workers used tools such as mass meetings, pamphlets, and factory gate speeches. Although sometimes aligned with elite leadership, their mobilization emerged from lived experience, not ideological doctrine.

5. Lower-Caste and Dalit Movements: Challenging Social Exclusion

Caste oppression shaped everyday experiences of millions. Leaders like Jyotiba Phule, Periyar, and later B.R. Ambedkar challenged ritual hierarchies and demanded rights for the oppressed. Ambedkar's writings such as Annihilation of Caste (1936, pp. 25–31) criticized Hindu orthodoxy and emphasized political representation. While elite nationalist movements often

downplayed caste issues, Dalit struggles highlighted social inequality as fundamental to freedom.

Village studies in Bihar show patterns of:

- temple-entry protests,
- demands for access to wells,
- challenges to beggar (unpaid labor), and
- resistance to caste-based humiliation.

These movements constructed a narrative of dignity long before independence.

6. Gendered Subalternity: Women's Participation and Silenced Voices

Women in subaltern groups experienced dual marginalization—economic and patriarchal. Historians like Tanika Sarkar argue that women's resistance manifested through domestic negotiations, participation in picketing, and symbolic defiance (Sarkar, Women and Social Reform, 1999, pp. 121–139).

Examples include:

- tribal women guarding sacred groves from British forestry officials,
- women in Champaran resisting landlord harassment,
- textile workers' strikes led by women in Bombay,
- self-defense mobilization during communal violence.

Their contributions, though underrepresented, were central to collective survival.Religious idioms shaped mobilization:

- Santhals invoked the forest spirits and ancestral deities during rebellion.
- Peasants in eastern India circulated folk songs mocking British rule.
- Pilgrimage routes became sites of political messaging.

David Hardiman shows how tribal prophets used sacred symbols to articulate anti-colonial visions (Hardiman, 1987, pp. 111–134). Myth and memory became political languages.

7. Nationalism and the Subaltern: Convergence and Divergence

While the nationalist movement aimed at freedom, its leadership was largely urban and elite. Subaltern groups aligned with nationalism when it addressed local grievances—e.g., salt tax protests, forest laws, forced cultivation. However, whenever national leadership compromised with landlords or industrialists, subaltern loyalty fractured.This tension demonstrates that Indian nationalism was not monolithic but layered and contested.

Conclusion

This research paper demonstrates that subaltern resistance in colonial India was not isolated, sporadic, or accidental. It was continuous, structured, and intrinsically tied to lived experience. Tribal uprisings, agrarian revolts, worker protests, Dalit mobilization, and everyday acts of defiance reveal an alternative political sphere—rich with culturally rooted symbols, community-based leadership, and localized strategies of resistance.

By examining these histories, we uncover a different India—one where marginalized people shaped political culture, asserted moral authority, and challenged the colonial state long before elite negotiations articulated the demand for independence. Subaltern contributions were foundational to the emergence of modern India, and their agency remains essential for understanding justice, equality, and democracy in contemporary society.

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