



Resistance against colonial rule: Revisiting the Kol Uprising of 1831 in Chotanagpur

Sumanta Kumar Mishra¹, Dr. Archana Kumari²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of History, Glocal University, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of History, Indraprasth College for Woman, University of Delhi, India

Abstract

The Kol Uprising of 1831 in Chotanagpur represents one of the earliest and most significant episodes of tribal resistance against British colonial rule in eastern India. Rooted in the disruption of traditional socio-economic structures, land alienation, and the exploitation of indigenous communities by colonial administrators, zamindars, and moneylenders, the rebellion reflected deep resentment toward external domination. Led by tribal groups such as the Kols, Mundas, and Oraons, the uprising challenged both the political authority and moral legitimacy of the British Empire. Although brutally suppressed, it prompted administrative reforms and marked a turning point in colonial policy toward tribal areas. This paper revisits the uprising through a historical and sociological lens, analysing its causes, course, and consequences. By reassessing colonial and nationalist interpretations, the study situates the Kol Uprising as a crucial yet overlooked chapter in India's broader narrative of indigenous resistance and the struggle for autonomy.

Keywords: Kol uprising (1831), chotanagpur, tribal resistance, british colonial rule, indigenous communities, land alienation

Introduction

The first half of the nineteenth century became a decisive period in British expansion over the eastern part of India, and the socio-political and economic life of the tribal lands also changed significantly, especially in Chotanagpur (Mahato & Mahato, 2023)^[1]. As the colonial rule gained momentum with the fall of the native governments and the spread of the Permanent Settlement, the British also brought about new land sources of income that interrupted the existing ownership and rule patterns (Ecka, 2025)^[2]. Hapless tribes, such as the Kols, Mundas, Oraons, and Hos, who had so long been independent under local law, were suddenly shut out by external administrative systems, and by the encroachment of non-tribal landlords, moneylenders, merchants and so forth (Kumar, 2015)^[3]. The introduction of colonialism, in addition to weakening tribal power, also estranged the people from their own places, and this triggered a sense of agitation and rebellion (Jha, 1961)^[4]. In this broader framework of defiance, the Kol Uprising of 1831 can be analysed as a very effective outcry of defiance of the native people against economic exploitation and political oppression (Kumar, 2025)^[5, 16]. Similar to the Bhil revolts in western India and subsequent Santhal and Munda revolts over time, the Kol movement was the representation of the much-battered tribal societies being pushed to the wall by the pay-no-attention attitude of the colonial state to their social organisations and cultural identity (Mahato & Mahato, 2023)^[1]. Nevertheless, the Kol Uprising has received a comparatively small amount of scholarly attention compared to other tribal movements in the history of Indian colonial history, even though it is of such a large scale and has such far-reaching consequences (Ecka, 2025)^[2]. It has not been readily accepted as an organised expression of autonomy by the colonial historians as a spontaneous outburst of violence, but has only more recently become integrated into the then wider discourse of anti-colonial resistance as the post-colonial narrative (Kumar, 2015)^[3]. To follow up on the causes, course, and

consequences of the little-known but important event, the Kol Uprising of 1831, this research aims to understand the complicated relations between the native society and the advancing colonial boundary in early nineteenth-century eastern India (Jha, 1961)^[4].

This historical study paper questions the Kol Uprising of 1831 in Chotanagpur as a major but much-overlooked instance of tribal resistance to British colonial control in eastern India. The research problem is to examine the historical, socio-economic, and political factors that triggered the revolt, the processes involved in tribal mobilisation, and how the colonialists responded to the protest. The paper explains the continuity of indigenous struggles against exploitation and outer domination by placing the uprising within the wider range of indigenous resistance movements, especially the anti-exploitation movements of the Bhils, Santhals and the Mundas. Based on colonial archives, administrative documents and sociological perspectives of contemporary historiography, the analysis takes a historical-analytical and sociological approach in order to think of the uprising not just as reactive but as a statement of tribal identity and independence. By reconsidering the Kol rebellion through the prism of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, the paper will assist in a better understanding of how the indigenous people of Chotanagpur negotiated, resisted and redefined colonial power structures. Finally, it argues that the Kol Uprising of 1831 is an early manifestation of collective action that led to the later tribal movements and should be considered an important step in the overall anti-colonial history of India.

Research Questions

1. What were the socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions in early nineteenth-century Chotanagpur that contributed to the outbreak of the Kol Uprising of 1831?

2. How did the introduction of British land revenue policies and administrative control disrupt traditional tribal systems of governance and land ownership?
3. In what ways did the Kol tribes organise and mobilise their resistance against colonial authority and external exploitation?
4. How did the British colonial administration perceive, represent, and respond to the Kol Uprising, both militarily and administratively?
5. What does the uprising reveal about the evolution of tribal consciousness, identity, and resistance within the broader context of colonial governance in eastern India?

Chotanagpur Under Colonial Encroachment

The Chotanagpur plateau, found in modern Jharkhand, is made up of wavy hills, thick forests and fertile valleys. In the past, it was occupied by a wide range of tribal communities, the most notable being Kols, Mundas, Oraons, and Hos. These communities had strong cultural ties to the land, surviving on subsistence farming, hunting and forest product acquisition. Before the British colonial rule, the tribal society in Chotanagpur existed in a customary system of governance that paid much attention to the communal ownership of land and decision making by the collective based on village heads, *mankis* and *mundas*. This kind of organisation was nurturing social unity and environmental balance, and in the process preserving independence against exogenous influence (Sharma, 1994) ^[15]. Nevertheless, the British expansion, which occurred at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, rather interfered with this balance. The intrusion of the East India Company into the territory of Chotanagpur led to the introduction of a new administrative system and a new system of revenue collection that weakened the power of the local authorities. The plateau was viewed as a potential source of money and commodities by the colonial ruling, and so the land settlements triggered the plateau to change its ownership patterns and replace the old chiefs with other intermediaries serving colonial interests. Permanent Settlement and subsequent revenue reforms gave an opportunity to moneylenders, traders, and non-tribal landlords (dubbed *dikus*), and thus the tribal lands were vulnerable to dispossession and stagnation. Agricultural monetisation and taxation forced many tribals into debt bondage and internal migration, which were slowly destabilising their traditionally open economic foundation (Prasad & Mitra, 2023) ^[13]. Moreover, the British system of laws did not pay attention to the customary laws, thus interfering with the accepted standards of justice and inheritance of land. All these measures unleashed social unrest in tribal life, which created ill feelings and anger that were quickly translated into bloody opposition. The historical background of Chotanagpur, therefore, explains why the collision of the colonial force, economic exploitation and the cultural disturbance was such that the Kol Uprising of 1831 was one of the earliest resistances put forward by the tribes towards the imperial rule in eastern India.

Causes of the Kol Uprising

The Kol Uprising in 1831-1832 was not a spontaneous or isolated event; it was the culmination of long-term economic, political, social and cultural destabilisations

created by the British colonialism and venture into the tribal lifestyle. The revolt was a mass and legally organised opposition of the Kols, the Mundas, the Oraons, the Hos and other groups of tribes inhabiting the rugged plateau of what is modern-day Jharkhand. For centuries, these societies lived in a relatively free and egalitarian regime with customary laws, communal land structure and traditional village meetings (*parhas*). This balance, however, was basically disrupted with the introduction of British rule in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Economically: Colonial land revenue schemes, including the Permanent Settlement of 1793, followed by experiments with revenue schemes, had upset the conventional *khuntkatti* (joint family) system of landholding. In line with the pursuit of fixed and augmented income, the British substituted the tribal chiefs with zamindars and non-tribal landlords, thus enabling the massive acquisition of tribal lands (Vadakumchery, 1997) ^[12]. It was a process which heralded what was known by the tribes as *diku-raj* (the rule of outsiders). Moneylenders, traders and speculators, collectively known as *dikus*, singled out the local economy, putting tribals in debt and bonded servitude loops. Their conditions were further enhanced by the exploitative system of *ijaradari* (leaseholder) that caused middlemen to charge inexplicable rents and levies. When the tribal lands were converted to non-tribal lands, the economic dislocation heightened and generated poverty, displacement and hunger among the natives. British intervention weakened tribal self-government politically. Colonial powers forced a system of bureaucracy that was a foreign element to local cultures, replacing hereditary *mankis* and *mundas* (Tribal headmen) with officials who neither knew nor respected tribal practices. The *parhas*, who had been the mainstay of tribal political and judicial existence, were put to nought. In place of these systems, there were established formal courts, police stations, and revenue offices, which were remote and corrupt and thus denied the tribal people justice. Such subjugation of political independence not only seems to be an interruption in the administration but also an existential indignity to the identity and sovereignty (Prasad & Mitra, 2023) ^[13]. The changes in the socially and culturally demographic in the Chotanagpur region witnessed in the early nineteenth century were tremendous. To promote agriculture and to broaden trade, the British encouraged non-tribal migration and especially the migration of Bengal, Bihar, and the plains. These foreigners came with unfamiliar social and religious traditions, customs and exploitative dispositions that shattered the social system of the tribe, the rectifying and cohesive tribal social order. Hindu caste hierarchies started to subdue the tribal society, and the influence of missionaries started to creep into the social structure. Besides dominating the land and labour, the *dikus* tried to influence the culture and thus took over the traditional festivals, beliefs and moral principles of the tribes. The disappearance of lands meant the destruction of the sacred groves and places of worship for ancestors, which dealt a blow to the spiritual essence of the tribal identity. The Kol Uprising was precipitated by the addition of exploitation and humiliation meted out on the locals by local landlords, revenue farmers and British agents. Disappointed with the unrestrained ability to address the grievances of the tribals by the colonial medium, a violent outburst broke out in late 1831. It started its rebellion at Ranchi and quickly filtered through to Singhbhum, Hazaribagh and Palamau.

Budhu Bhagat, a leader of the Munda in the Silagai village near Ranchi, became one of the leading personalities of the rebellion. During his leadership, the rebels would attack dikus, moneylenders, and British institutions with fire and destruction of documents and retrieve ancestral territories. Their struggle was typified by the guerrilla warfare, the famine of the police stations, treasury offices, as well as zamindar estates, and both observation and deep emotional bitterness (Gupta, 1966) ^[11]. The resultant outcome was a terrible retaliation by the British. Martial law was proclaimed, and the insurrection was beaten out by 1832 with great loss of tribe and much of the villages destroyed. Nevertheless, the Kol Uprising left an indelible effect on the history of the native resistance in India due to this repression. Not only did it show the innermost division caused by colonial rule, but it also formed the basis of further tribal uprisings, including the Santhal Rebellion (1855-56) and the Birsa Munda Movement (1890s). Accordingly, the plight of the Kols is a great witness to the eternal phenomenon of tribal independence and resistance to exploitation, which is considered to be one of the first collective manifestations of anti-colonial resistance in eastern India.

Course of the Uprising (1831–1832)

In 1831–1832, the Kol Uprising broke out as a large tribal uprising, which saw large areas of Chotanagpur in the states of Ranchi, Singhbhum, Palamau and Hazaribagh. The incident was an important step in the history of the struggle against colonial subjugation in eastern India. In the southern parts of Ranchi, the Kols were the breed of the rebellion, being incessantly exploited because of the deep-rooted land alienation and swindlers of money, and as such, they rose against the exploiters and colonialists. The preconditions to this first spark were the historical problems of dispossession and economic exploitation. The movement then extended to the nearby districts, attracting other ethnic groups like Mundas, Oraons and Hos. Such a mass turnout resulted in a deep sense of rebellion that highlighted the extent of the dissatisfaction of native people. Decentralised leadership and strong community organisation were used to define the uprising. Instead of a centralised chain of command, local people organised overall resistance, using informal connections, which allowed communication and mobilisation to be made possible even in sparse settlements (Lakra, 2022) ^[10]. Local resistance through the networks of kinship and traditional village councils was planned by tribal leaders, with Budhu Bhagat and his associates being the most popular. These practices helped provide long-term coordination and exchange of resources, and this strengthened the collective action of the insurgents. The rebels attacked the representations of the colonial regime, like the British police stations, revenue collection, and plantations of predatory landlords. They took a guerrilla approach, mostly by taking advantage of the hyper-familiarity with the deep woods and the mountainous terrain. First, the British themselves had not predicted such magnitude and force of the revolt. It spread, however, as far as the resistance and the colonial authorities evidently engaged in a brutal counter-action campaign with the military force strategically positioned to suppress the rebellion. Rebellious villages were burned by the burning, and many chiefs of tribes were either taken or murdered, such as Budhu Bhagat. These disciplinary actions would

reduce the leadership system as well as the material support system of the rebels. The suppression caused a trail of devastation in Chotanagpur with massive loss of life and displacement. The severity of this reaction was an indication of how the colonial rulers believed in keeping the rule, come what may. Although the uprising was suppressed by military means, it was able to reveal the vast reservoirs of bitterness in tribal society (Kumar & Chandran, 2025) ^[5, 16]. It also forced the British to re-evaluate their administrative strategy, and this might affect future policies concerning indigenous communities. The fact that the rebels maintained communication and coordination via the traditional networks showed that the tribal people were strong and together; hence, collective identity was still strong despite external forces. Finally, the Kol Uprising, albeit crushed, was a landmark in the history of tribal revolt and the establishment of independence against colonialism, which consequently added to the body of historical work on indigenous revolt in colonial India.

Colonial Response and Administrative Measures

The British colonial reaction to the Kol Uprising of 1831-1832 was decided by the mixture of repression, misinterpretation, and gradual reform. To begin with, the colonial government represented rebellion not as a political or social protest but as an eruption of lawlessness and brutal mayhem. This framing enabled the British to wash away the true origins of the uprising, namely land alienation, economic exploitation and cultural suppression, and to rationalise their cruel punitive action as a need to restore peace and order. In the affected areas, martial law was proclaimed, and large-scale military operations were conducted to suppress the uprising. Suspected insurgents were shot without trial, villages were attacked and burned down, and tribal elites, such as Budhu Bhagat, were seized or murdered. The repression was brutal, and there was mass displacement and tribal villages were burned. However, the enormity of the rebellion made the colonialists start questioning their administrative policies. The British became aware of the ineffectiveness of direct interference and predatory land policies in implementing land reforms extensively (Ramesh, 2013) ^[8]. In 1834, they created the South-West Frontier Agency, a special administrative division that was to rule the tribal regions independently of the plains. This agency was authorised some independence with a political representative controlling them, as they recognised the unique social and cultural nature of the tribal people. The mode of land settlement has been modified to avoid the complete outsourcing of tribal lands to foreigners. The British had also become more cautious of their reign in Chotanagpur (Misra, 1986) ^[7]. The British realised that being overly assertive would spur even more insurrections. Therefore, although the Kol Uprising was suppressed violently, the latter compelled the colonial state to realise the particularity of tribal identity and sensitivities of tribal societies, which became a decisive turning point in the history of the British tribal policy in eastern India.

Socio-Political Implications

The socio-political consequences of the Kol Uprising of 1831-1832 of the tribal communities of Chotanagpur and the course of the anti-colonial movement in India were far-reaching and long-term. Immediately after the uprising, there was a massive demographic and social displacement

as the whole village was brought down and the population scattered as retaliation measures by the British. The massive expropriation of land after the rebellion also eased the marginalisation of tribes even more, leaving a significant number of them tenants and labourers on their ancestral land. The interference with the past systems of authorities and the incentive of the colonial system of authority to establish administration disbanded community formation, and cultural traditions connected to the land and communal worship were being washed away by foreign control (Jha, 1961) [4]. However, in the midst of this destruction, there emerged the germs of tribal consciousness and group political consciousness in the insurgency. The experience of protest and struggle brought some forms of unity among the various tribal units like the Kols, the Mundas and the Oraons and this, later, allowed the formation of mobilisations. The Kol rebellion is a precursor to other tribal movements that followed in the antibiological account, including the Santhal Rebellion (1855-56) and the Birsa Munda Movement (1890s), which further demanded land, self-rule, and respect. Late revolts would find an ideological and symbolic inspiration in the memory of the Kol defiance, as one of the assertions of indigenous rights against exploitation and alien domination (Sharma, 1994) [15]. The heritage of the uprising is still maintained in terms of oral traditions, folk songs, and regional folklore, where tribal heroes such as Budhu Bhagat are commemorated as examples of bravery and sacrifice. The Kol Uprising has thus also been symbolically converted into not just a historical expression of protest, but also as an eloquent genealogy of identity-preservation and socio-political awakening, whose memory continues to be part and parcel of the collective consciousness of Chotanagpur as an inescapable reminder of the timeless tribal spirit of protest against injustice and colonial oppression.

Reinterpretation and Historiographical Debates

Historiography of the Kol Uprising of 1831-1832 is the shift towards a gradual transformation of the colonial distortion to the nationalist reinterpretation and, more lately, the subaltern and tribal-centred scholarship. According to the historical accounts of colonial historians of the nineteenth century who wrote from the view of British rulers, the uprising could not be taken seriously as tribal unrest or a breakout of barbaric violence, which lacked any political and ideological explanation. They described the Kols and other tribal groups as barbaric and irrational, unable to think of politics in an organised manner and, therefore, justifying the colonial discourse of moral superiority and the need to have British rule. The event was reconsidered by nationalist historians at the beginning of the twentieth century in response to this bias as one of the first forms of anti-colonial resistance (Gupta, 1966) [11]. They put an economic and political focus on the uprising, placing it in the greater framework of the freedom struggle in India and pointing to such leaders as Budhu Bhagat as predecessors to more modern revolutionaries. But these narratives tended to over-romanticise the tribal involvement without looking deeply into the inner workings of the tribal society. Conversely, the modern academic field to which subaltern and post-colonial studies have led is somewhat more interested in understanding the agency of indigenous peoples themselves. According to recent studies, the Kol Uprising is not merely a revolt against exploitation by the British, but it was an

initiative to protest ownership of tribal lands, identity and even social stability (Kumar & Chandran, 2025) [5, 16]. Through the examination of oral traditions, folklore and indigenous memory, contemporary historians endeavour to silence the voices that were omitted in historical accounts. Nevertheless, the gaps are still substantial- especially in the sociological analysis, the local oral documentation and the interdisciplinary domain of studying anthropology and history. To a large part, the available literature is still probably based on colonial documents, which are biased in nature. Thus, to have a more detailed reinterpretation, one will have to incorporate the tribal views and individual accounts regarding the eventual parts of the Kol Uprising as a deliberate and intricate claim of indigenous people against colonisation.

Conclusion

Kol Uprising of 1831-1832 is a major but poorly remembered episode in the life of the Indian colonies that represented a poly-dimensional resistance that was economic, political and cultural simultaneously. It grew out of long-rooted resentments in the tug of war with the tribal life under the expansion of the British, the imposition of land revenue systems that were exploitative, and the encroachment of moneylenders and zamindars on the traditional territory. This movement was hence not only a spontaneous incident of anger but also a planned demonstration of collective independence and socio-cultural self-determination of the indigenous peoples of Chotanagpur. It was politically protesting colonial rule; economically, it was protesting exploitative systems; culturally, it attempted to defend ancient ways and the solidarity of communities. The applicability of Kol Uprising is far more than its historical time. In the modern context, it provides valuable insights into the native rights, autonomy over the resources, and oppression of the system. The modern conflicts of tribal people in India, be it the land-grabbing, the right to forests, the conservation of a culture, all recall the very air of self-determination that was waving the flags of Kols almost 200 years ago. The acknowledgement of the uprising as a pioneer demonstration of indigenous resistance to colonial modernity makes it possible to understand how resistance movements develop in marginalised societies more plentifully. The current work is also relevant to the existing literature as it places the Kol Uprising in context with other early tribal uprisings in India and fills the gap between national and regional histories of anti-colonial resistance. However, there is much yet to be done on the topic of research, especially by conducting a comparative analysis with other tribal revolts like the Santhal Rebellion or the Birsa Munda movement. Furthermore, ethnographic studies on oral culture and memory of the people in Chotanagpur can help in further understanding how such historical experiences still influence the tribal conscience today. The Kol Uprising, therefore, lives on as a historical occurrence and an active symbol of Aboriginal strength.

References

1. Mahato NK, Mahato S. Major J. Sutherland's report on Kol Rebellion of 1831-32 in Chotanagpur. *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies*, 2023;13(1):74-77. https://joais.in/Journal/4.%20Dr.%20Nirmal%20Kumar%20Mahato_Nov_2023.pdf

2. Eeka SR. Kol Rebellion. A threat to the commercial venture of the British. ivySCI. https://www.ivysci.com/en/articles/10401763_Kol_Rebellion_183132_A_Threat_to_the_Commercial_Venture_of_the_British, 2025, 1831–32.
3. Kumar U. A study of tribal movement against colonial rule in Jharkhand – historical perspective. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science and Technology*, 2015. https://doi.org/10.32628/IJSRS_T161216
4. Jha JC. Tribal unrest on the South-West frontier of the Bengal Presidency, 1961, 1831-1833. SOAS Repository. <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00034113>
5. Kumar P. The Kol insurrection: Uprisings against British land policies. Philosophy Institute, 2025. <https://philosophy.institute/tribal-philosophy/kol-insurrection-british-land-uprisings>
6. Jha JC. The tribal revolt of Chotanagpur, Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1987, 1831–1832.
7. Misra KK. From millenarianism to Jharkhand: The changing nature of social movements in tribal Chotanagpur. *African and Asian Studies*, 1986;21(3):226–236. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852186x00297>
8. Ramesh Y. The dawn of revolutionary extremism in India – A study of response to British rule. *International Journal of Enhanced Research in Educational Development IJERED*, 2013, 1(2). https://www.erpublications.com/uploaded_files/download/dryramesh_EcUmS.pdf
9. Bodhi SR, Ekka KT. Of savagery, disruption, historical injustice and political distortion: Reflections on Chottanagpur, Adivasi, state and empowerment. *TICI Journals*, 2023. https://www.ticijournals.org/of_savagery-disruption-historical-injustice-and-political-distortion-reflections-on-chottanagpur-adivasi-state-and-empowerment
10. Lakra JP. Politics of knowledge production: Revisiting ethnography in the Kurukh context. *TICI Journals*, 2022. <https://www.ticijournals.org/politics-of-knowledge-production-revisiting-ethnography-in-the-kurukh-context>
11. Gupta BK. The Kol insurrection of Chota-Nagpur Review of the book *The Kol insurrection of Chota-Nagpur*, by JC Jha. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 1966;25(2):358. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2051363>
12. Vadakumchery J. Jharkhand A movement from ethnicity to empowerment of autonomy. *Journal of Dharma*, 1997. <https://dvkjournals.in/index.php/jd/article/view/1035>
13. Prasad S, Mitra A. Intersection of claim for Scheduled Tribe status and identity politics among the Kurmi Mahto of Chotanagpur region in India. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328x231207500>
14. Chakraborty M, Kesharwani PK. Evolution of tribal movements and the emergence of statehood in Jharkhand. *ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 2024, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.29121/sodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.5434>
15. Sharma A. Colonial dimensions of regionalism in Jharkhand. *Social Chang*, 1994;24(12):6374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085719940104>
16. Kumar A, Chandran, RCA. Impact of the British colonial era on the Jharkhand mining sector. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research JETIR*, 2025, 12(3). <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR2503355.pdf>