Instrumentalising Fifth Schedule for Adivasi Development: The Case of Chhotanagpur and Santhal Parganas

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Introduction: Unravelling a Dream Woven with Frayed Threads

The vision of *Viksit Bharat @2047* presents an ambitious blueprint for India's economic growth and modernisation. Yet, its implications for historically marginalised communities, particularly Adivasis in Fifth Schedule Areas, remain contentious. As a developing society, India faces numerous challenges in realising this vision, many of which stem from its colonial past. A critical concern is ensuring that Dalits and Adivasis, constitutionally recognised as "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes" and together comprising nearly one-fourth of the population, are meaningfully included in the nation's envisioned path of development. This question remains pertinent even after nearly eight decades of independence, as both communities continue to exist on the margins of progress. Their long histories of suppression and marginalisation persist, despite constitutional safeguards and the nation's stated commitment to a socialist and inclusive society. The Fifth Schedule was conceived as a constitutional safeguard to protect Adivasi autonomy, land rights, and self-governance through mechanisms such as the Tribes Advisory Council (TAC) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA). Introduced in 1996, the PESA Act sought to operationalise the Fifth Schedule by decentralising governance and empowering Adivasi Gram Sabhas. It granted Adivasi communities control over land, water, and forests, making local consent mandatory for mining and industrial projects.

However, governance in these areas has been marked by administrative neglect, the dilution of legal protections, and policies that prioritise corporate and state-led developmental agendas. A fundamental contradiction arises between the constitutional intent of the Fifth Schedule and the resource-driven economic model of "Viksit Bharat @2047," which continues to favour extractive industries in mineral-rich Scheduled Areas. Despite legal safeguards such as the Samata Judgment (1997) and the Forest Rights Act (2006), successive governments have prioritised economic interests over Adivasi land rights, raising concerns that these communities will face further disenfranchisement. The increasing dilution of the TAC and the erosion of PESA reflect broader attempts to undermine Adivasi self-governance. While "Viksit Bharat @2047" promotes decentralised governance and digital empowerment, these measures often do not translate into substantive decision-making power for Adivasis. Bureaucratic interventions and political control have continuously sidelined grassroots governance mechanisms, weakening the protective framework of the Fifth Schedule. Recent political narratives, such as "PESA Day" and "Our Tradition, Our Heritage," alongside legislative manoeuvres like the Jharkhand Panchayati Raj Act, 2001, indicate an effort to dilute Adivasi self-rule.

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Recognising these manoeuvres is essential to the constitutional ethos of the Fifth Schedule and PESA from being relegated to historical artefacts rather than functioning instruments of Indigenous empowerment. Over time, Adivasi movements have embodied the enduring assertion: *jal, jangal, jamin hamara hai* ("water, forest, and land are rightfully ours"). These struggles encapsulate the persistent quest for Indigenous identity, manifesting in varied socio-political mobilisations. Historically, Adivasi movements have oscillated between demands for distinct political, social, and religious recognition and resistance against the dispossession of ancestral lands and resources (Pati 2011: 237-268). Despite significant ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, Adivasi communities share fundamental socio-cultural traits, including closely knit community structures and governance norms distinct from mainstream society. Their geographical isolation, buffered by forests and mountains, sustained their collective identity (Grignard 1909:7). Strategically positioned at the crossroads of eastern, western, northern, and southern India, Chhotanagpur and the Central Provinces have long been politically contentious for both the British colonial state and the Indian nation-state. Rich in natural resources, particularly minerals, the region became central to the capitalist economy and a key site of economic and political contestation (Bara 2018: 22).

Recognising its significance, British military campaigners and geological surveyors in the early 19th century pushed for its control and development, initiating phased infrastructure expansion to integrate it into the colonial economy. Post-independence, these politico-economic imperatives persisted, shaping India's industrialisation agenda. As the nationalist movement engaged with Adivasi communities, the region became a focal point for early tribal welfare initiatives. In 1918, Thakkar Bapa undertook famine-relief efforts among the Bhils in Panchmahal, and by 1927, Verrier Elwin established an ashram among the Gonds, influenced by nationalist thought. These pre-independence interventions laid the groundwork for constitutional provisions resembling the Fifth Schedule, embedding state oversight and protective mechanisms for Adivasis within the Indian Constitution. Correspondingly, to make Viksit Bharat @2047 genuinely inclusive, policy frameworks must prioritise Adivasi autonomy, land rights, and self-governance rather than reducing these communities to the periphery of an exploitative development model.

The present essay delves into a comparative analysis of colonial and post-independence policies, revealing both ruptures and continuities in governance approaches toward Adivasi regions. The British-era "Non-Regulation" policy and post-independence constitutional protections both sought to accommodate Adivasi autonomy within state structures. Understanding the contemporary governance crisis necessitates an inquiry into the historical trajectory of Adivasi resistance and state policies. The period from 1830 to 1949 marked significant transformations in the state's approach toward Adivasi autonomy. Organised adivasi resistance against British expansion gained momentum with the "Kol" Rebellion (1831-32) in Chhotanagpur, prompting the colonial administration to introduce the "Non-Regulation" policy, which exempted Adivasi regions from standard colonial laws (Jha 1987). By 1949, the Constituent Assembly codified special protections for Adivasis, marking a shift in governance (Parmar 2015: 1-4). However, a comparative analysis of colonial and post-independence policies reveals enduring continuities in state strategies of control and resource extraction.

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Scope, Relevance, and Emergent Questions

This study challenges conventional policy analyses that frame state actions as hegemonic forces rendering marginalised communities voiceless, submissive, or passive recipients of governance. Traditional scholarship, particularly in historical writings on colonialism, often prioritises the perspectives of state actors and elite classes while depicting lower-class subjects as mere victims of oppressive policies. Such narratives obscure the agency of subaltern groups, reducing them to pitiable figures surrendering to colonial or post-colonial state power. Focusing on Chhotanagpur and the Santhal Parganas, this study reinterprets tribal resistance as an enduring dialogue with the colonial state rather than mere episodic revolts. Adivasi communities actively interrogated and contested colonial policies through sustained resistance movements, embodying what Eugene Irschick conceptualises as "cultural *dialogue"* within the colonial context (Irschick 1994: 53). While acknowledging the overwhelming power of the colonial state, this analysis foregrounds the often-overlooked resilience and articulation of tribal voices. Despite the dominance of state-centric narratives in scholarship, there remains a critical gap in recognising the proactive engagement of Adivasis in shaping their own historical trajectories. Few scholars have ventured into this terrain, with recent works by Felix Padel (Padel & Das 2010) offering a rare departure from conventional historiography. This study builds on such perspectives, emphasising the need for a more nuanced understanding of subaltern agency in colonial and post-colonial governance.

This study traces the origins and instrumentalisation of the Fifth Schedule, mapping the trajectory of "scheduling" Adivasi communities from the onset of British colonial rule, with a particular focus on Eastern India (Bara 2018: 22). "Scheduling" in this context denotes the state's special dispensation for Adivasis, as institutionalised in the constitutional categories of "Scheduled Areas" and "Scheduled Tribes," while emphasising on its pre-colonial and colonial legacies. More than an administrative classification, it reflects the state's enduring efforts to regulate and control Adivasi regions. The British first introduced the term in the Scheduled Districts Act, 1874, marking the formalisation of colonial interventions in Adivasi governance. Focusing on the Eastern Indian Adivasi belt, spanning present-day Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, this study examines a region where nearly 80% of India's Adivasi populace resides. This area is home to major tribal communities, including the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, Kondhs, Gonds, Paharias, and Bhils, whose histories of interaction with state structures reveal the evolving nature of governance, autonomy, and resistance.

Scholars such as K.S. Singh and Sangeeta Das Gupta have extensively analysed the messianic and millenarian tendencies in Adivasi responses to crises (Singh 1984; Dasgupta 1998). Nonetheless, their scholarship largely overlooks the influence of Christian missionaries and Western education, fixating instead on the role of missionaries in the construction of the "tribe" (ibid.). The recorded expressions of Adivasis, through official petitions and various writings, offer invaluable insights into their evolving psyche, a subject many scholars have hesitated to explore (ibid.). Christianity, which gained substantial traction among certain Adivasi groups, is often interpreted as a providential intervention. As India's nationalist movement intensified in the early twentieth century, Singh attributes Adivasi mobilisation to "external stimuli" (Singh 1979: 9), neglecting their own spontaneous intellectual agency rooted in

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cultural traditions. This omission leads him to misinterpret the emergence of a 'powerful separatist movement' among educated Adivasis as a sub-nationalist reaction within constitutional confines (ibid.). The fixation on "external stimuli" further denies the existence of an autonomous Adivasi consciousness, reducing their actions to mere byproducts of colonial "divide and rule" tactics.

Mainstream scholarship often denies ideological sophistication within "pre-literate" Adivasi communities. S.P. Sinha, for instance, claims that "ideological acceptance is a very advanced situation, which could not be expected from pre-literate groups of Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas" (Sinha 1994: 33). This perspective obscures the agrarian roots of Adivasi resistance, which arose in direct response to land alienation by encroaching settlers, known as "dikus." Fürer-Haimendorf characterises Adivasi rebellions as tragic clashes between the weak and the powerful, where the "illiterate and uninformed" contend with the state's sophisticated machinery (Fürer-Haimendorf 1982: 36). He posits that Adivasi conditions 'considerably improved' after the Rampa Rebellion in East Godavari, thereby advancing a colonial-apologist reading of British rule (ibid.: 38). Yet, history refutes the portrayal of Adivasis as hapless victims; they repeatedly defied colonial authority with remarkable resilience and strategic agency. MacDougall's study of Sardari Larai underscores Adivasi agrarian consciousness, illustrating their assertive articulation of land rights (MacDougall 1985: 213-215). Conversely, J.C. Jha describes Adivasi society as being eroded from within by Hinduisation and from without by British incursions, yet he fails to engage with the firsthand testimonies of revolting Adivasis (Jha 1987: 269). Such omissions distort the Adivasi self-perception, reinforcing externally imposed narratives. Meanwhile, De Sa (1975) and B.B. Choudhury (2002: 34) argue that Adivasis strategically embraced Christianity and Hinduism as mechanisms of self-defence, incorporating new religious frameworks into their socio-cultural structures.

This underscores the imperative to reassess the evolution of Adivasi consciousness and its varied responses to exploitation, which manifested in diverse forms of protest. The dominant scholarly discourse frequently frames Adivasi transformations as imposed through external cultural forces, whether Hindu migrants, Christian missionaries, or colonial administrators. Within such a framework, Adivasis are depicted as either succumbing to cultural shocks or being passively redirected, both interpretations marginalising their self-perception. Some scholars have recognized the colonial state's strategic imposition of "colonial enclaves" on the eve of Indian independence (Pathy 1981; Singh 1984). This interpretation often misreads Adivasi appeals for British "paternalistic protection," as recorded in the Indian Statutory Commission Report as alignment with British imperialism rather than resistance to internal colonialism. Nandini Sundar offers a more nuanced perspective, advocating for an analysis that situates Adivasi-colonial interactions within the "dialectic of administrative intervention and popular resistance" (Sundar 2008: xii). This dynamic encapsulates the Adivasi struggle, not as a passive subjugation but as an enduring contestation of hegemonic power.

This study interrogates the mechanisms through which British colonial rule consolidated power in central India, particularly by fostering internal colonialism and co-opting local feudal elements to dominate Adivasi societies. It explores how British administrators, instead of directly engaging with Adivasi communities, relied on neighbouring migrants for intelligence, thereby shaping a distorted and self-serving colonial discourse on Adivasi lives. The research also examines the cultural traditions and

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indigenous resources that nurtured an interrogative Adivasi subjectivity under colonial rule. What intellectual and ideological frameworks informed Adivasi resistance, and how did these communities articulate their grievances and demands? Free Trade imperialism engineered sophisticated policies to subjugate Adivasis, using superficial ethnographic surveys and non-Adivasi "native informants" to construct knowledge systems that served colonial interests. Paradoxically, even the most conciliatory colonial policies exacerbated Adivasi resistance, amplifying their demands and sharpening their critique of British rule.

By the early twentieth century, colonialism had unwittingly catalysed powerful anti-colonial movements in Adivasi regions. This study investigates how these movements reconfigured the political landscape and how Indian nationalist forces engaged with or co-opted Adivasi struggles. It further examines how the Adivasi psyche remained in constant flux, evolving distinct modes and tones of interrogation as colonial structures changed. With the emergence of an Adivasi intelligentsia in the early twentieth century, the study explores its engagement with both the colonial state and Indian nationalism. How did these intellectuals negotiate power, assert their agency, and frame their discourses within the broader anti-colonial struggle? Finally, this research extends its historical analysis into the post-independence era, assessing the operationalisation of Fifth Schedule provisions and the evolution of policies such as the Tribal Sub-Plan, PESA, and the Indian Forest Rights Act, 2008. It critically evaluates why large sections of central India's Adivasi population remain disillusioned with state initiatives, often gravitating toward radical alternatives like Maoist militancy. Given that Adivasis constitute 8.6% of India's population, this study holds contemporary relevance in understanding the persistent contemporary socio-political challenges.

This study primarily draws on government files, reports, and official proceedings, supplemented by missionary records to analyze educational growth. Archival research in Kolkata, Ranchi, and Bhopal has yielded valuable Christian missionary tracts, offering keen observations on tribal developments. Nationalist perspectives emerge from the papers of the Bharatiya Adimjati Seva Mandal and Verrier Elwin. Additionally, private papers of key figures such as colonial official E.T. Dalton and nationalist leader Rajendra Prasad provide crucial insights into tribal affairs.

Official sources often lack substantive documentation on Adivasi perspectives regarding identity. To address this gap, the study incorporates local and private records, meticulously gathered over the years, ensuring a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of tribal consciousness and resistance.

From Rebellion to Regulation: Adivasi Defiance and Colonial Containment, 1830-1908

The history of the Eastern Indian Adivasi belt reveals the evolution of British colonial governance, beginning with the "Non-Regulation" policy and its eventual crystallization as a precursor to modern Adivasi "scheduling." Initially framed as a conciliatory measure, "Non-Regulation" was, in fact, an exclusionary strategy that exacerbated Adivasi marginalisation through dual racism and territorial dispossession. British administrators alternated between coerced assimilation and strategic exclusion, suppressing Adivasi resistance with legal and economic controls. The resulting failures of dialogue led to armed uprisings, such as the "Kol" Rebellions and the Santhal Hul, which Peter Stanley sees as

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expressions of indigenous defiance against colonial modernity (Stanley 2022: 64). The lyrical traditions of the Hul, emerging from early nineteenth-century "Kol" Rebellion literature, sustained a counter-narrative of resistance that continues to inform contemporary scholarship. The "Non-Regulation" framework, particularly in Chhotanagpur (1833) and Santhal Parganas (1856), eventually collapsed under its contradictions. In response, Adivasis adapted colonial legal structures, missionary education, and selective Hindu practices to bolster their identity and autonomy (Pati 2011: 237; Bara 2005: 617-637). These forms of resistance disrupted colonial authority and reaffirmed indigenous agency.

Despite the colonial state's paternalistic rhetoric, aimed at assimilating Adivasis through education and legal reforms, the agenda remained fundamentally extractive. Missionary efforts, though intellectually stimulating, did not prevent dispossession. From Wilkinson onward, administrators constructed a sub-Orientalist discourse that both reified Adivasi identity and facilitated their subjugation (Haldar 1880). Prior to the 1832 "Kol" Rebellion, British rule relied on brute force; afterward, it adopted a calculated "carrot and stick" approach. Adivasis, however, selectively embraced Hindu practices not as submission but as a strategic maneuver to reinforce resistance, as Chaudhuri suggests. Even the Santhals' post-1855 pursuit of a "Great Tradition" did not displace their vision of self-rule (Orans 1965). Hindu nationalist efforts to assimilate Adivasis met resistance, as Adivasi communities rejected cultural erasure and maintained their sovereignty. The Santhal Hul led to the enactment of Act XXXVII of 1855, exposing the latent Adivasi agency that fueled sustained uprisings. The colonial facade of benevolence began to unravel as Free Trade imperialism deepened, and the state expanded its bureaucratic apparatus to manage resource extraction in Adivasi regions. Colonial administrators, portraying Adivasis as the "backward-most" segment of India's "backward masses," justified a more intense civilising mission.

Early ethnographic reports, such as those by Cuthbert (1827) and Davidson (1839), framed Adivasi resistance as administrative disorder, thereby legitimizing deeper colonial penetration. These narratives, perpetuated into the twentieth century, reinforced the myth of British paternalism while entrenching Adivasi dispossession. The British colonial regime, driven by the need for raw material extraction, suppressed Adivasi resistance with military force, clearing the way for exploitation. In recognition of growing resentment, the colonial state attempted appeasement, but these measures failed to quell dissatisfaction. Landlord and colonial exploitation only intensified, leading to further unrest. As the British acknowledged the worsening situation, they sought new strategies to pacify Adivasi communities. By the mid-nineteenth century, Adivasi communities began to abandon violent resistance in favour of self-empowerment. They integrated Christianity, literacy, Hinduism, and British law to organize new forms of protest. By 1860, British administrators, such as Richard Temple and George Campbell, began conducting ethnographic studies of Adivasis, advancing beyond superficial knowledge to produce a significant body of literature. While these studies provided valuable data on Adivasi cultures, they perpetuated colonial stereotypes, depicting Adivasis as "barbaric" and "savage." These racialized discourses served to justify colonial policies and facilitate the extraction of Adivasi lands and resources, while obscuring the cultural significance of Adivasi land tenure systems.

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E.T. Dalton, despite his detailed understanding of the bhuinhari land tenure system in Chhotanagpur, deliberately omitted its significance in his writings. The colonial state's commitment to protecting Adivasis under the Non-Regulation policy ultimately proved ineffective. Local officials, lacking training and cultural sensitivity, were ill-equipped to provide meaningful protection, exacerbating exploitation by landlords, traders, and the police. In response, the colonial government introduced the Bhuinhari Act of 1869 and Regulation III of 1872, formalizing land surveys and settlements. These measures, while ostensibly designed to protect Adivasis, reinforced the dominance of migrant landlords and failed to address the core issue of land control, leading to further unrest, including the Kherwar and Sardari Larai uprisings. The Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 marked a further attempt to extend protection to Adivasis, but it merely maintained the colonial status quo. As Adivasi resistance continued to grow, particularly in regions like Chhotanagpur, the British government implemented the Act to quell opposition while perpetuating systemic exploitation. From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, resistance intensified, exemplified by the Birsa Ulgulan (1895-1900), which was rooted in Adivasi commitment to the bhuinhari-khuntkatti land tenure system. Colonial disregard for this system, coupled with the abuses of the Zamindari system, fueled Adivasi protests. These evolved from violent uprisings to more cultural forms of resistance, asserting Adivasi dignity against colonial categorisation.

This resistance mirrored struggles across India, including the Rampa Rebellion (1879-80) and the Bhumkal Rebellion (1910), reflecting broader Adivasi unrest over land rights and exploitation. As colonial control expanded, measures such as the CNT Act of 1908 and the Agency Tracts Interest and Land Transfer Act of 1917 claimed to protect Adivasis but continued to facilitate exploitation. J. Hoffmann, the architect of the CNT Act, 1908, described it as the "calm, sunny morning after a long destructive hurricane" (Hoffmann & Emleen 1950: 2404). Despite these so-called protective laws, colonial policies remained exploitative, with Adivasi resistance continuing to highlight the irredeemable nature of British rule and the ongoing struggle against systemic exploitation.

Paternalistic Postulations and Adivasi Pathways, c. 1909-1935

This section aims to survey three critical dimensions of the Adivasi struggle in the early twentieth century. First, it examines the evolving attitude of the colonial government. Second, it explores how the Adivasis, driven by an unwavering resilience in the face of adversity, responded to the changing circumstances. Finally, it addresses the rise of Indian nationalism under Mahatma Gandhi and the nationalist movement's interactions with the Adivasi populations of the central belt. As the Sardari Larai unfolded, the dialogue between colonialism and Adivasi culture grew increasingly intense. Throughout this period, the Adivasis remained acutely aware of their tribal identity. Central to this dynamic was the role of modern education, which fostered a growing cultural consciousness among the Adivasis. In the pre-independence years, the spread of education did more than broaden the Adivasis' worldview, it empowered them to define their own identity within their colonial context. Despite the widespread cultural, linguistic, and economic barriers that many faced under colonial rule, the Adivasis pursued Western education with determination. These challenges were particularly severe for the Mundas and Oraons, whose centuries-long isolation and exploitation by immigrant populations had entrenched their marginalisation.

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This complex situation led to a paradoxical response: while there was significant interest in education, the dropout rate remained high. Nevertheless, the Adivasis' pursuit of education was driven by a fundamental desire to reclaim their land and status, and later to secure white-collar jobs as a means of escaping their oppressive circumstances. This was a struggle against the powerful forces of colonialism and missionary influence. Concurrently, the colonial administration introduced a series of constitutional and legal reforms in the early twentieth century, partly in response to the growing tribal resistance and the broader nationalist movement. From around 1910, Adivasi consciousness began to crystallise within organised groups. One prominent example was the Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj, which emerged as a pan-Adivasi organisation and later evolved into the Adivasi Sabha in 1938, and eventually the Jharkhand Party in 1947. This organisational shift embodied a broader awakening of Adivasi self-awareness, situated in direct opposition to the suppression they experienced at the hands of outsiders.

The articulation of Adivasi consciousness unfolded amid rapid political shifts, driven by administrative expansion, Bihari-Bengali job rivalries, and the Bengal reorganization of 1911 and 1936. This consciousness, an organic outgrowth of latent Adivasi identity, gained traction through official reports and anthropological writings, fuelling political assertion and autonomy demands. A tangible expression of this burgeoning identity emerged in the Chotanagpur Oraon-Munda Siksha Sabha (1910), a non-Christian Adivasi forum committed to education through schools, hostels, and libraries (Memorandum of the Chotanagpur Oraon-Munda Siksha Sabha, undated). Distancing itself from movements deemed "disloyal," the Sabha underscored an evolving Adivasi outlook (ibid.). Social and intellectual transformations saw many Adivasis adopting select Hindu cultural traits (Roy 1912: 203). Despite limited higher education facilities, Ranchi became the intellectual nucleus of an expansive Adivasi hinterland, attracting ambitious students from far-flung villages. Christian Adivasi students, primarily from mission schools, dominated St. Columbas College.

Parallel organisational efforts surfaced with the Chotanagpur National Conference (1912), an attempt to unite educated Adivasis across denominational lines. Though short-lived, it foreshadowed pan-tribal aspirations. "National" songs in Mundari and Kurukh reflected emerging self-pride (Gharbandhu, 15 July 1913; 1 September 1913). The seminal monographs by S.C. Roy on Mundas (1912) and Oraons (1915) further catalysed Adivasi identity, culminating in the Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj (CUS) (c.1915). The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Mission viewed CUS as a rival, given its significant Munda-Oraon membership (Gharbandhu, 15 May 1912: 97). Educated Adivasis resented systemic job discrimination and perceived immigrants as existential threats, corroborated by colonial surveys like John Reid's settlement report (Reid 1912). Migrants' casteist attitudes reinforced Adivasi alienation, igniting hostility. Meanwhile, millenarian movements arose in rural settings destabilized by education, Christianity, and urbanisation. The Tana Bhagat Movement (1914-1922) and Hari Baba Movement (1930s) attracted semi-Hinduised Adivasis seeking deliverance from economic distress through self-purification rites linked to Vaishnavism (Letter from Hoeck to Driessche, 17 August 1916; Chotanagpur Mission Letter, Nov. 1931; Nishkalanka, January 1932: 6-10).

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The British perceived the Tana Bhagat movement as a grave threat due to its expansive reach into Palamau and Jashpur, nocturnal assemblies with radical rhetoric, and alignment with Mahatma Gandhi's 'no-rent' campaign during the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920). Some adherents even sought liberation through the German Kaiser, "German Baba," during World War I. While the rural Adivasi masses remained detached from Indian nationalism, educated Adivasis engaged with it from their distinct vantage point. Until the 1920s, Indian nationalists largely ignored Adivasis, barring figures like Rabindranath Tagore. However, C.A. Watt's notion of "national efficiency" spurred selective nationalist interventions (Watt 2005). A.V. Thakkar, later Thakkar Bapa, pioneered Adivasi social work in Gujarat (1919), extending these efforts to Chhotanagpur under Gandhi's influence (Jagadisan & Shyamlal 1949: 298). Gandhi's untouchability reform movement overshadowed Adivasi concerns, but Thakkar and Indulal Yagnik secured tribal uplift initiatives (Pathak, Spodek & Wood 2011: 52). Verrier Elwin, inspired by Gandhi, initiated tribal programs in Central Provinces (1932) (Guha 2014: Ch. 4). However, nationalist engagement with Adivasis remained paternalistic, with Thakkar and Elwin shaping mainstream discourse (Singh 1970).

The CUS, aiming for administrative participation, identified Chhotanagpur's subjugation as "internal colonialism." It decried the region's arbitrary attachment to Bihar-Orissa and demanded a separate province under direct British governance (Indian Statutory Commission Report 1930: 436). Petitioners highlighted legislative neglect, unchecked immigrant encroachment, and bureaucratic prejudice. While initially advocating paternalistic governance, by 1930, the CUS opposed autocratic rule and sought democratic inclusion (Memorandum from Joel Lakra, undated). It distinguished Adivasis from 'outcastes' and 'untouchables,' asserting historical primacy and democratic governance aptitude. Sanskrit texts were selectively cited to bolster these claims, linking figures like Jarasandha and Kurush to Munda and Oraon lineages (Indian Statutory Commission Report 1930: 447). The CUS petitioned the Round Table Conference (1930), demanding special representation and separate identity recognition. Before the Indian Franchise Committee (1931), S.C. Roy reiterated Adivasi autonomy demands (Report of the Indian Franchise Committee, Vol. III, 1932: 201-11). While Gandhi and Ambedkar mobilised the depressed classes, Adivasis remained largely unintegrated into national politics.

Gandhi's influence was limited to Tana Bhagat Oraons, while the Congress-backed Adimjati Seva Mandal under Thakkar Bapa made little impact on Mundas, Oraons, and Santhals. Ambedkar's absence from Adivasi discourse was conspicuous. Despite nationalist apathy, colonial ethnology and educated Adivasi advocacy secured special administrative provisions under the Government of India Act, 1935. The Act designated Adivasi regions as 'Excluded' or 'Partially Excluded Areas,' shielding them from provincial legislature intervention (The Government of India Act, 1935 [26 Geo. 5 Ch. 2], Chapter V: Section 92, Clause 1). Though framed as protective measures, these classifications primarily served British political and security interests. Provincial governments initiated tribal protection laws, particularly concerning land alienation and usury. Official discourses, the Indian Statutory Commission (1928), Round Table Conference (1931), and Franchise Committee (1932), shaped subsequent policies. Ultimately, the colonial government unilaterally controlled 15 million 'primitive' individuals across eight fully excluded and twenty-eight partially excluded regions, reinforcing the paradox of Adivasi governance: administrative marginalization under the guise of protection.

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Adivasi Aspiration and Nationalist Arrogation: Debates and Dispensation, 1936-1949

The Constituent Assembly debates encapsulated the competing visions of Adivasi integration and exclusion within the broader nationalist movement. This section scrutinizes the emerging Adivasi intelligentsia's stance on a distinct Adivasi identity and their response to nationalist anxieties over colonial policies. Analysing the Assembly's proceedings provides insights into the ideological interplay between Adivasi assertions and nationalist priorities. Colonial exploitation exacerbated India's internal contradictions, fostering both nationalist consolidation and radical mass movements. By the 1930s and 1940s, escalating resistance culminated in demands for complete independence. The British responded with divisive communal tactics, intensifying socio-political ferment. Against this backdrop, the Government of India Act, 1935, shaped India's administrative framework and facilitated the Congress's electoral ascendancy. The Act's impact influenced Congress's policy orientation, particularly regarding tribal governance. Adivasi leaders, previously confined to resolutions and petitions, engaged in electoral politics during the 1937 elections. However, Congress, perceived by Adivasis as a 'diku' party, dominated reserved seats, while independent Adivasi candidates secured limited victories (Beck 1960: 9).

Meanwhile, state measures ostensibly aimed at 'protecting' Adivasi rights coincided with anthropological discourse advocating tribal autonomy. This period witnessed the intensification of Adivasi self-consciousness, fuelled by modern education and aspirations for a separate Jharkhand state. Julius Tigga's experimental fusion of Western and Adivasi education in Ranchi (1942-43) epitomised this evolving identity. The 1936 separation of Orissa from Bihar, based on cultural and linguistic distinctions, reinforced Adivasi demands for provincial autonomy. The omission of 'Chhotanagpur' in the 1911 state reorganisation and its continued marginalization in 1936 heightened Adivasi grievances (Gharbandhu, June 1938: 102). The Montagu-Chelmsford Report (1919) acknowledged the possibility of sub-provinces in Bihar and Orissa, further legitimising their claims (Adivasi: Mahasabha Visheshank, March 1938: 34).

The municipal election victory marked a watershed in Adivasi mobilisation, elevating political assertion to unprecedented levels. Oxford-educated Jaipal Singh Munda, invited to preside over the Adivasi Sabha, catalysed this momentum, culminating in the Adivasi Mahasabha of January 1939 in Ranchi. An estimated sixty-five thousand Adivasis, guided by four thousand volunteers, participated in this grand assertion of identity (Adivasi Mahasabha special issue, March 1939: 15-17). Addressing the gathering, Munda articulated their aspirations: "the moral and material advancement of Chotanagpur and the Santhal Parganas for the economic and political freedom of the aboriginal tracts... the creation of a separate Governor's province" (ibid.: 37). The Mahasabha's proclamations underscored their self-determined identity, rejecting the stigma of "Dalit jati" and asserting their equal citizenship (ibid.: 7-8). With India's independence, the Constituent Assembly (1946-1948) established an Advisory Committee on minorities, fundamental rights, and Adivasi areas (Constituent Assembly Debates Vol. VII: 4 November 1948 – 8 January). This development followed the August Offer of 1940, later refined by the Cripps Mission (1942) and further structured post-World War II by the 1946 Cripps Mission. Two subcommittees examined Adivasi affairs: A.V. Thakkar's committee focused on excluded and partially excluded areas in Eastern India, while Gopinath Bardoloi's addressed North-Eastern Adivasi regions.

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The Fifth Schedule, rooted in the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, emerged from Thakkar's recommendations, perpetuating paternalistic governance under a Governor's oversight while instituting Tribal Advisory Councils (TACs) dominated by Scheduled Tribe legislators. Bardoloi's proposals materialised as the Sixth Schedule. The Constituent Assembly grappled with two opposing ideologies: integrationists, led by Thakkar Bapa and Vinoba Bhave, sought Adivasi assimilation into the national mainstream (Sinha 1989:1), while isolationists, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad, favoured protectionist policies to preserve their distinctiveness (ibid.). Verrier Elwin championed the latter stance, advocating for Adivasi autonomy. Both perspectives romanticised Adivasis as passive subjects requiring state intervention. The Congress-led government in the Central Provinces institutionalised this paternalism in 1939, establishing a department for Adivasi "upliftment" (Grigson 1946: 85), mirroring British colonial policies of "exclusion" (ibid.). Grigson, emphasising a "defined permanent policy," advocated "paternal autocracy" in Central Provinces between 1861 and 1935 (ibid.).

Late colonial Adivasi assertions, articulated through organisations such as the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj and Adivasi Sabha, intensified in the Constituent Assembly, where five Adivasis championed their cause. Jaipal Singh Munda's intervention during debates on Adivasi protections exemplified this (Constituent Assembly Debates Vol. III: 1947). However, Adivasi voices remained marginalised. Nationalist discourse, heavily influenced by colonial narratives, framed Adivasis as "backward Hindus," a construct propagated through censuses and ethnographic records (Ghurye 1943). Post-independence policies exacerbated dispossession, aligning with a "development" model that prioritized resource extraction over Adivasi autonomy. Despite integrationist rhetoric, the state's approach functioned as covert assimilation, facilitating caste and class-based exploitation. Gandhi incorporated Adivasi welfare into his 14-point reconstruction program (1942), but meaningful inclusion remained elusive. Nehru's "Panchsheel" principles, ostensibly promoting Adivasi development, were largely symbolic (Munda & Mullick 2006: 12). Verrier Elwin, India's foremost Adivasi policy architect, gained official recognition, influencing parliamentary reports such as the Bhuriya Committee Report (1995). His "Philosophy of the NEFA" (2009) received Nehru's endorsement, shaping India's Adivasi policy. However, critiques from scholars like G.S. Ghurye highlighted its limitations.

Adivasi intellectuals countered assimilationist tendencies, leveraging historical and cultural narratives to demand autonomy. Early nationalist engagement prioritized "Harijans," sidelining Adivasis. Elwin, however, championed their cause, recognizing state paternalism's colonial roots (Prakash 2001: 39). The nationalist framework continued colonial exclusions, aligning with Hindu majoritarianism and exacerbating dispossession. This exclusionary trajectory intensified post-independence, as the state manipulated Adivasi identity for governance (Bara 2014). Resistance persisted, crystallising in movements like "Jal, Jangal, Jameen" and compelling the Indian state to reconsider extractive "development" projects (Padel & Das 2011). The High-Level Committee on "Scheduled Tribes" acknowledged this resilience, highlighting Adivasi agency (HLC Report 2014). Educational advancements empowered Adivasi voices, transforming them into assertive political actors. Adivasi leaders utilised cultural heritage to advocate for autonomy, producing independent journals such as *Adivasi Sakam* (Jaipal Singh, 1940-1941) and *Abua Jharkhand* (Ignace Kujur, 1947). These publications

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provided an indigenous platform for critiquing state policies. As independence approached, Adivasi demands for self-governance intensified, challenging internal colonialism. Post-independence policies systematically marginalised Adivasi agency. Julius Tigga's *Dhumkuria* initiative in Ranchi, which incorporated tribal languages and cultural resources, languished due to state apathy, while nationalist NGOs received substantial funding (Elwin 1944: 15). The V Schedule, Tribal Sub-Plan, PESA, and Indian Forest Act (2008) failed to deliver substantive change. Instead of fostering empowerment, these policies reinforced state hegemony. Adivasi assertion, far from dissipating, remains a formidable force against systemic marginalization. The dialectic between state hegemony and Adivasi agency underscores a persistent struggle for self-determination, challenging both colonial legacies and post-independence assimilationist frameworks.

Conclusion

For India's 85 million Adivasis, or "Scheduled Tribes" as classified by the Constitution, political empowerment remains elusive. Both colonial and post-colonial state interventions, rather than addressing their marginalization, exacerbated their struggles, often reigniting historical wounds. Yet, Adivasis remained indefatigable; their very survival constituted resistance, as historian Biswamoy Pati argues. Rejecting postmodernist claims that Adivasis were mere colonial constructs, Pati asserts their deep-rooted presence in South Asia, long before British intervention intensified land alienation and agrarian commercialisation. Adivasis were India's earliest and most fervent freedom fighters, as evidenced by historic rebellions, which left a trail of petitions, depositions, and folk songs articulating their resistance. However, mainstream scholarship often overlooks their ideological articulation of adivasiyat (Adivasihood) and its navigation through nationalist democratic politics. Adivasis' cultural consciousness predated European colonialism, shaped by earlier encounters with plains populations who encroached on their land-centric way of life. British colonialism accelerated this dispossession, leveraging internal colonisers as intermediaries.

Unlike the West, where indigenous societies were decimated outright, India's Adivasis endured subjugation through a gradual process, negotiating their survival within the British legal framework. British ethnographic accounts, shaped by outsider informants from dominant communities, constructed misleading representations of the Adivasis. Post-independence, the Indian nation-state perpetuated this colonial legacy, relying on outdated ethnological frameworks rather than engaging with Adivasi realities. The suppression of Jaipal Singh's assertions in the Constituent Assembly debates and the continued marginalisation of Adivasis underscore the endurance of colonial governance models. Colonial classifications such as "Non-Regulation" and "Scheduled Districts" evolved into the "excluded" and "partially excluded" areas under the Government of India Act (1935), which later informed the Schedules V and VI of the Indian Constitution. These frameworks widened the disconnect between state policy and Adivasi aspirations. State interventions remained half-hearted and fragmented, failing to address systemic injustices. Instead, successive regimes institutionalised "scheduled marginalisation," a cumulative erosion of constitutional rights and self-determination.

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While "scheduling" ostensibly sought to protect Adivasi culture and autonomy, it paradoxically entrenched their dispossession. The Independent Indian state, despite marking a break from British rule, retained colonial instruments of control. Laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (1963), Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958), Chhattisgarh Special Public Safety Act (2005), and Operation Greenhunt (2009) disproportionately target Adivasis, branding them security threats. The highest number of political prisoners falsely accused under these draconian laws belong to Adivasi communities. This form of legal repression, operational in "conflict zones," differs starkly from legal frameworks applied elsewhere in the country. "Scheduling" has thus become a mechanism for territorial containment and state suppression, as Adivasis fiercely resist displacement and dispossession. The pressing question, as scholar-activist Gladson Dungdung provocatively asks, remains: 'Whose country is it anyway?' Addressing this requires a deeper, nuanced engagement with the Adivasi perspective, challenging dominant paradigms in Adivasi studies and rethinking issues of displacement, marginalisation, and resistance through the lens of Adivasi self-perception.

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