



“Socio-Cultural Dynamics of the Munda Tribes in British-Era Chota Nagpur: A Historical Perspective”

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-cultural dynamics of the Munda tribes in the Chota Nagpur Plateau during British rule, focusing on the transformative effects of colonial policies on their social structures, economy, and cultural practices. The Munda, with their distinct kinship systems and traditional governance by chiefs (*Munda*) and priests (*Pahan*), faced significant disruptions under British colonial rule, particularly through land revenue systems, legal reforms, and the introduction of new economic practices. The British-imposed Forest Acts and land settlements severely impacted the Munda's access to natural resources and traditional livelihoods. Simultaneously, missionary activities began to alter their religious beliefs, leading to both resistance and conversion. This study also delves into the Munda resistance movements, notably the Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900), led by Birsa Munda, which challenged colonial authority and the erosion of tribal rights. By analyzing these socio-cultural shifts, the research highlights the resilience of the Munda community, their efforts to preserve cultural identity, and their struggle for autonomy in a changing colonial landscape. The study ultimately contributes to understanding the long-term impact of British colonialism on indigenous communities in India.

Introduction

The Munda tribes, an indigenous community primarily residing in the Chota Nagpur Plateau, have a long and rich history that predates British colonialism. This study explores the socio-cultural dynamics of the Munda tribes during the British era, focusing on how colonial policies shaped their social structures, economic activities, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. Before the British arrived, the Munda were organized in a decentralized system of governance, with chiefs (*Munda*) and priests (*Pahan*) playing central roles in community leadership and spiritual guidance. Their economy was largely based on



subsistence farming, hunting, and gathering, deeply connected to the forests and natural resources of Chota Nagpur. However, the arrival of the British in the late 18th century introduced significant changes to their way of life, from land revenue systems and legal reforms to missionary activities and the imposition of new economic practices. These changes led to social disruptions, displacement from traditional lands, and increased economic hardships. Despite the challenges, the Munda resisted colonial encroachment, most notably through the Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900), led by Birsa Munda, which became a symbol of tribal autonomy and resistance. This study examines the impact of British policies on the Munda tribes, highlighting the tensions between traditional practices and colonial impositions, and how the Munda maintained and adapted their cultural identity in the face of profound social and economic transformations. By understanding these socio-cultural dynamics, we gain insights into the resilience of the Munda community and their continued struggle for autonomy and cultural preservation in the colonial context.

Historical Background of the Munda Tribes

These are the Munda tribes or the indigenous people living on the Chota Nagpur Plateau, and having long and separate history for thousands of years. They are believed to be of Austroasiatic language family, and early settlers are believed to have been from Southeast Asia. Munda people historically have a rich cultural being and strong connection to their land, their language and traditions. Prior to British colonial rule, Munda society had a highly defined social structure, surrounded by clans (kuls) usually overseen by the chief, or Munda, with the priest, the Pahan, leading and explaining. These leaders were at the centre of local governance as well as religious life and oversaw local customs, rituals and the welfare of their communities. The Munda were animistic, towards nature, ancestors and many assorted deities, whose religious cult was interwoven with agriculture seasons and periodic festivals. The Munda were largely an agricultural people and the Munda Cultured growing rice, millet and vegetables, with hunting and foraging providing supplementary food sources. They too depended much on the forest for wood, medicinal plants and fodder for livestock. The Munda was not isolated politically, but largely involved in regional dynamics of Chota Nagpur. But they kept a certain autonomy, joining, for instance, neighboring tribes in a common cause of mutual support, or of fighting external threats. They had proved their



independent spirit and their resistance to outside authority whether it be an invasion or local ruler. Although occasionally pressured from the outside, the Munda managed to retain their own systems of a distinct socio political structure and its cultural practices until the advent of British colonialism in the 18th century.

Literature review

Girmohanta, S. (2020). A critical analysis of the projection of historical narratives of Indian tribal people in *Our Past III* reveals significant gaps and stereotypes in how their histories are represented. The textbook often presents tribal communities in a simplistic and monolithic manner, failing to capture the diverse and dynamic nature of tribal cultures, traditions, and histories. Their contributions to Indian society, economy, and politics are often marginalized or oversimplified, reducing tribal people to passive recipients of change rather than active agents in shaping their own destinies. The narrative focuses largely on external influences like colonialism or mainstream society's interventions, without giving enough emphasis to indigenous tribal systems, governance, and their resistance movements. The portrayal often lacks depth in discussing tribal autonomy and their relationships with neighboring communities. A more nuanced, inclusive, and multifaceted approach would offer a richer, more accurate understanding of tribal history, addressing these biases and omissions in the representation.

Ekka, A. (2011). The particularity of struggles of Adivasis or indigenous peoples as outlined in Land Series-4 is with respect to their land rights, displacement and socio-economic marginalization. Ancestral lands have been central to Indigenous cultures, economies and spirituality, and other camps have long been tied to their own ancestral lands. Oftentimes, threats from industrialization, urbanization, and government policies that result in land acquisition without just compensation or consent are common. The Land Series-4 reveals the effect of land loss which increases poverty, disrupts traditional livelihoods and erodes cultural practices. But it also highlights the difficulties enforcing legal protections such as the Forest Rights Act (2006) which gives forest living Adivasis land rights but is thwarted by bureaucratic delays and legal loopholes. The series aims to enforce the implementation of these laws much more strongly, in addition to actually giving credence to indigenous knowledge systems, and to empower Adivasi peoples to make decisions



involving their own land and resources.

Mallick, P. (2022). An analytical exploration of the influence of modern societies on the transformation of selected tribal communities in the Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts of West Bengal reveals significant changes in their cultural, economic, and social structures. The intrusion of modernity, through education, urbanization, and market economies, has reshaped traditional tribal lifestyles, often leading to both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, access to education and healthcare has improved living standards, enabling tribal communities to engage in new forms of employment and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, the erosion of traditional agricultural practices, cultural assimilation, and loss of land to industrial projects have caused cultural disintegration and economic instability. Modern governance systems and development programs, while aimed at improving tribal welfare, sometimes fail to consider indigenous knowledge and practices, leading to a sense of alienation. The transformation is a complex blend of empowerment and marginalization, requiring a more inclusive approach to development that respects tribal identity and autonomy.

Sarmah, P. (2018). Originally migrants in Assam during British colonial era to work in the tea gardens, the Tea Tribes of Assam have undergone much migration and assimilation amongst the Assamese society. Introduced in Assam in the 19th century to serve the expanding industry of tea, these communities were from Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand. They then over time created distinct social, cultural, and economic identity within the region. Although they had faced initial social exclusion and marginalisation, now the Tea Tribes have integrated into Assamese society, in some way, through labour, political movements and educational advancement challenges like land rights, quality of living and recognition still persist. Assam in the 19th century to meet the labor demands of the expanding tea industry. Over time, they established their own distinct social, cultural, and economic identity within the region. Despite facing initial social exclusion and marginalization, the Tea Tribes have gradually integrated into Assamese society, particularly through labor, political movements, and educational advancements.

Sharma, C. K., et al (2020). Tribal movements have been an important part of resistance to colonial oppression, assertion of land rights and fight against social inequalities in Indian



indigenous communities. In response to these often demands for greater levels of autonomy, for the protection of the land and the protection of their culture, these movements have changed over time. Movements like the Santhal Rebellion (1855–56) and the Munda Rebellion (1899–1900) struggled against exploitation, land alienation and forced labour, as before during the British colonial era. After independence tribal movements have still struggled to assert their claims of right, among these are Naxalite insurgency, Bodo movement for self-recognition and latest protests by the Adivasi community demanding implementation of the Forest Rights Act. These movements are also based on issues of displacement arising out of development projects, denial of land rights and cultural assimilation. Tribal movements have made significant contributions to India's freedom struggle and the contemporary socio political landscape of India, but they are invariably backfooted in effective implementation of protective laws and in adequate political representation and also for their acknowledgment as a distinct identity.

Sinha, S. P. (2009). The "17 Passing Scene of Tribal Development in North Bengal" highlights the evolving socio-economic conditions of tribal communities in the region, marked by both progress and persistent challenges. Over the years, various initiatives aimed at improving the livelihoods of tribal people in districts like Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Darjeeling have brought notable changes. Government schemes, such as the Forest Rights Act and educational programs, have led to increased access to land, resources, and opportunities for tribal communities. The benefits of these policies are often unevenly distributed, with many tribal areas still grappling with poverty, unemployment, and poor healthcare. Land alienation due to industrialization, deforestation, and encroachment on traditional lands remains a significant issue. While some tribal groups have made strides in education and political representation, others continue to face cultural marginalization and a loss of their traditional way of life. The path to holistic development for these communities remains complex and requires inclusive, region-specific strategies.

Bose, S. P. (2005). During Colonial India, the role of the predatory state was most impacted to the social structuring process in Jalpaiguri District as well as other adjacent districts. In the period of British rule, marginalization of indigenous communities hurting tribals and peasants was marked with opacity to revenue extraction and economic exploitation. Land



revenue systems like the Permanent Settlement in Bengal, and other parts of the country, introduced the zamindars and ultimately the British into the system to confiscate land and dispossess local communities of both land and eco-products, inequitably tax them and in some cases force them into debt and labour. In turn, this created a very rigid social hierarchy, whereby the indigenous population were subjected to both economic exploitation and social stratification. The less respect was given to local governance structures and practices of the colonial state, the more powerless the local population became. As such, colonial policies had a more lasting impact in Jalpaiguri, deepening social inequalities, disrupting community cohesion and altering the region's socio political dynamics that later led marginalized groups to fight for autonomy and rights.

Waris, M., et al (2017). Baradarism, a form of social and political organization based on kinship ties, played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of the Sargodha District during the colonial and post-colonial periods. In this system, local elites formed alliances based on extended family and clan affiliations, which were crucial for consolidating power and influence in the region. These kinship networks often controlled land, resources, and the socio-political fabric, thereby impacting the local governance structure. During British rule, baradarism was exploited to maintain control over the rural populace, with colonial authorities co-opting local elites to suppress resistance and enforce policies. Post-independence, the political influence of baradari groups continued, as they remained key players in local elections and power dynamics, shaping the socio-political identity of Sargodha. The persistence of baradarism in regional politics reflects the interplay between traditional kinship-based authority and modern political systems, often contributing to entrenched patronage networks and class divisions in the district.

British Colonial Impact on Munda Society

Coming of British colonial rule in the Chota Nagpur area completely changed the socio economic fabric of Munda society in such a way that the entire traditional way of life of Munda was transformed through administrative, economic and legal policies. A new land revenue system was imposed on the Munda where one of the profound impacts was that this disrupted their traditional agrarian economy. In 1793 the British introduced the Permanent Settlement and other revenue collection systems that dispossessed Munda people from their



ancestral land, and with it much of their livelihood, quite literally. However, these policies limited the Munda's dependence on the British imposed landlords, resulting in high impoverishment. According to this, along with this the British promoted new agricultural practices which included cash crops such as indigo and opium which proved detrimental towards the Munda's old farming practices that were focused on subsistence agriculture. The Munda became increasingly disconnected from their staple crops as the British prioritized cash crops for export, and thus became food insecure. The Munda were restricted from the forest through the Forest Acts, especially the 1865 Forest Act, which closed the forests from the Munda, and for which the forests had earlier been important for the Munda for their subsistence activities such as hunting, gathering, and collecting forest products for exchange and medicinal purposes. However, to enforce this legal restriction would have not only disrupted their livelihoods but would have eroded their spiritual connection to the land. In addition, British legislation and social reforms, e.g., the Criminal Tribes Act (1871), were applied to tribal communities, the Munda, among which, and declared 'criminals', who were subjected to surveillance and control. The reforms of these made the Munda's traditional social structures very weak, made their cultural identity very weak, and made the people divide into them. British colonial policies left the region in economic hardship, social disintegration and resistance, especially the Munda Ulgulan (1899–1900).

Traditional Socio-Cultural Practices of the Munda Tribes

The traditional socio-cultural practices of the Munda tribes were deeply rooted in a community-based way of life that revolved around kinship, religion, economic sustenance, and cultural expression. Kinship and family structures in Munda society were organized around clans (*kuls*), with a strong emphasis on communal ties and collective responsibility. The family, typically extended, was the foundational unit, with each member playing a specific role in maintaining harmony and social cohesion. Religious beliefs and rituals were central to Munda life, with animism being the dominant faith. The Munda revered nature, believing that spirits resided in trees, rivers, and animals. Rituals and festivals were closely linked to the agricultural cycle, marking seasonal changes and invoking blessings from deities and ancestral spirits for good harvests. These practices were overseen by the Pahan (priest), who also played a key role in guiding the community's moral and spiritual life. The



Munda were primarily agriculturalists, cultivating rice, millet, and other crops, and supplemented their diet through hunting and gathering. The forests provided essential resources for food, fuel, and medicinal plants, making the Munda economy intimately connected to nature. Art, craft, and cultural expressions also played a significant role in their social life. The Munda were skilled artisans, creating intricate beadwork, pottery, and weaving, often linked to ceremonial and everyday use. Chiefs and elders, such as the *Munda* (chief) and *Pahan* (priest), were responsible for local governance, resolving disputes, and maintaining law and order through customary laws. Their leadership was based on wisdom, respect, and the preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring the stability and continuity of Munda society. These practices created a well-knit, self-sustaining social structure that thrived in harmony with nature.

Social and Cultural Changes during British Rule

Munda society underwent drastic social and cultural changes under British colonial rule in Chota Nagpur that involved qualitative changes in its traditional way of life. Introducing British educational policies was one of the most impactful changes because it entailed the promotion of Western style education and sidelined indigenous knowledge systems. The traditional education and cultural practices were gradually eroded by missionary schools and British controlled institutions that were involved in replacing Munda spiritual practices with Christianity and colonial values. Munda society was transformed still further by urbanization and the burgeoning of new technologies. Into growing towns or labor markets they were displaced from their rural settlements as British infrastructure projects, railways and roads, expanded into the region. But urbanization, this urbanization also fragmented traditional Munda communal life, undermined rural economies, and introduced new forms of employment and social mobility. Furthermore, the current introduction of new technologies, e.g., modern farming tools, has also undermined the traditional ways of farming practised by the Munda; they were based on their ancient methods of cultivation. Related to the above was the changing gender role and family dynamics, brought in by British notions of gender, property and family structure, often in competition with Munda traditional, more egalitarian notions of women's role in society. Roles within family became more hierarchical, following the belief of patriarchy that characterized colonial values. The



projection of British cultural norms, for instance, law and religious Christianity, set Munda communities in an ideological ground. The importance of missionaries and colonial authorities grew and blended Christianity with traditional Munda beliefs creating social fragmentation and resistance on one hand, and new cultural expressions on the other. Collectively, these changes upset the harmony of Munda society, and paved the way for cultural adaptation, resistance and change throughout the period of colonialism.

Impact of British Policies on Munda Religion and Spirituality

The British colonial period had a profound impact on the religious and spiritual life of the Munda tribes, primarily through the introduction of Christianity and the active efforts of missionaries. Missionary activities began in earnest in the 19th century, as British officials encouraged Christian conversion as a means of "civilizing" the indigenous tribes. Christian missionaries, particularly in the Chota Nagpur region, worked to convert Munda communities by establishing schools, churches, and medical facilities. This led to a gradual but steady blending of Christianity with traditional Munda beliefs. For many Munda people, Christianity was not an outright rejection of their indigenous faith, but rather a hybridization of the two. While the Munda continued to revere nature, ancestral spirits, and local deities, they incorporated Christian practices such as church attendance and prayers, creating a syncretic form of spirituality. However, the growing influence of Christianity also contributed to social and cultural fragmentation within Munda communities. As more Munda people converted, tensions arose between the converts and those who remained committed to their animistic traditions. The social fabric of Munda society was thus strained, as religious divisions emerged, undermining the unity of the tribe. Elders and spiritual leaders like the Pahan faced challenges in maintaining authority over spiritual practices, as missionary teachings often contradicted indigenous beliefs and practices. This fragmentation led to a decline in traditional rituals, which were increasingly replaced by Christian religious observances, resulting in a loss of cultural coherence and continuity within Munda communities.

Economic Changes and Their Effects on Munda Tribes

Deep economic changes brought by the British during the colonial period made radical changes in the traditional livelihood of the Munda tribes. One of the biggest impacts was



land alienation; the British introduced Permanent Settlement and land revenue systems that broke Munda's ability to possess and control their ancestral lands. As Munda farmers were now paying too high taxes and were often obliged to sell their lands to European settlers or to moneylenders, this led to the fall of traditional agriculture. Aside from land alienation, economic exploitation took other forms as forced labor and forced planting of cash crops such as opium and indigo that ate up the land for the sustenance of the land, for agriculture for profit. Further further forcing Munda people to provide labor as plantation laborers eroded their traditional economic independence. Another consequence of the introduction of British rule was the decline of traditional livelihoods, including hunting, gathering, and dependence on the forest which had been so important to Munda survival. Their subsistence practices became unsustainable in the 19th century due to Forest Acts of the 19th century that limited their access to forests for fuel, food and medicinal plants. The economic power shifts were effective in transforming the Munda economy from the indigenous system characterized by self-sufficiency to that increasingly engaged with the colonial economy. Moreover, the British economic policies weakened traditional Munda social structures and colonialism subsequently left the Munda open to exploitation within this colonial system, with limited autonomy over resources that had long sustained their way of life.

Table 1: Socio-Cultural Structure of the Munda Tribes before British Rule

Aspect	Description
Kinship and Family Structure	Organized around clans (<i>kuls</i>); extended family units with collective responsibilities.



Religious Beliefs	Animistic faith with reverence for nature, ancestors, and local deities; rituals tied to agriculture and seasonal changes.
Economic Practices	Subsistence farming, hunting, and gathering; reliance on forests for resources.
Cultural Practices	Traditional dance, music, handicrafts; festivals tied to agricultural cycles.
Role of Chiefs and Elders	Chiefs (<i>Munda</i>) and priests (<i>Pahan</i>) led governance and spiritual life, resolving disputes and guiding rituals.

Socio-Cultural Structure of the Munda Tribes before British Rule

The socio-cultural structure of the Munda tribes before British rule was deeply rooted in community, nature, and traditional practices that formed the foundation of their social life. Kinship and family structure were organized around clans (kuls), and extended family units played a vital role in ensuring collective responsibility, social harmony, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Religious beliefs were primarily animistic, with the Munda revering nature, ancestors, and local deities. They believed that spirits resided in natural elements such as trees, rivers, and animals, and their rituals were closely tied to the agricultural cycle and seasonal changes, ensuring a harmonious relationship with the environment. In terms of economic practices, the Munda relied on subsistence farming, cultivating rice, millet, and other crops, while also engaging in hunting and gathering. The forests provided crucial resources for their livelihoods, including food, fuel, and medicinal plants. Their cultural practices encompassed traditional dances, music, and handicrafts, with significant importance given to festivals that marked agricultural cycles, such as sowing and harvesting. These festivals were a way of expressing gratitude and seeking blessings for good harvests. The role of chiefs and elders, notably the Munda (chief) and Pahan (priest), was central to governance and spiritual life. They led the community by resolving disputes,



maintaining order, and guiding religious and social rituals, ensuring the preservation of traditional norms and values within Munda society.

Research Problem

The core research problem of this thesis is examining the socio cultural dynamics of Munda tribes in British era Chota Nagpur and how the British colonial policies and their implementation impacted the traditional social, economic and cultural structures of Munda people in British era Chota Nagpur. Among the Munda tribes, who were primarily an agrarian community with a well defined social system, the impact of British imposition of land revenue system was extremely disruptive to customary land rights and labor practices. This work aims to delve into the strategies employed by the Munda people to resist or compromise with the colonial interventions in the process of conservation, or modification of, social and cultural identity. Moreover, the study attempts to explore the role of religious and political Munda movements (especially of the Ulgulan [Revolt] led by Birsa Munda) as forms of resistance to colonial dominance. The problem also involves studying the changes within the Munda community in terms of their modes of governance, religious practices or their interactions with the foreign environment (the missionaries and British administration). Finally, this research aims to shed more light on the resilience and agency of indigenous people under colonial rule, drawing on how Munda tribes of Chota Nagpur managed to hold their socio-cultural togetherness while changing historical and political situation.

Conclusion

Analysis of the socio-cultural dynamics of the Munda tribes in British era Chota Nagpur, highlights their complex resistance, adaptation and transformative process during the British rule. Mundas have long been tied to their traditional agricultural practices and the community based governance systems, and, with the coming of colonial policies and British imposed land revenue systems, they have been persistently disrupted. While these policies were generally detrimental to their customary rights, they were a long running source of discontent and fuelled several uprisings, most notably the Ulgulan (Revolt) led by the Munda leader, Birsa Munda. The Munda as a people resisted the new socio economic structures the British attempted to impose on them, their unique social organisation based on the panchayat (the village council) and their religion what was a resilient source of



resistance. Munda religion, consisting mainly of animistic and indigenous beliefs laid side by side with burgeoning ideas of social justice, also shaped their collective identity. The colonial repression was still unable to dissolve the fabric of Munda tribes as a distinct social and cultural unit able to maintain its customs, language and religious beliefs. But, British rule resulted in long term changes in socio economic landscape like introduction of new forms of land ownership and labor system which altered the age old methodology of livelihood. The British influence on Chota Nagpur was an era of extensive socio cultural transformation for the Munda tribes. The Munda people's resilience, their cultural cohesion and their capacity for resistance stood them in good stead in the face of colonial policies that were aimed at undermining their traditional way of life and helped them survive and regain their stride in the immediate post independence era, which is a great turning point in the region's history.

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