

# Creation of Jharkhand State: Issues of Environment and Identity

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**Abstract:** *The Chhotanagpur region, encompassing present-day Jharkhand, parts of West Bengal, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, served as a hotbed for revolts from the early days of British colonial rule. This area was endowed with abundant natural resources, including forests and minerals, which initially attracted the colonial administration. They exerted control through measures like designating 'reserved' and 'protected' forests, enacting various tenancy laws, and providing support to contractors and moneylenders. Subsequently, missionaries infiltrated the region, establishing educational and medical centres, and seeking to propagate Christianity. This missionary endeavour resulted in a significant portion of the tribal population converting to Christianity. The combination of missionary work and expanded educational opportunities raised awareness among the tribal population about their rights and the exploitation of their resources, leading to a series of revolts during the colonial era, including the Kol uprising, Bhil uprising, Santhal rebellion, and Munda rebellion, among others. The political consciousness spurred by both colonial activities and the national movement gave rise to various socio-political groups such as the Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj, Adibasi Mahasabha, and Jharkhand Party, which frequently advocated for a distinct identity for the tribals of Chhotanagpur. The demand for a separate entity somewhat subsided with the advent of independence, as efforts were made to safeguard the rights of the tribal population through the establishment of a secular government and by incorporating provisions in the 5th and 6th schedules of the Indian constitution. Nevertheless, the aspiration for a distinct entity for the tribal populace of the Chhotanagpur region eventually culminated in the creation of the state of Jharkhand in 2000, which was carved out of Bihar.*

**Keywords:** Chhotanagpur, missionaries, Santhal and Munda rebellions, Adibasi Mahasabha, Jharkhand

## 1. Introduction

In 2000, the state of Jharkhand was created by dividing Bihar into two separate states. The desire for a distinct state and representation for its tribal population had been cherished for a considerable period by the inhabitants of the Chhotanagpur region, which now encompasses Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Chhattisgarh. The demand for a distinct identity stemmed largely from deep-rooted issues caused by colonial rule, affecting various aspects of socio-economic and political life in the region. The colonial administration exerted extensive influence over Chhotanagpur, a region abundant in biodiversity and natural resources, aiming to exploit these resources and facilitate unhindered trade to fulfil colonial objectives. Additionally, this sought to extend political authority over an area that had been largely inaccessible to those living in the plains. Consequently, they often aligned with the traditional ruling classes of the region, including native princes and rulers, as well as dominant caste and tribal groups, to establish control over tribal territories. The intrusion of missionaries further compounded this by perceiving indigenous practices as backward and corrupt, advocating for the adoption of superior European customs and practices. This effort to 'civilize' led to a significant conversion of the native population to Christianity.

From the outset, the British administration recognized that until the tribal population integrated into the existing socio-political system, they required a higher degree of protection. They believed that once the colonial state structure was established, the state had the discretion to choose between direct intervention and a cautious approach, "maintaining a policy of non-intervention but intervening occasionally to enforce or disallow certain actions which were important to

the colonial enterprise" (Prakash, Amit. 2001, p 45). Simultaneously, the colonial administration adopted an exclusionary policy in tribal areas, limiting the application of ordinary laws of British India. These areas were governed by the Governor of the province they belonged to and were not subject to the laws outlined in the Govt. of India Acts of 1919 and 1935. The allocation of funds to these areas was also beyond the purview of elected bodies, eliminating the need for voting in the legislature. Moreover, the nature of British rule in tribal areas discouraged their integration into the mainstream economy and political process, as it favoured direct rule in these areas, which proved advantageous during numerous tribal revolts.

To effectively govern and control tribal areas, a robust communication network was established, enabling smooth administration, rapid deployment of the army, establishment of military zones, infiltration, and efficient control of local markets by merchants, traders, and contractors, as well as a faster pace of urbanization. This also led to a higher influx of non-tribal population into the region. Consequently, the tribal areas became part of the new economic and administrative framework, ending the relative isolation of the tribal population and their political dominance in the region (Prakash, Amit. p. 46).

The initial British policy in the tribal areas of Bihar involved setting up military zones and employing military force. This was followed by the legitimization of power in the region through various regulations, tenancy acts, and other modalities that enabled direct control over tribal areas. The maximization of rent entailed increased intervention in the economic life of the region, establishing material structures that benefited both colonial masters and their representatives, such as local merchants, shopkeepers,

moneylenders, contractors, and so forth, who operated with impunity on behalf of the colonial regime. Although the new economic order and rent regime did not deter the tribal population from expressing their grievances, often leading to violent clashes. Some notable examples include the Kol insurrection, the Santhal rebellion, Munda rebellion, and many others. Recognizing the gravity of such uprisings, the British administration began contemplating long-term solutions, especially in light of the immense and enduring benefits derived from the natural resources. To legitimize their presence and occupation of the area, tenancy acts like the Wilkinson Rules, Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act, and others were enacted. With the aid of these legislative powers, the British were able to establish administrative control, thereby facilitating economic exploitation of the region.

### Context

The Chhotanagpur region's tribal society harbored deep-seated grievances long before British rule took hold. Outsiders, often referred to as 'diku,' infiltrated the area masquerading as traders, shopkeepers, moneylenders, and contractors, encroaching upon the traditional rights and privileges of the native population. This intrusion was further formalized with the arrival of colonial administrators. The tribal populace bore the brunt of these outsiders, leading them to resort to various forms of resistance, often escalating into violent acts with messianic and religious undertones. These movements mobilized large groups protesting against oppressive structures enforced by an emerging new class and colonial administrative systems, such as the introduction of a new legal system, revenue administration, evangelization, and money lending. However, these rebellions were primarily defensive, representing the last stand of the tribal population driven to desperation by the encroachment of outsiders on their ancestral land and economic resources.

Starting in the early 19th century, the tribal population of Chhotanagpur began losing their hereditary land rights when the Maharaja of Chhotanagpur governed the area. Initially, he was a vassal of the Mughal rulers and later formed an alliance with neighboring Rajput families. They also invited Rajput and Brahman families from Orissa to settle in the region, as they had aided Chhotanagpur during wartime conflicts with neighboring states. These families were granted land, not as cultivators, but as rent collectors. The peasants in these areas cultivated the land and paid rent to the non-tribal landlords, who, in turn, paid a portion to the Maharaja of Chhotanagpur, who then remitted a share to the Mughal ruler. Initially, the East India Company followed the same system of rent collection. However, like in other regions, the British were interested in establishing a legal and administrative framework that ensured a stable system of revenue collection and administrative organization, ultimately facilitating efficient colonial rule.

Over time, a four-tier administrative structure was established, with the Company at the top, followed by the Maharaja of Chhotanagpur. The third tier comprised numerous local rajas, predominantly non-tribal, who were subordinate to the Maharaja. These rajas appointed intermediary rent collectors known as thikadars. It was the thikadars who directly collected rent from the peasants. They were also referred to as 'diku,' or outsiders who had

come from outside and settled in the tribal areas. Eventually, all outsiders came to be known as 'diku.' These thikadars gradually strengthened their control over the tribal population, often acquiring land through dubious means, leading to the alienation of the tribal population from their own land. The use of forests and their resources was restricted and formalized through the creation of 'reserved' and 'protected' categories of forests. This directly impinged on the longstanding traditional rights of the tribal population to unrestricted forest use.

Periodically, the British administration enacted laws that limited or prohibited the sale and purchase of tribal land to non-tribal populations. After the Kol insurrection of 1832, rules governing the sale and mortgage of land in the tribal area were implemented. The Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1869 aimed to address the grievances of the peasantry, but it was limited to specific privileged agricultural tenures and did not cover khuntakatti villages. In 1876, the colonial administration prohibited the sale and transfer of land, either privately or by court order, and the Bihar Tenancy Act of 1885 prevented land transfer, even in the form of gifts. However, substantial damage had already been done, and land ownership had been significantly altered. The Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 was more stringent in safeguarding the land rights of Chhotanagpur's tribal population, regulating land transfers from tribal to non-tribal individuals except under specific conditions. Nonetheless, outsiders were often shielded by colonial administrators, and police and other government machinery were employed to safeguard their interests. Given this context, the occurrence of multiple revolts by the tribal population during the 19th and early 20th centuries is not surprising, and these revolts persisted with active collusion between outsiders and colonial administrators.

### Missionary Intervention

The tribal population of Chhotanagpur experienced a significant shift in their way of life with the arrival of Christian missionaries. These missionaries received support from the British administration in establishing their presence in the region. They believed that tribal converts would be loyal subjects to the British and, as such, deserving of special treatment. Over time, Christianity became deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural fabric of the tribal people and emerged as a major catalyst for socio-economic and cultural transformation in colonial Chhotanagpur (Francine R Frankel and MSA Rao Eds. 1990, p. 15).

The GEL Mission was one of the initial Christian missionary groups to arrive in the Chhotanagpur region in 1845. Their activities faced a brief interruption due to the events of the Mutiny of 1857, but they soon resumed their work. Other missions, both Anglican and Roman Catholic, also arrived in the late 1860s. These missions primarily focused on the more influential and prosperous segments of the tribal population. They stressed the importance of tribal awareness regarding their historical and ongoing exploitation, as well as their rights and entitlements. The Khairia, Oraon, and Munda tribes saw significant success in conversion, whereas the Ho and Santhal tribes had fewer converts. Conversion rates were highest in areas where people suffered severe exploitation by landlords. The missionaries, however, were

mindful that this sometimes led to direct clashes with the British administration. In such cases, they withdrew. Nevertheless, their contributions in the realms of healthcare and education empowered the tribal population of Chhotanagpur in their interactions with the British administration.

### Uprisings

The Chhotanagpur region witnessed a series of uprisings and socio-cultural movements during the colonial era. These included events like the revolt of the Raja of Dalbhum, Bhumij Chaur of Manbhum, revolts by the Kolar Hos and Mundas in Chhotanagpur and Santhal Pargana (1795-1800), the Tamar revolts in 1801, the Chhotanagpur Tribal Revolt (1807-08), the Kol Insurrection (1831-32), the Tamar Revolt (1820), the Santhal Uprisings (1855-56), the Bokta Rising and Rai Movement of 1857, the Sardari Larai or Mukti Larai Movement (1858-59), the Munda Rebellion (1895-1900), the Tana Bhagat Movement, and the Kol and Ho Uprisings of the 1930s.

The occurrence of these revolts spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries primarily stemmed from long-held grievances against the British administration and outsiders who, as moneylenders, contractors, and agents of the British, exploited the tribal population. They encroached on the traditional rights of the tribes in terms of land, forests, and resources, limiting their access to forests for everyday needs. These movements galvanized large groups of people who protested against oppressive structures established by an emerging class as a result of colonial administration. These structures were evident in the introduction of new legal systems, revenue administration, evangelization, and money lending. As noted by Singh, K. S. in "Birsa Munda and His Movement" (1983), "All these movements were defensive movements, the last resort of the tribals driven to despair by the encroachment of outsiders on their lands and economic resources" (p. 8).

The scale and spontaneity of these protests indicated a growing movement for the identity of the tribal population in the Chhotanagpur region. The Jharkhand agitation in the 1940s was directly linked to these past movements and had significant implications for the future. Ultimately, it culminated in the establishment of the separate state of Jharkhand in 2000.

### Separatist Movement

The roots of the Jharkhand agitation can be traced back to the establishment of two organizations: the Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj in 1920 and the Adibasi Mahasabha in 1938. Both these organizations were highly organized and garnered significant support from Christian missionaries. According to Singh (1977), "The movements of the post-1920 period show a distinct change in the behavior pattern of the tribal movements, and the period also saw the rise in terms of ethnicity of a separatist movement and its transformation into a regional movement" (p. 320).

Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj asserted tribal identity by submitting a memorandum to the Simon Commission, which aimed to highlight the issues faced by the tribal population of Bihar from a unique perspective. In addition to outlining

the harsh realities and exploitation faced by the tribes, it proposed a different set of solutions. The memorandum advocated for the abolition of existing tenancy laws, deeming them inherently discriminatory and feudalistic in nature. It further contended that the provisions of the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act led to an unjust division of land, exacerbating the grievances of the natives. The demands of Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj took a step further by proposing the establishment of a self-governing village corporation for civil matters, a judicial panchayat for specific issues, and an executive body for managing village lands. It also addressed matters concerning franchise, provincial divisions, and the legal and judicial system. Regarding education, the Society called for the introduction of compulsory primary education in the local languages, along with the establishment of a local board of education and provision of recurring grants (Prakash Amit, p. 59, as quoted from Indian Statutory Commission Report, 1930).

While the Simon Commission did not directly reference the memorandum submitted by Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj, it acknowledged that the tribal people were in need of protection due to their primitive and backward status (Prakash Amit, p. 60). Kumar Suresh Singh has meticulously analyzed the separatist nature of the movement and identified at least six contributing factors:

First, Chhotanagpur was the most advanced of the tribal regions in terms of literacy, political consciousness and industrial progress. Second, the major tribal communities were concentrated in a geographically distinct region. Third, Christianity came in a big way in Chhotanagpur and the missionaries very effectively influenced the major tribes. In fact, there was no other region of tribal middle India which witnessed such a spread of Christianity. As Christianity spread, it performed many roles: it gave them a history and a myth; it accentuated the notions of private rights in land; it promoted education and medical care; it also emphasized a sense of separateness from the rest. Fourth, the Chhotanagpur tribe had a tradition of militant and organized struggle going back over a hundred years, and the tribal system had survived relatively intact in this region. Fifth, there was a rich corpus of anthropological literature to draw upon in order to create a new sense of history, which could legitimize the tribal search for identity. Sharat Chandra Ray, the father of anthropology, gave an eloquent expression to the tribal demands for separation. And finally, Chhotanagpur was exposed to the operation of many interests. The Bengalis formed a sizeable professional and land-owning community, and the Muslims were a significant trading professional and land-owning interest. The Bengali-Bihari controversy over employment in the late 1930s and the Muslim League politics also affected the development of the tribal separatist movement". (Singh, Kumar Suresh, From Ethnicity to Regionalism ...p. 331).

Several entities and organizations, including Christian missionaries, played a crucial role in uplifting the lives of

the people in Chhotanagpur. The Temperance Movement, for instance, worked towards eliminating alcohol consumption among the tribal population. The Roman Catholic Cooperative Society, established in 1906, aimed to free the native population from the influence of moneylenders. The Christian Association, founded by Lutheran graduates, promoted education among the tribal population. Another organization during this period was the Munda Oraon Education Conference. These organizations significantly contributed to the development of the region and fostered a sense of unity among the people of Chhotanagpur, bridging divides among Christians, non-Christians, and various tribal groups like the Munda, Oraon, Tamar, and Mahali.

Besides missionaries, there were also non-tribal organizations dedicated to the betterment of the tribal population. Notably, the Chhotanagpur Charitable Trust, formed in 1912 by both aboriginal Christians and non-Christians, raised funds to provide scholarships to students in the region. These organizations not only contributed to the region's development but also promoted unity among the people of Chhotanagpur, regardless of religious or tribal affiliations.

One of the most influential organizations in the region was the Chhotanagpur Improvement Society (Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj), which emerged following the constitutional reforms of 1919. It was established in response to the Anglican Bishop of Ranchi's insistence on protecting regional and tribal rights. The society, comprised mainly of educated Christian tribal students, voiced concerns about the lack of security for tribals and emphasized the need to preserve their identity in the face of changing political circumstances. They advocated for employment opportunities for educated tribal youth, reservations in services and legislative bodies, and the creation of a sub-state connected to Bengal or Orissa. In 1928, they submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission, demanding autonomy for the tribals. This movement was led by figures like Paul Dayal, Bandi Oraon, Rev Joel Lakra, Theodore Huard, and Anand Mashi Topno. The demands put forth before the Simon Commission influenced the framing of the Government of India Act of 1935, which established an all-India federation and a new system of government based on provincial autonomy.

However, the 1937 elections did not yield favorable results for the Samaj, as the Congress party secured a sweeping victory. This was partly attributed to the emergence of a rival organization, the Catholic Sabha, which gained popularity in the region due to its strong organizational skills. The split in votes between these two organizations ultimately worked in favor of the Congress party. The Samaj's defeat in the 1937 elections led to the formation of the Adibasi Mahasabha in 1938. The Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj subsequently merged with the Adibasi Mahasabha, broadening its political base and objectives. The Bihari-Bengali controversy and the politics of the Muslim League further supported the cause for a unified tribal organization. The Bengalis believed that their interests would be better protected outside of Bihar, leading them to align with the tribal organization for a distinct identity.

## 2. Conclusion

As the call for freedom from colonial rule and the demand for a separate state for Muslims gained momentum, the Muslim League considered the creation of a corridor through tribal areas connecting East and West Pakistan. This idea garnered sympathy from the League, which often provided financial support to the Adibasi Mahasabha. Under the leadership of Jaipal Singh, the Sabha took a radical turn, adopting a separatist stance and offering full support to the British administration. The leaders of the Mahasabha were skilled political workers, many of whom were highly educated and articulate. They employed modern and sophisticated mass mobilization techniques, encompassing both urban and rural areas and involving tribal leaders from various regions. The ultimate goal of the Adibasi Mahasabha was not merely the establishment of a sub-state, but complete separation from Bihar.

However, the violent nature of the Adibasi Mahasabha and its militant actions did not align well with the broader political movement led by the Congress, which ultimately won the 1946 elections. Simultaneously, the connection with the Muslim League was severed, and the Bihari-Bengali conflict subsided, further weakening the movement. Consequently, significant changes were made to the organization following Independence. The Constitution of India established a secular government and granted various concessions to minorities, with the tribal population recognized as a minority community and placed under the 5th and 6th Schedules for their protection. The Adibasi Mahasabha was defeated in the 1946 elections and disbanded thereafter. In its place, the Jharkhand Party was formed in 1950.

The Jharkhand Party evolved into a significant political force across the states of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh. In Orissa, its influence grew significantly, winning five seats in the 2nd General Elections. Thus, what began as a movement predominantly for tribals, supported by Christian missionaries and a substantial Christian population, transformed into a political movement encompassing all segments of society across the broader Chhotanagpur region. Starting as an urban movement in the 1920s with the formation of Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj, it developed into a pan-tribal movement spanning major areas of tribal Bihar and including both Christian and non-Christian tribal populations.

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