

Tribal Uprisings in the 18th and 19th Centuries

The tribal communities have always been very conservative in nature and wanted to retain features of their society. Indian tribal uprisings, rebellions, and movements were motivated by revolutionary ideas. After the interference in their way of living, diverse tribal communities from various regions of India led a revolt against the exploitative and discriminatory practices of the British Indian Government during the time of British rule.

In this article, we provide a comprehensive overview of the tribal uprisings that took place in British India. This information will be useful to candidates as they get ready for exams like those for the [UPSC CSE](#), SSC, State Services, CDS, NDA, Bank PO and Railways, among others.

Tribal Uprisings in British India UPSC

Many of the various tribal groups in India revolted against the forceful and devastating intrusions into their life and region by the British. The tribals had been living peacefully and in harmony with nature for hundreds of years in their own forests prior to the arrival of the colonial powers. The British came and introduced many changes in their way of life and also introduced outsiders into their turf. This reduced them to the status of labourers and debtors from masters of their own land. The uprisings were basically against this unwelcome intrusion and a fight for their independence.

In accordance with the geographic area occupied, tribal movements are further split into two kinds.

a) **Non-Frontier Tribe:** These tribes make up 89% of the overall tribal population. The non-frontier tribes were mostly restricted to Andhra, West-Central India, and central India. Khonds, Savara, Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Koya, Kol, Gond and Bhil were a few of the tribes that took part in the movements. These tribes' uprisings were quite violent and included several significant uprisings.

b) **Frontier Tribes:** These are the inhabitants of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura, seven of the frontier states in the northeast.

List of Tribal Uprising in India

The following three phases are used to categorise tribal movements:

- **The First Phase (1795-1860):** It happened at the same time as the British Empire's emergence, growth, and establishment. The top class of tribal society, led by the traditional group whose privileges had been curtailed by colonialism in India, produced the leadership. Major tribal uprisings in this phase were: the **Kols Uprising, Santhal uprising, Khond uprising and Early Munda uprising**.
- **The Second Phase (1860-1920):** It includes the **Koya Rebellion** and the **Birsamunda-led Munda Uprising**.
- **The Third Phase (1920-1947):** It comprises the **Chenchu tribal movement, the Rampa rebellion, and the Tanabhat/Oraon Movement**.

List of Tribal Uprisings in India		
Year	Tribal Uprising	Features
1776	Chuar Uprising	Organised by aboriginal tribesmen of Midnapore, against land revenue demands and economic distress.

1778	Pahariyas' Rebellion	It was headed by Raja Jagganath who led Pahariyas of Raj Mahal Hills against British expansion on their land.
1818-1831 and 1913	Bhil Uprising	In Western Ghats against the Company rule to form Bhil Raj. Reorganised again in 1913 under Govind Guru to fight for Bhil Raj.
1820-37	Ho and Munda Uprisings	By Ho tribals led by Raja Parahat in Singhbhum and Chottanagpur region against new farming revenue policy. This later became Munda rebellion.
1822-29	Ramosi Uprising	By the Ramosi tribals of western ghats, under Chittur Singh against Britishers occupation of the region.
1829	Koli Uprising	The tribals of Gujrat and Maharashtra revolted against the Company's control in 1829, 1839, and again in 1844-48.
1832	Kol Rebellion	Tribals of Chottanagpur under Buddho Bagat revolted against Britishers and money lenders.
1837-56	Khond Rebellion	Tribals of hills from Tamil Nadu to Bengal led by Chakra Bisoi, revolted against interference in tribal customs and imposition of new taxes.
1855-56	Santhal Rebellion	Tribals of Bihar led by Sido and Kanhu against moneylenders and zamindars.
1868	Naikada Movement	Tribals of Madhya Pradesh and Gujrat against British and caste Hindus to establish Dharma Raj.
1870s	Kharwar Rebellion	Tribals of Bihar led by Bhagrit Majhi against revenue settlement activities.
1867	Bhuyan and Juang Rebellions	Tribes of Keonjhar, Orissa revolted twice in 1867 and 1891.
1899-1900	Munda Rebellion	Tribals of Chotanagpur area revolted under Birsa Munda against the 'Dikus'.
1879-80	Koya Uprising	Tribals of eastern Godavri region led by Tomma Sora and Raja Annantyar revolted against the police and moneylenders.
1910	Bastar Revolt	By tribals of Jagdalpur against new feudal and forest levies.
1914-1919	Tana Bhagat Movement	Tribals of Chottanagpur, led by Jatra Bhagat, Balram Bhagat revolted against interference of outsiders.
1921-22	Chenchus Uprising	Tribals of Nallamalla Hills led by K. Hanumanthu revolted against the British forest laws.
1922-24	Rampa Rebellion	Led by Alluri Sitaraman Raju of Koyas, Andhra Pradesh against British interference.

North Eastern Frontier Tribal Movement		
1828-33	Ahom's Revolt	In Assam against non fulfilment of Britishers' promise to leave their region after Burmese war.
1830s	Khasis' Revolt	Led by Tirath Singh in hills of Jaintia and Garo against occupation of their region.
1830s	Singphos' Rebellion	In Assam against occupation of their region by Britishers.
1917- 19	Kukis' Revolt	In Manipur, against British policies of recruiting labour during World War.
1920	Zeliangsang Movement	By tribes of Manipur against failure of British to protect them during Kuki violence.
1905-31	Naga Movement	By tribals of Manipur, led by Jadonang against British rule and to form Naga raj.

From the exam perspective certain important tribal uprisings are discussed below:

Bhil Uprising (1818-1831)

- Bhils belonged to the Khandesh region of Maharashtra.
- In 1818, the British made their way into the area and began encroaching on the Bhil territories.
- The native Bhil Tribe was in no way prepared to accept any British changes made on their land.
- As a result they revolted against the foreigners on the land.
- The reason for the uprising was the brutal treatment of the Bhils at the hands of the East India Company who denied them their traditional forest rights and exploited them.
- The British responded by sending a force to suppress the rebellion.
- But the revolt was not in vain, as the British gave concessions to various taxes and returned forest rights as part of the peace settlement.

Ramosi Uprising (1822- 1829)

- Ramosis were hill tribes of the western ghats.
- They resented the British policy of annexation and rose against the Britishers under the leadership of Chittur Singh.
- The new British Administration system, which the tribal people thought to be extremely unfair to them and left them with no other option than to rise against the Britishers for, was the primary cause of this insurrection.
- They plundered the regions around the Satara.
- The revolt continued till 1829, after which the British restored order in the region.
- Britishers followed a pacifist policy towards the Ramosis and some of them were recruited in the hill police.

Kol Rebellion (1832)

- Kol uprising is one of the most well-known revolutions against the British government.
- The Kols were one of the tribes inhabiting the Chhotanagpur area. They lived in complete autonomy under their traditional chiefs but this changed when the British came.
- Along with the British came the outsiders. The colonial government also introduced the concept of non-tribal moneylenders, zamindars and traders.
- The Kols then lost their lands to farmers from outside and also had to pay huge amounts of money in taxes. This led to many becoming bonded labourers.
- To this the British judicial policies also caused resentment among the Kols.
- There was an **insurrection in 1831-32** which saw the Kols organise themselves under **Buddho Bhagat** and revolt against the British and the moneylenders.
- They killed many outsiders and burned houses. This armed resistance **went on for two years** after which it was brutally suppressed by the British with their superior weaponry.
- The Kol Rebellion was so intense that troops had to be called in from Calcutta and Benares to crush it.

Santhal Uprising (1855- 1856)

- The Santhal Hul (also known as the Santhal revolt) occurred in the regions of present-day Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal against the British as well the Zamindari system from 1855 until 1856 when the movement was crushed by the British.
- When the Zamindari system was introduced in the Bengal presidency, the British and the Zamindars claimed the traditional Santhal land as their own.
- The Santhals were exploited mercilessly by the landlords who charged exorbitant rates of interest (sometimes as high as 500%) which ensured that the tribals were never able to repay their loan.
- They lost their land and also were turned into bonded labourers. They had to suffer extortions, forceful deprivation of property, abuse and violence, cheating in business deals, wilful trampling of their crops, etc.
- The government supported the landlords instead of helping the tribals whose grievances were genuine.
- The rebellion started in **June 1855** when **two brothers Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu** organised 10000 Santhals and began an armed uprising. Their primary aim was to completely annihilate the alien or British regime.
- The Santhals, who predominately lived in the regions between Rajmahal and Bhagalpur known as Daman-ikoh, rose up in revolt against the outsiders, whom they referred to as "**Dikus**."
- They killed many moneylenders and Company agents. The revolt was very intense and massive in scale. The Santhal community celebrates the day of rebellion to this day.
- The revolt was violently suppressed by the British with about 20000 Santhals being killed including the two leaders.

Khond Uprising (1837-56)

- The Khonds inhabited the mountainous regions that ran from Bengal to Tamil Nadu as well as the central provinces.
- Due to the impassable hilly terrain, they were entirely independent before the British arrived.

- Between 1837 to 1856, they rose against the British for their exploitation of forest practices, led by **Chakra Bisoi**, who adopted the name "**Young Raja**."
- Tribal people from the Ghumusar, Kalahandi, and Patna regions took part in the uprising.
- The British attempt to outlaw the practice of "**Mariah**" (Sacrifice) and the subsequent introduction of new taxes, as well as the influx of Zamindars and Sahukars (Moneylenders), were the main causes of their uprising.
- Using bow-and-arrows, swords, and axes, the Kols rose up in rebellion against the British-created "**Maria Agency**."
- Additionally, some local militia clans led by Radha Krishna Dand Sena helped them. The insurrection finally came to an end in 1955 when Chakra Bisoi was taken, prisoner.

Munda Rebellion (1899- 1900)

- One of the most well-known revolutions against the pervasive British Rule in the nation was the early Munda revolt. The Mundas inhabited the Chotanagpur area.
- This uprising is also known as the **Ulgulan revolt** which means "great commotion".
- Between 1789 and 1832, the Mundas revolted around seven times against the oppression brought on by moneylenders and the British Government. The **Khuntkatti system**, which was a joint holding of land, prevailed among the Mundas. But the advent of the British and the outsider Zamindars replaced the Khuntkatti with the Zamindari system. This caused indebtedness and forced labour among the tribals.
- Its movement was known as Sardariladai, or "War of the Leaders," and their main goal was the eviction of outsiders, or "dikus."
- Many Mundas joined the "Evangelical Lutheran Mission" after 1857 in the hopes of a brighter future.
- However, as they realised that these missionaries couldn't give them any long-term benefits, many apostates rebelled against this mission and became even more hostile.
- They sought to establish the Munda traditional chiefs' dominance over their domains. But, every time they were without a charismatic leader, their movement waned.
- However, the Mundas were able to get an able and charismatic leader in **Birsa Munda** who proclaimed a rebellion in 1894.
- He organised his people to revolt openly against the government. He urged people to stop paying debts and taxes.
- He was arrested and spent 2 years in jail before being released in 1897.
- In December 1899, he launched an armed struggle against the landlords and the government.
- The Mundas torched police stations, houses of the landlords, churches and British property.
- In 1900 Birsa Munda was caught. He died in jail due to cholera aged just 25.

Koya Uprising (1879- 1880)

- Assisted by Khonda Sara commanders, the Koyas of the eastern Godavari track (now Andhra) revolted in 1803, 1840, 1845, 1858, 1861, and 1862.
- They rose once again under Tomma Sora in 1879–1880.
- They complained about being persecuted by the police and moneylenders, new limitations and the denial of their historical rights to forest areas.
- Following the passing of Tomma Sora, Raja Anantayyar led a new uprising in 1886.

These were the main uprisings by the non-frontier tribals in the 18th and 19th century. Some important uprising of the 20th century are:

Tana Bhagat Movement/Oraon Movement (1914-1919)

- The Bihar region of Chotanagpur served as the focal point of this movement.
- It was a tribal rebellion that took place between 1914 and 1919 and was led by Jatra Oraon and a group of Tana Bhagats or Oraons.
- It was first called as Kurukh Dharam and was purely a religious movement, similar to the Munda movement (Meaning the original religion of the Oraons).
- They opposed the British Government in the end, as well as the Zamindars and Moneylenders.
- Like Mahatma Gandhi, the Tana Bhagats were proponents of nonviolence.
- Finally, the British Government brutally put an end to this uprising.

Rampa Rebellion (1922-1924)

- Alluri Sitarama Raju was the leader of the Rampa rebellion, which took place in the present-day Andhra Pradesh districts of Vishakhapatnam and East Godavari.
- The Bengali revolutionaries served as an inspiration for A.S. Raju, who used their example to launch an uprising against the British.
- From 1922 until 1924, Alluri and his supporters carried out this uprising, which included protesting numerous police stations, killing a number of officers, and stealing weapons and ammunition.
- After capturing Alluri Raju in 1924 and shooting him dead after tying him to a tree, the British were finally able to put an end to this movement.

North-East Tribal Movement

The frontier tribals also revolted against the British annexation of their lands. The main frontier tribal uprisings were Khasi Uprising (the 1830s), Ahom Revolt (1828) and Singhphos Rebellion. In the 20th century, Rani Gaidiniliu led the Naga Movement.

It is to be noted that:

- The tribes in the north-eastern region, who had ties to nations across the border on both a tribal and cultural level, were not overly interested in the nationalist movement. Their uprisings were often in support of total independence or political autonomy inside the Indian Union.
- British settlement in the north-eastern regions began significantly later than in tribal lands without borders. Due to the fact that these tribals were typically in charge of the land and the forests, these revolutions were neither agricultural or forest-based uprisings.
- Tribal uprisings in the frontier against the British lasted longer than those in non-frontier tribes.

Ahom Uprising (1828- 30)

- Following the conclusion of the first Burma War (1824–1826), the British made a commitment to end their rule. Instead, when the first Burma War was over, the British attempted to seize control of the Ahom provinces in Assam.
- As a result of this, the Ahoms rebelled against the colonial authority in 1828, led by **Gomdhar Konwar**, out of dissatisfaction.

- By giving Maharaja Purandar Singh Narendra control over upper Assam and a few other regions of the kingdom, the British eventually made the decision to pursue a conciliatory strategy.

Khasi Uprising (1830)

- The hilly areas between the Garo and Jaintia Hills were occupied by the British when the Burmese war was ended.
- The colonial government planned to construct a road that would cross the entire country and connect the Brahmaputra valley with the Sylhet region, Khasi area.
- The khasis rebelled under the leadership of a khasi chief named Tirut Singh as a result of the conscription of labourers for road building. They were joined by the Garo.
- The four-year-long, battle with the Khasis was eventually brutally put an end to in the early months of 1833.

Singphos' Rebellion (1830)

- The Singphos resisted the Colonial Government in the early 1830s while the British were preoccupied with repelling the challenge posed by the Khasis.
- The British only managed to put an end to this uprising after four months.
- But in 1830, the Singphos rose up once more, killing the British Political Agent with considerably greater force.
- Nirang Phidu, the Chief of the Singphos, also assaulted the British Garrison in 1843, killing numerous soldiers. A British settlement in Assam was attacked by Khasma Singphos later in 1849.
- Finally, the British Government ruthlessly put an end to this insurrection.

Causes of Tribal Revolts in India

- **Practice of Settled Agriculture:** The tribals' mainstay were shifting agriculture, hunting, fishing and the use of forest produce. With the influx of non-tribals into the traditional regions of the tribals, the **practice of settled agriculture** was introduced.
 - This led to a loss of land for the tribal population. The tribals were reduced to being **landless agricultural labourers**.
 - There were restrictions imposed on the use of forest produce, on shifting agriculture and on hunting practices. This led to the **loss of livelihood** for the tribals.
- **Introduction of the outsiders:** The British **introduced outsiders** like money lenders into the tribal areas which led to severe exploitation of the local tribals. They became bonded labourers under the new economic system.
- **Private ownership by non-tribal landlords:** The tribal societies had a system of joint ownership of land which was replaced by the notion of private property.
- **Society became non-egalitarian:** Tribal society was traditionally egalitarian compared to mainstream society which was marked by caste and class distinctions. With the coming of the non-tribals or outsiders, the tribals came to be classified under the lowest rungs of society.
- **Introduction of Forest Acts:** A Forest Department was set up in 1864 by the government mainly to control the rich resources of Indian forests. The Government **Forest Act of 1865** and the **Indian Forest Act of 1878** established a complete government monopoly over the forested land.
- The **work of the Christian missionaries** also led to social upheaval in tribal society and this was also resented by them as they considered the work of missionaries an extension of colonialism.

- A section of the tribal rebellion was a **response to the landlords' attempts to impose taxes** on the traditional use of timber and grazing areas, police exaction, new excise regulations, low country traders' and moneylenders' exploitation, and limitations on shifting agriculture in forests.

Weakness of these Uprisings:

- The tribal uprisings were massive in totality but were localised and isolated.
- They were the result of the local problems and grievances.
- The uprising lacked a strong leadership as they were semi feudal in character, backward looking, traditional in outlook and their resistance represented no societal alternative.

On the whole, however, these rebellions were able to establish valuable traditions of local resistance to authoritarianism.

For many government exams, the topic of tribal movements in Indian history is quite pertinent, and the significance of this topic can only be understood by being aware of the types of questions that might be asked in the test. Candidates should therefore practise enough questions on the subject.

Sample Questions on Tribal Movements

1. Munda Uprising/Rebellion took place in which region?
A. Assam
B. Chhotangapur region Ranchi
C. Andhra Pradesh
D. Punjab
Ans: B
2. Which of the following is not tribal movement?
A. Tebhaga movement
B. Chuars movement
C. Bhils movement
D. Kolis movement
Ans: A
3. Which of the following uprising/rebellion is also known as Ulgulan (great commotion)?
A. Ramosi Uprising
B. Munda Uprising/Rebellion
C. Santhal Rebellion
D. Kol Uprising
Ans: B
4. Which of the following is not correct pair?
A. Tebhaga movement- Lucknow
B. Bardoli Satygarha- Gujarat
C. All India Kisan Congress- Lucknow
D. Eka Movement- Madari Pasi
Ans: A
5. Which of the following statement (s) is/are correct about Kol Revolt?
A. It rose when region leased out to Hindu, Muslim and Sikh money-lenders for revenue collection.
B. The most significant uprising was the Durjol Singh led revolt in 1789-90 which was brutally put down by the government.
C. Both A & B
D. Neither A nor B

Ans: A

6. The Santhals used to call the outsiders by which of the following name?

A. Daman
B. Kayali
C. Dikus
D. Chenchus

Ans. C

7. Consider the following events:

1. Indigo Revolt
2. Santhal Rebellion
3. Deccan Riot
4. Mutiny of the Sepoys

The correct chronological sequence of these events is:

A. 4, 2, 1, 3
B. 4, 2, 3, 1
C. 2, 4, 3, 1
D. 2, 4, 1, 3

Answer: D

8. The origin of "Ho tribal uprising" of British period is belong to which of the following area?

A. Singhbhum
B. Midnapore
C. Jaisalmer
D. Rampa chodavaram

Ans. A

Some practice questions for Mains:

9. Although tribal movements initially had a different nature from the national movement, in later years the two movements merged. Explain.

10. Even though the tribal uprisings were isolated from one another in time and location, they shared some basic traits. Discuss.