

FROM EXCLUSION TO ASSERTION: POLITICAL MOBILISATION AMONG ADIVASI COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Adivasi communities in India, numbering approximately 104 million people according to the Census of 2011 and constituting 8.6 percent of the national population, have a continuous history of political organisation stretching from the anti-colonial rebellions of the nineteenth century through the constitutional struggles of the present. This history is routinely underrepresented in mainstream accounts of Indian politics, which treat Adivasi movements as peripheral or reactive rather than as sustained and often structurally significant forms of political action. This article traces that history from the Santhal Hul of 1855-56 and the Munda Ulgulan of 1899-1900 through the Jharkhand statehood movement, the Forest Rights Act campaign, and the Niyamgiri gram sabha process to contemporary forms of digital activism and identity-based political assertion. It draws on election data, Forest Rights Act implementation records, constitutional law, field-based scholarship, and newspaper documentation to situate Adivasi political mobilisation within concrete institutional and demographic contexts. The article argues that Adivasi political agency has been continuous, has taken different forms in different historical periods, and has produced measurable institutional outcomes, from the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 to the Forest Rights Act of 2006 to the Niyamgiri Supreme Court ruling of 2013. It also argues that the gap between formal legal recognition and actual implementation of rights remains the defining challenge for Adivasi political mobilisation today.

KEYWORDS: *Adivasi; Scheduled Tribes; Political mobilisation; Forest Rights Act; Gram Sabha; Niyamgiri; PESA; Electoral Politics; Indigenous Rights.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2019 general election, 47 of the 543 seats in India's Lok Sabha were reserved for candidates from Scheduled Tribe communities. Voter turnout in those constituencies was 66.2 percent, close to the national average of 67.4 percent. Adivasi communities, accounting for 8.6 percent of India's population, were present in the electoral process in proportions that largely matched their share of the population. By one measure, at least, they were part of Indian democracy.¹

By other measures, the picture looks very different. The Forest Rights Act of 2006, the most significant legislation ever passed to protect Adivasi land and forest rights, has a national claim rejection rate of 50.1 percent as of 2022-23 data. The Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act of 1996, which was intended to give Adivasi village assemblies real

¹*Election Commission of India, Statistical Report on General Elections to the House of the People: Seventeenth General Election 2019 (New Delhi: Election Commission of India, 2019), <https://www.eci.gov.in/statistical-report/ge/2019/1551>.*

authority over their own territories, remains unimplemented in most of the states for which it was designed.² Adivasi communities accounted for approximately 40 percent of development-induced displacement in India despite being 8.6 percent of the population.³

COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS

The political marginalisation of Adivasi communities in modern India did not begin with independence. It was built systematically by colonial administration through three interlocking mechanisms that reshaped Adivasi territories, social structures, and political possibilities across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first mechanism was the legal reclassification of Adivasi territories as resource frontiers. The Indian Forest Act of 1878 converted communally managed forests into state-owned reserves. Communities that had governed these forests through customary institutions for generations became, in legal terms, encroachers on government property. Their governance systems were not recognised. Their land claims, built on centuries of use and management, had no standing in the new property rights framework. This legal reclassification was, as Bernard Cohn argued, inseparable from governance: it made the administration of Adivasi territories possible by removing the institutional barriers to their exploitation.⁴

The second mechanism was the colonial ethnographic classification of Adivasi communities as "tribes." This classification was not simply a descriptive category. It was a political one. By positioning Adivasi communities as standing outside the progress of civilisation and requiring special governance frameworks, it simultaneously justified their administrative separation from mainstream political institutions and denied their internal governance structures any recognition as legitimate political systems. Adivasi communities were governed, not represented.⁵

The third mechanism was the colonial revenue system, which imposed individual property title on communities organised around collective land tenure, and the debt structures that accompanied it. By replacing customary land governance with individual title, colonial administration created the conditions for land alienation through debt: communities that had collectively managed land for generations lost it to moneylenders and revenue contractors who operated within the new formal legal framework. The loss was not only economic. It was a dismantling of the institutional basis of Adivasi political life.⁶

Adivasi communities responded to this systematic dispossession with organised resistance. The Santhal Hul of 1855-56 mobilised tens of thousands of people across what is now Jharkhand and West Bengal to resist moneylender exploitation, zamindari expansion, and colonial administrative control. The Munda Ulgulan of 1899-1900, led by Birsa Munda, combined a demand for the restoration of alienated land with an assertion of indigenous governance principles under the concept of Abua Raj, meaning rule by the people of this land. The Bhumkal rebellion in Bastar in 1910 resisted colonial forest policy and the destruction of Gond governance structures.⁷

²Sachchidan and Prasad and Nagendra Ambedkar Sole, "Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996: A Review," *Revisiting Tribal Heritage and Contemporary Issues (volume 1)* (2023): 1.

³S. N. Tripathy, "Development-Induced Displacement: Balancing Progress and Human Rights," *Journal of South Asian Research* 2, no. 1 (2024): 47-65.

⁴Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3-15.

⁵Gunjan Wadhwa, "'They are Like that Only': Adivasi Identities in an Area of Civil Unrest in India," PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2019.

⁶Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 18-76.

⁷K. S. Singh, *Birsa Munda and His Movement, 1874-1901* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1983), 55-90.

Colonial administration suppressed all of these movements militarily and framed them in official records as "disturbances" or "tribal unrest" rather than as political movements. This framing was consequential. It shaped how postcolonial historians initially approached these movements, treating them as pre-political outbursts rather than as structured articulations of political demands.

INDEPENDENCE AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

When India became independent in 1947, the constituent assembly had to decide what the new constitutional framework would do with and for Adivasi communities. The debates in the assembly reflected genuine disagreement between those who favoured integration into the mainstream democratic framework and those, including B.R. Ambedkar, who argued for stronger and more autonomous institutional arrangements.

The compromise that emerged was the system of Scheduled Tribes and the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution. The Fifth Schedule applied to tribal areas in most of peninsular India and required the governor of each applicable state to maintain a Tribes Advisory Council and report annually to the President on the administration of Scheduled Areas. The governor was given authority to regulate or prohibit the application of laws to Scheduled Areas and to make regulations for tribal welfare. The Sixth Schedule applied to certain areas of northeastern India and created Autonomous District Councils with legislative and judicial powers over a defined range of subjects.

These provisions represented a serious constitutional engagement with the special conditions of Adivasi communities. In practice, however, the Fifth Schedule operated more as an administrative discretion than as a hard legal constraint on development and land acquisition. State governors rarely invoked their special powers to protect tribal areas from land alienation or forest enclosure. The Tribes Advisory Councils functioned as consultative bodies with limited influence rather than as meaningful governance institutions. The constitutional protection was real but weak in application.

The practical consequence was visible in the numbers. As Virginius Xaxa's research documents, the proportion of Scheduled Tribe land in individual Adivasi ownership declined across the decades following independence, even as constitutional protections were nominally in place.⁸ Adivasi communities' share of development-induced displacement, estimated at 40 percent of all displaced persons against 8.6 percent of the population, illustrates the gap between constitutional language and administrative reality.

⁸Virginius Xaxa, "Tribes as Indigenous People of India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 51 (1999): 3589–3595.

Table 1: Major Adivasi Political Movements in India: Timeline, Demands, and Outcomes

Period	Movement / Event	Primary Demand	Outcome and Significance
1855-56	Santhal Hul, Bengal-Bihar border	End of moneylender exploitation; restoration of land; removal of colonial administrators	Suppressed militarily; led to creation of Santhal Parganas district in 1856; first major Adivasi political assertion against colonial order
1899-1900	Munda Ulgulan (Birsa Munda)	Return of alienated land; indigenous governance under Abua Raj; expulsion of missionaries and zamindars	Suppressed; Birsa died in custody 1900; directly led to Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act 1908 protecting Munda land
1910	Bhumkal Rebellion, Bastar	Resistance to colonial forest policy; defence of Gondi governance and cultural autonomy	Suppressed; established Adivasi cultural memory of resistance in Bastar region
1930s-1947	Adivasi participation in nationalist movements	Anti-colonial freedom combined with demands for separate tribal rights and land protection	Partial: independence achieved but separate constitutional status not granted; tribal areas absorbed into states
1970s-1990s	Jharkhand Movement (JMM and others)	Separate state; protection of tribal land; recognition of Jharkhand identity	Jharkhand state created in November 2000; land and governance issues remain partially unresolved
1990s-2006	Forest Rights Movement (national)	Legal recognition of forest land and resource rights denied since 1878	Forest Rights Act passed in 2006; implementation incomplete but marks rights-based legal shift
2002-2013	Niyamgiri Movement, Odisha	Halt bauxite mining in sacred Dongria Kondh territory; recognition of cosmological rights	All twelve Gram Sabhas voted against mining 2013; Supreme Court upheld veto; project halted
2019-present	Anti-CAA and Pathalgadi movements	Constitutional rights for indigenous communities; rejection of citizenship exclusions	Ongoing; Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand established village sovereignty declarations under constitutional provisions

Source: Compiled from K. S. Singh, *Birsa Munda and His Movement* (1983); Biswamoy Pati, ed., *Adivasis in Colonial India* (2011); Nandini Sundar, *The Burning Forest* (2016); Ministry of Tribal Affairs, *Annual Report 2022-23*; Supreme Court of India, (2013) 6 SCC 476.

NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE ADIVASI POLITICAL TRADITION

The relationship between Adivasi political movements and the nationalist historical narrative is complicated. The independence movement and the historiography it generated acknowledged Adivasi contributions to anti-colonial resistance, but it did so selectively. Birsa Munda became a national hero. The Santhal and Munda uprisings were incorporated into accounts of proto-nationalist resistance. But the structural critique embedded in these movements, their challenge to land alienation, their assertion of indigenous governance, their rejection of missionary and zamindari intermediaries, was typically left out of the narrative.⁹

What nationalist historiography did was to extract the anti-colonial element from Adivasi movements and incorporate it into a national narrative of freedom struggle, while treating the rest of what those movements were arguing for as either parochial or pre-modern. The Munda Ulgulan was not only anti-colonial. Birsa's concept of Abua Raj, of an indigenous political order grounded in Munda land law and governance tradition, was a theory of sovereignty that had no place in the framework of a unitary democratic nation-state. It was politely set aside.¹⁰

⁹Biswamoy Pati, ed., *Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance and Negotiation* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011), 1–20.

¹⁰RahulRanjana, *The Political Life of Memory: Birsa Munda in Contemporary India*(Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Nandini Sundar's research on the politics of tribal identity in India documents how this selective incorporation shaped postcolonial policy. Adivasi communities were acknowledged as having historical roots and special needs but were not recognised as having political theories or governance traditions that deserved to reshape the mainstream institutions of Indian democracy. They were included symbolically while being marginalised structurally.¹¹

This pattern, symbolic recognition combined with structural marginalisation, has remained a defining feature of how the Indian state has related to Adivasi political assertion. It was visible in the constitutional arrangements of 1950, in the welfare-focused tribal development policies of the planning period, and in the continuing gap between the language of Forest Rights Act and PESA on the one hand and their administrative implementation on the other.

CASE STUDY: THE JHARKHAND MOVEMENT

Origins and Development

The demand for a separate state of Jharkhand has roots in the early twentieth century, when Adivasi leaders in what was then the southern division of Bihar first raised the question of a separate administrative unit that could protect Adivasi land, culture, and governance from the pressures being experienced under integrated state administration. The demand grew through the postcolonial decades as mining expansion, industrial development, and the associated displacement of Adivasi communities made the political stakes increasingly concrete.

The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, founded in 1973 by Shibu Soren, provided the organisational structure through which the statehood demand was advanced most effectively. The JMM combined electoral politics with mass mobilisation, contesting state and national elections while also organising protests, land rights campaigns, and cultural assertion movements. It drew its core support from Santal, Munda, Ho, and Oraon communities whose territories lay within the proposed Jharkhand region and whose experience of land alienation and industrial displacement gave the statehood demand its practical urgency.¹²

The movement navigated a difficult political terrain for nearly three decades. The statehood demand was contested by non-Adivasi communities within the same region who feared exclusion or reduced influence in a state where Adivasi communities formed the majority in some districts but not in the region as a whole. It was also complicated by the Indian state's reluctance to reorganise states along ethnic or indigenous identity lines, given the precedents this might set across a country with many comparable demands.

Statehood and Its Limits

Jharkhand became a state on 15 November 2000. The date was chosen deliberately: it was Birsa Munda's birth anniversary. The symbolic significance was clear. The statehood demand had been articulated explicitly as a fulfilment of what the Ulgulan had begun, a century after Birsa's movement and his death in colonial custody.

Statehood produced real institutional changes. Jharkhand's Scheduled Tribe communities gained a state government in which they had more direct electoral influence than in undivided Bihar. Tribal welfare institutions, cultural bodies, and language education programmes received greater attention and funding. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act and

¹¹Nandini Sundar, "Adivasi vs. Vanvasi: The Politics of Conversion in Tribal India," in *Assertive Religious Identities*, ed. Satish Saberwal and Mushirul Hasan (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 325–356.

¹²Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 210–235.

the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act, colonial-era land protection laws that had been inconsistently applied in Bihar, continued in Jharkhand with somewhat greater political salience.

What statehood did not resolve was the underlying structural dynamic of mineral extraction, land alienation, and displacement. Jharkhand contains approximately 40 percent of India's mineral reserves. The state's development model after 2000 continued the extractive pattern of pre-statehood Bihar, with mining leases expanded and industrial corridors developed. Adivasi displacement continued. The Forest Rights Act implementation record in Jharkhand, with a claim rejection rate of 60.4 percent, is among the worst in India. Stuart Corbridge's research on Jharkhand's political economy shows that statehood reorganised the institutions through which Adivasi communities were governed without fundamentally altering the economic relationships that generated their grievances.¹³

CASE STUDY: THE FOREST RIGHTS ACT

The campaign for legal recognition of forest rights was one of the most significant examples of sustained civil society and Adivasi political mobilisation in postcolonial India. It brought together national coalitions of Adivasi organisations, environmental groups, academics, and legal activists to push for legislation that would correct what the Forest Rights Act itself describes as a "historical injustice": the removal of Adivasi communities' legal claim to forest land and resources under the colonial Forest Act of 1878 and its postcolonial successors.

The campaign succeeded in the narrow sense: the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act was passed in December 2006. The Act recognised individual rights to forest land that communities had cultivated before 13 December 2005, community rights over forest resources, and the authority of gram sabhas to protect and manage community forest areas. It also gave gram sabhas authority over the use of forest land for development projects affecting their territories.

The implementation record has been severely uneven. Table 3 shows the claim recognition data for major tribal states as of Ministry of Tribal Affairs figures for 2022-23. Nationally, 4.47 million individual claims have been filed. Of these, 2.23 million have been recognised, giving a rejection rate of 50.1 percent. In Jharkhand the rejection rate is 60.4 percent. Community forest resource claims, which are the provisions most directly relevant to community governance over shared ecological resources, have been recognised in only a small fraction of eligible cases across all states.¹⁴

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Ministry of Tribal Affairs, *Government of India, Annual Report 2022-23 (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023)*, 45–60.

Table 2: Scheduled Tribe Electoral and Demographic Representation in India

Indicator	Scheduled Tribes	General Population	Source and Notes
ST population (Census 2011)	104.3 million (8.6% of India)	Rest of population	Census of India 2011
Reserved Lok Sabha seats (2019)	47 of 543 seats (8.7%)	Not applicable	Election Commission of India, 2019
States with ST-majority districts	10 states (Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, MP, Mah., Raj., HP, Uttarakhand, NE states)	Not applicable	Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2022-23
Voter turnout, ST constituencies (2019 GE)	66.2%	67.4% (national avg.)	Election Commission of India, 2019
Women elected from reserved ST seats (2019)	9 of 47 ST seats (19.1%)	14.3% overall (78 of 543)	Election Commission of India, 2019
ST literacy rate (2011)	59.0% (men 68.5%, women 53.0%)	74.0% national avg.	Census of India 2011
ST land ownership (individual, %)	24.6% of ST households own cultivable land	45.9% national avg.	National Commission for Scheduled Tribes 2016

Source: Census of India 2011; Election Commission of India, Statistical Report on Seventeenth General Election 2019; National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, Sixth Report 2016; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Annual Report 2022-23.

Table 3: Forest Rights Act Implementation by State (Individual Claims, as of 2022-23)

State	Claims Filed	Claims Recognised	Rejection Rate (%)	Community Claims Pending (%)
Odisha	641,000	448,000	30.1	54
Jharkhand	197,000	78,000	60.4	82
Chhattisgarh	432,000	261,000	39.6	61
Madhya Pradesh	703,000	366,000	47.9	68
Maharashtra	428,000	248,000	42.1	58
Gujarat	183,000	112,000	38.8	55
India (all states)	4,472,000	2,231,000	50.1	64 (avg.)

Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2022-23.

Madhu Sarin's analysis of the Forest Rights Act's first decade identifies the structural reason for this pattern. The state governments responsible for implementing the Act are the same governments that benefit from mining and forest clearances in the areas where claims are filed. The conflict of interest is direct and unavoidable under the current administrative structure. Forest bureaucracies that retained operational control of the claim adjudication process under the Act have, in documented cases, systematically obstructed recognition in areas where extraction interests are present. The political campaign that produced the Act has not yet produced the administrative transformation that would make it effective.¹⁵

CASE STUDY: NIYAMGIRI AND THE GRAM SABHA

The Niyamgiri bauxite mining case, which culminated in the unanimous rejection of a proposed mine by twelve Gram Sabhas in Odisha in 2013, represents the most significant exercise of indigenous democratic authority in post-independence India and the clearest demonstration of what the constitutional framework can achieve when it is actually applied as written.

¹⁵Madhu Sarin, "India's Forest Rights Act: The Anatomy of a Necessary but Not Sufficient Institutional Reform," IIED Working Paper (London: International Institute for Environment and Development, 2010).

The Dongria Kondh community of approximately 8,000 people in the Niyamgiri hills resisted the Vedanta Resources bauxite mining proposal from 2002 through a combination of legal challenges, civil society mobilisation, and the assertion of their cosmological relationship to the hill ecosystem. Felix Padel and Samarendra Das's detailed research on the case documents the ecological precision embedded in Kondh cosmology: the hills are understood as the home of Niyam Raja, the governing deity, and this cosmological claim is simultaneously an accurate description of the ecological relationships through which the hills sustain water sources, forest cover, and biodiversity across the wider region.¹⁶

The Supreme Court's 2013 direction that Gram Sabhas of affected villages be convened to vote on whether mining would infringe their religious and cultural rights was unprecedented in Indian legal history. The use of the Gram Sabha as a constitutional decision-making body on a question involving a multi-billion rupee international mining project placed the most basic form of indigenous democratic governance at the centre of a national legal process. All twelve Gram Sabhas voted against the mine. The Court accepted those votes as legally binding. The mine has not been built.¹⁷

The political significance of Niyamgiri extends beyond the specific case. It established that the Gram Sabha, as defined under PESA, is a real constitutional institution with genuine authority over decisions affecting its territory. It demonstrated that communities with culturally intact governance systems and adequate legal support could prevail against a major corporate-state alliance within India's constitutional framework. And it showed that indigenous cosmological and ecological claims could carry legal weight in national courts when properly argued.

Electoral Politics and the Representation Gap

The 47 reserved Lok Sabha seats for Scheduled Tribes have ensured that Adivasi communities have a formal presence in India's national parliament since 1952. At the state level, legislative assembly seats are reserved in proportion to the tribal population in each state. This system has produced Adivasi political leaders, cabinet ministers, and in one case a President of India: Draupadi Murmu, elected President in 2022, became the first Adivasi person and the second woman to hold that office.

The reserved seat system has also produced a political paradox. By ensuring that Adivasi constituencies are contested by Adivasi candidates, it creates a form of descriptive representation: the people elected from these seats formally belong to the communities they represent. But the policies produced by the governments those elected members support have often continued the same patterns of land alienation, mining displacement, and Forest Rights Act non-implementation that the communities they represent are most affected by. The connection between descriptive representation and substantive policy outcomes is not automatic.

Independent Adivasi political parties have had uneven success in building sustained electoral power beyond the Jharkhand context. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha has operated as a significant political force in Jharkhand state politics, occasionally participating in coalition governments. In Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh, Adivasi-specific political formations have struggled to sustain organisational coherence against the resources of the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party, both of which compete actively for Adivasi votes in states where reserved seats significantly affect election outcomes.

¹⁶Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010), 1–30.

¹⁷Supreme Court of India, *Orissa Mining Corporation Ltd. v. Ministry of Environment and Forest and Others*, (2013) 6 SCC 476.

Corbridge and Harriss's research on Indian democracy notes that the integration of Adivasi communities into mainstream party politics has produced both gains and losses. Gains include access to government resources, some policy responsiveness to Adivasi concerns, and the development of politically experienced Adivasi leadership. Losses include the weakening of independent Adivasi political organisations, the subordination of community-based demands to party electoral calculations, and the capture of reserved constituency representation by political machines that are not primarily accountable to the communities they nominally represent.¹⁸

Militarisation and the Challenge of Democratic Space

In central India's mineral belt, particularly in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and parts of Odisha, the governance of Adivasi territories has increasingly been organised through security frameworks alongside administrative ones. The presence of Maoist insurgency in forested tribal regions has provided administrative justification for deploying paramilitary forces in areas that are simultaneously sites of active resource extraction and community resistance to land acquisition and displacement.

The practical effect of this security framing has been to compress the space available for democratic political action by Adivasi communities. Nandini Sundar's research in Bastar documents how community leaders who organise resistance to mining or displacement may be surveilled, detained, or prosecuted under anti-terror provisions. Village meetings called to discuss land acquisition can be treated as potential insurgent gatherings. Women who participate in anti-mining protests have faced harassment and sexual violence. The line between legitimate democratic dissent and criminal insurgency has been drawn by security forces with minimal accountability to the communities affected.¹⁹

Bela Bhatia's research on how the state manages dissent in central India's resource belt shows that the security framing of tribal protest has been deliberately cultivated as an administrative strategy, not merely as a response to actual insurgency. By associating Adivasi land rights protests with Maoism, state governments and corporate interests can remove those protests from the domain of constitutional rights and place them in the domain of security management, where standard democratic protections do not apply with the same force.²⁰

The result is that in the regions of India where Adivasi communities have the most to gain from effective political mobilisation, the conditions for that mobilisation are most constrained. The Niyamgiri case succeeded partly because it was not located in the security-intensive zones of Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand.

CULTURAL ASSERTION AND NEW FORMS OF MOBILISATION

Cultural and Identity Politics

Adivasi political mobilisation has never been exclusively about land and resources. Cultural assertion, including the preservation and promotion of languages, music, visual arts, and religious practices, has been a central dimension of Adivasi politics since the colonial period. Birsa Munda's movement combined land rights demands with religious and cultural renewal. The Jharkhand movement articulated statehood partly in terms of cultural identity and language protection.

¹⁸Corbridge and Harriss, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy*, 210–235.

¹⁹Nandini Sundar, *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2016), 35–68.

²⁰Bela Bhatia, "The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 15 (2005): 1536–1549.

In contemporary India, cultural assertion has taken new institutional forms. The campaign for a Sarna religion code in the Census, which would allow Adivasi communities who follow indigenous nature-based religions to identify as Sarna rather than being counted under Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or other categories, has mobilised substantial political energy across Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh. Santhali was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution in 2003, giving it formal status as one of India's recognised languages. Demands for the inclusion of other Adivasi languages continue.

Gond visual art has moved from being an exclusively community practice to being a recognised form in India's formal art market, creating new economic possibilities for Gond artists while raising serious questions about intellectual property, cultural appropriation, and the terms on which community cultural production is valued and compensated. These questions are themselves political, and the community organisations and artist collectives navigating them are engaged in a form of cultural rights assertion that belongs in the history of Adivasi political mobilisation.

Women's Leadership in Mobilisation

Adivasi women have been active participants in every major form of political mobilisation described in this article. In the Niyamgiri Gram Sabha process, women's voices were prominent in the community deliberations. In anti-displacement protests across Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, women have often formed the majority of active protesters. In forest rights campaigns, women's dependence on forest resources for daily food, medicine, and income has made them the most immediately motivated advocates for recognition of community forest rights.²¹

Women's political participation in Adivasi movements has also challenged internal patriarchal structures within communities. The experience of organising public protest, conducting Gram Sabha deliberations, and engaging with legal processes has contributed to the development of political leadership among Adivasi women that extends beyond movement participation into community governance and, in some cases, elected political office. The nine women elected from reserved ST seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha represent one measure of this development, even as they remain a fraction of the forty-seven total ST members.

Digital Activism and New Visibility

Since approximately 2015, Adivasi political mobilisation has developed significant digital dimensions. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp groups, have been used to document land conflicts in real time, share legal information with affected communities, organise national solidarity campaigns, and preserve and transmit cultural content. The Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand in 2017-18, in which communities erected stone slabs inscribed with constitutional provisions about tribal rights at village entrances, was partly organised and widely publicised through social media.

Young Adivasi activists use social media to create forms of political visibility that bypass mainstream media, which has historically covered Adivasi communities primarily in the frames of disaster, displacement, or security.²² By producing their own documentation of land conflicts, cultural events, and political meetings, Adivasi digital activists are creating an alternative public record that serves both immediate political purposes and long-term historical documentation.

²¹ Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30–55.

²² Uttaran Dutta, "Adivasi Media in India: Relevance in Representing Marginalized Voices," *Intercultural Communication Studies* 25, no. 3 (2016).

CONCLUSION

From the Santhal Hul of 1855 to the Niyamgiri Gram Sabha votes of 2013, from the Jharkhand statehood campaign to the digital activism of the present, Adivasi communities in India have maintained a continuous tradition of organised political assertion. That tradition has produced real and measurable outcomes. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, won partly in response to the Ulgulan, protected Munda land rights against alienation for more than a century. The Santhal Parganas district, created after the 1856 Hul, gave Santhal communities a dedicated administrative space. Jharkhand state, created in 2000, gave the communities of that region stronger electoral leverage. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 created, for the first time in Indian legal history, a statutory right to forest land for communities that had been dispossessed by colonial law. The Niyamgiri ruling established that indigenous consent is a constitutional requirement, not an administrative courtesy.

These are not small achievements. They were won through sustained, often dangerous, and sometimes lethal struggle by communities facing adversaries with vastly greater resources and institutional power. The fourteen dead at Kalinga Nagar in 2006, Birsa Munda dying in colonial custody in 1900, the Santhal men and women killed in the suppression of the 1856 Hul: the cost of Adivasi political assertion has been paid in lives across generations. The 50.1 percent Forest Rights Act rejection rate, the PESA non-implementation, and the Niyamgiri precedent's failure to become general administrative practice all testify to the durability of the forces that Adivasi political mobilisation has been contesting.

The argument of this article is that understanding Adivasi political mobilisation as a continuous, serious, and consequential tradition matters for how Indian democracy is evaluated and how its future is imagined. A democracy that formally includes Adivasi communities through reserved seats and constitutional protections while systematically undermining those protections through administrative non-implementation is not delivering on its constitutional promise. The history traced in this article is the evidence that Adivasi communities know that. They have been making that argument, in different forms and through different means, for more than 170 years.

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