Adivasi Insurrections in India: the 1857 Rebellion in central India, its wider context and historiography

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INTRODUCTION
The adivasis of central India found themselves in the early nineteenth century in a time of flux, caught between the demands of competing hegemonies: the sub-empires of the Maratha Peshwa, and Bhonsle, Holkar and Scindia Rajas – all part of the Maratha confederacy – were in decline after the Second Anglo-Maratha War of 1803-05. At the same time, British hegemony had yet to establish itself in the newly ceded and conquered territories. This included the Narmada Valley, directly ceded to British control, and also the province of Chattisgarh, which was administered by a British officers on a behalf of the Nagpur Raja after 1818. Much of this area, especially the northern half known as ‘Mahakoshal’, was densely forested, hilly, and the home to a variety of adivasi chiefdoms. None were isolated from the planes but all had established, by treaty or attrition, a considerable degree of independence. That autonomy was progressively worn down throughout the 19th century in a manner largely invisible to historians. We are able, nonetheless, to glimpse the political life of these localities through their involvement in broader political movements of the period. It is at these moments that the adivasi comes into ‘existence’ in historical records. All too often they are absorbed into broader narratives of the movements of which they form part. However, if they are regarded and addressed as separate phenomena, we may be allowed an insight into the challenges being faced by adivasi communities in this period and the particular role that armed force and insurrection played in the constitution of adivasi polities. It is only by such an exclusive attention that adivasi insurgency may be given meaning by historians.

1. TRIBALS AND RESISTANCE IN INDIA: A SELECT HISTORIOGRAPHY
The study of adivasi or ‘tribal’ insurrections has significantly diminished in recent decades in the writing of Indian history. In the 1960s up until the early 1980s there were a plethora of books on 'Tribal movements' in India. However, apart from Ajay Skaria's Hybrid Histories, Felix Padel on the Khonds, Denis Vidal's quirky study entitled Truth and Violence on Rajasthan, and Thomas Weber's brief
study of the Chipko movement there has been a paucity of new work in the past decade.\footnote{Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories, Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India* (New Delhi: OUP, 1999)}

The publication of K.S. Singh’s famous work on *Birsa Munda and his Movement* in 1983, at the height of the campaign for the creation of a separate adivasi state in Jharkhand, appeared to anticipate a wealth of new work of the same genre. This anticipation was further heightened by Ram Guha's *The Unquiet Woods* and David Arnold's essay on the Gudem-Rampa insurrections – both also published in the early 1980s.\footnote{K.S. Singh, *Birsa Munda and his Movement 1874-1901, A Study of a Millenarian Movement in Chhotangpur* (New Delhi: OUP, 1983).} Together these seemed to indicate the possibility of in-depth historical studies of largely autonomous adivasi communities which highlighted the continuity of struggle from the remote past until the present. They were criticised for their romanticisation of the movements they addressed, but had an important impact nonetheless. Since these studies appeared, the interest in violent forms of adivasi self-assertion - as reflected in published sources - has not been maintained. This decline has been accelerated following the fortuitous creation of new tribal states in Uttarkhand, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh in 1998. This leaves the last vestige of adivasi separatism in the north-east of India, where it has chiefly been a focus of concern for political scientists.

The reason for this dearth of historical work lies firstly in problems of access: restrictions applied to research on communalism – as I keenly felt myself having tried and failed to obtain visa clearance to work in the Madhya Pradesh archives in the late '80s. Even Indian scholars have been turned away, the few exceptions including Nandini Sundar, who completed her study of Bastar (*Subalterns and Sovereigns*) with the sympathetic help of an official and contacts supplied by others. Walter Huber's earlier study of the adivasis of Bastar and their opposition to World Bank forestry projects in the 1980s was completed without official sanction (unsurprisingly) and on subsequent occasions both he, Alfred and Simeran Gell have been summarily arrested and removed from adivasi areas.

The only studies of adivasis that have achieved official approval in past decades, with the exception of a few favoured individuals (such as the director of the anthropological survey of India), have been those that confined themselves strictly to developmental or cultural issues. On the issue of access it is of course arguable that the Government of India has good reason to be reticent: the interference of
foreign missionaries is often held responsible for the rise of militant self-assertion in Chota-Nagpur and the north-east, primarily through the subversive tactic of promoting education and literacy. Keenly aware of their success, the RSS has targeted the same areas, so that as well as being regarded as vote banks, some are also now centres of conversion conflict. The problem with this analysis however, is that Christian missions were banned in Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh as early as 1956, and naxalism has flourished in several areas far removed from missionary influence of any persuasion.

Another factor in the declining interest in adivasi insurrections has been the ambivalent attitude of scholars working on peasants and adivasis, particularly those associated with the subaltern school. Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* forcefully argued that there was more often than not an equation of interests between subaltern peasants and adivasis, thus undermining any notion of the exceptionalism of adivasi revolt. The result was that several subsequent studies preferred to elide adivasi and peasant insurrection, albeit subtly, and to confine themselves to the nationalist period, when these similarities were most apparent.³

Guha's position is analogous to that articulated by Eric Stokes in the 1970s, who spoke of 'primary' and secondary or 'proto-nationalist' resistance movements to colonial rule: the former being backward looking and contrasting with the latter, characterised as organised and 'modern' movements which somehow anticipated or paralleled the growth of nationalism.⁴ Both approaches were avowedly structural interpretations of the conditions for revolt. For Guha it was obvious that there remained amongst the Santhals a suspicion about the 'dikus' or outsiders with whom they were otherwise collaborating.

The divorce of subaltern studies from adivasi insurrections was accentuated by Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* and the re-alignment of subalternity along the axis of public and private life (the importance of which division in colonial India was emphasised by David Washbrook as long ago as 1985). This had the beneficial effect - for some aspects of social history - of shifting focus away from organised political activity into everyday domestic life.

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However, in the process adivasi insurrections, loud, organised, and very public events, were left out in the cold.⁵

There may well have been convergences between adivasi and peasant interests during the nationalist period. They certainly existed in other periods – as highlighted by Guha, which raises the issue of the degree of that convergence, whether it was confined purely to material concerns, and the extent to which adivasi and peasant might have social, cultural, political and even kin relations in common. This in turn brings us to another major problem in the study of adivasi revolts: the trend in recent scholarship to emphasise the elements in common between adivasi and popular Hindu religious beliefs, and the importance of the economic interdependence of adivasi and peasant economies throughout history. G.D. Sontheimer is among those who have described adivasi beliefs as simply occupying one within a range of Hindu traditions including folk and tribal religion, the teaching and work of Brahmins, asceticism and Bhakti.⁶ K.S. Singh has made a similar argument in *Tribal Society in India*⁷, arguing in one chapter that 'Tribalisation' and 'Sanskritisation' within India is a dialogic process making Hinduism 'tribal' as much as the other way around and hence leading to the observable proliferation of re-incarnations and deities.⁸ Lawrence Babb, David Hardiman and Hermann Kulke have at different times argued much the same thing.⁹

A possibly greater threat to any idea of adivasi autonomy has recently come from Sumit Guha, whose *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*, argued that adivasis could become peasants and vice versa, that ‘Certain habitats and habituses persisted through time – but their geographical locations and human occupants were in recurrent flux.’¹⁰ This was not an original argument, being evident in for, example, the work of Paul Hockings and others on the Nilgiri

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⁵ Sumit Sarkar, critique of Subaltern History in *Writing Social History*.
⁷ K S Singh, *Tribal Society in India* (New Delhi : Manohar,1985)
⁸ A similar argument concerning diversity can be made about other religions apart from Hinduism, including the professedly monotheistic such as Christianity. K.S. Singh’s is therefore both a strong and a weak characterisation of processes of sanskritisation.
Hills. Nonetheless, Sumit Guha has taken it to a subtle and well documented extreme.

These ideas are arguably catastrophic for any attempt to treat adivasi insurrections as unique and special events. This problem of categorisation may arise, at its inception, from the colonial endeavour to stereotype and essentialise the adivasi, which has in turn provoked a determined postcolonial back-lash. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the adivasis in India are more differentiated and sophisticated than the 'indigenous peoples' elsewhere in the world with whom they are often compared. The U.N.'s Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (ICIHI) thus found itself reduced (as is well known) to defining adives in India and indigenous groups elsewhere simply as 'peoples affected by the past 500 years of colonialism', and describing them as 'an unresolved part of the legacy of colonialism'. This leaves entirely up in the air the problem of who and what they were before the advent of colonialism.

It is incontestable that the concept of adivasis as an India-wide community – notwithstanding the dasus of vedic literature - did not exist among the adivasis themselves before the twentieth century. Most adivasi groups, societies or polities (call them what you will) had little or no contact with each other and shared neither language, culture, religion, political system or means of subsistence. This remains true for most up to the present day. Of course, the same applies to those who are professedly 'Hindu' – the concept incorporating groups that are widely divergent in language, customs and rituals. Those who have sought to identify common interests and differences amongst such widespread communities have usually been elites following an elite-focussed political agenda – most conspicuously to begin with, of course, the British.

2. ADIVASIS AND RESISTANCE: TOWARDS A NEW PERSPECTIVE

To resolve the issues raised in the preceding section, we should begin by leaving aside the traditional general anthropological markers of 'tribal societies', which I have argued elsewhere might fit a few extremely isolated groups such as the Hill Maria of Bastar, but are otherwise thoroughly inadequate to deal with Indian


circumstances. It is preferable too to avoid depicting them as merely ethnic minorities, since this can amount to little more than a coded way in which to bring back into social anthropology the discredited discourse of race. We should leave aside also the broad definition of many adivasi 'groups', such as those labelled as the 'Gond', since these include numerous kin groups organised politically in many different ways, who rarely inter-marry and are even linguistically discrete.

This line of argument has been dismissed by some as an extreme form of 'cultural relativism': a position which holds that all categories and concepts are socially constructed and that an objective understanding of the adivasi is impossible. However, I am not arguing that adivasis or tribal societies in India do not exist: of course they do, and independently of our accounts of them. Unfortunately studies of the adivasis rarely come from the adivasis themselves (or if so only at one moment in time) but for the most part from outsiders whose descriptions are unavoidably determined by their own particular predilections, agendas and perspectives. In the study of adivasis these perspectives have been highly divergent and commonly politically motivated, which is why our accounts have become so contradictory and have changed so greatly over time. To argue that there is no one adivasi type is not therefore to deny the possibility that the many 'adivasis' which history has encountered over time might still share elements that one can usefully analytically describe in common.

My preferred solution would be to approach adivasis groups as 'polities', or communities with a shared sense of political sovereignty, hierarchy and rituals of rule which distinguish them from the norms and practice of Hindu and Muslim states within the subcontinent. An immediate objection to this may be the fact that many adivasi polities from the seventeenth century onwards were ruled by Hindu sovereigns who claimed hegemony over large regions and numerous tribal 'chiefs'. Generally, however, as Felix Padel has shown, this was a formalised relationship of mutual respect between adivasis and Hindu kingdoms and seen as an alliance as much as allegiance. The relationship between the adivasi and the Hindu ruler is vividly demonstrated in ceremonies of investiture, both upon the accession of a

new king and in annual ceremonies, such as *dussehra* where a mixture of Hindu and local adivasi ritual was practiced.\(^{15}\)

Adivasi kingdoms were commonly segmentary states, nonetheless capable of cooperatively rallying a substantial fighting force when the need arose. What distinguished adivasi communities from their neighbours was thus - importantly - a long history of conflict, which often began in the forested plains where they formerly settled and drove them into the less accessible hills.

Amongst the adivasi kingdoms of central India was that of Garha-Mandla, in the area of modern Jabalpur and Mandla, which withstood numerous invasions from the north, being finally defeated by the Mughals in the mid sixteenth century after a battle in which the Queen, Durgavati, commanded an army purportedly including several hundred elephants. The account of this army was probably exaggerated since it derives from the *Ain-i-akbari* (the chronicles of the emperor Akbar), which like all such accounts tends to enlarge the opposing odds and hence the scale of the Emperor's victories. But although there may not have been any war elephants, there were certainly large fortresses and defensive walls, constructed by the adivasis out of stone, and the remains of these can be seen today.

Another 'adivasi' leader from central India, Bukht Buloond, performed creditably in battles in the mid seventeenth century with the Emperor Aurangzeb, who eventually signed a treaty with him, accepting his conversion to Islam, rather than continue with the struggle. He too has left forts and other ruins to commemorate his rule.\(^{16}\) When the British arrived in central India they came in the form of the resident, Richard Jenkins, appointed to the Court of the Raja of Nagpur in 1816, and his assistant, Agnew, who was appointed to streamline administration of the

\(^{15}\) K.S. Singh describes how a tika was often affixed to the forehead of Rajput rulers by adivasi ‘subjects’ in central India (K.S. Singh, *Tribal Society*) and Alfred Gell has described a ceremony of capture of the king and his restoration to the throne in the annual dussehra ceremony in Bastar up until the 1950s, when it was last practiced. Amongst the Bhils the Raja's head was commonly anointed with blood from a chief's thumb and similar legitimating rituals were found in Eastern India: see H. Kulke, 'Early State Formation and Royal Legitimation in Eastern Tribal Areas' in P. Moser and R. Gautam (eds.), *Aspects of Tribal Life in Orissa*, Bern, 1978.

\(^{16}\) The ruins of these forts today are largely inaccessible, but photographs of them may be found in nineteenth century gazetteers, for example that for the Chhindwara district, published in 1867, which illustrates the ruins of Deogurh fort, to be found near the modern village of Deogarh. The keep of the Garha fortress, known as the Madan Mahal, also still crowns the range of hills along the foot of which the town of Jabalpur is built.
Nagpur Raja's territories in Chattisgarh and to ensure payment of the tribute demanded by the East India Company at the end of the Maratha wars.

In his first letter to the Governor-General, Jenkins described the limits of the kingdom.

A very large proportion of these tracts is totally unproductive, or more a burden than an advantage to the state which has the barren right of sovereignty over it. Rennell indeed has well described the appearance of the country at large and particularly between Nagpore and Berar to be that of a forest, thinly set with villages and towns… Total revenue is 70-80 lakhs, of which 11 lakhs is the appanage of Appa Sahib [the Raja of Nagpore].

Jenkins also described how at this time all legislative orders in public documents in the territories of the Nagpur Raja, otherwise known as 'Gondwanah', were counter-signed by the Gond Raja of Deogurh, who still received a share of revenues (originally one-third, but later reduced to one lakh and a quarter of rupees per assessment) and remained nominally sovereign over the territory west of the Wyne-Gunga river running from Chandrapur up to the Satpura hills. In the bulk of this area the Maratha Rajah collected directly from the peasants in each pergunnah, whilst in the Berar districts there were Deshmukhs, Deshpandes and Patels to oversee land administration and revenue collection.

To the north however, in the area known as 'Deogurh above the Ghats', a large area of the land was controlled by a succession of 'zamindars', mostly Raj Gond tribal chiefs who paid tribute to the Maratha Raja of Nagpur but were otherwise left untroubled in control of the northern border along the Satpura hills, on condition that they allowed free passage to the Nagpur raja’s troops and those of his allies and desisted from raiding the plains. This area Jenkins described as 'not without some fertile districts, although a considerable portion of it to the north and west is very mountainous and sterile, entirely unproductive to the state and only the haunt of the savage gonds.' Pretty much the same situation pertained to the south, where the Raj Gond ruler of Chandrapur paid his tribute. In the east, in Chattisgarh, gaontias – or village headmen – collected most of the revenue, but there were also numerous zamindaris, the largest including states such as Kharonde and Bastar, that were sufficiently remote as to be able often to avoid making payments altogether. They were described by Jenkins as 'only a burden to the state and not worth the expense of maintaining the necessary establishment to control them.'

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17 IOR, Bengal Political Consultations, 1816, no. 23, Richard Jenkins, Report on the Nagpur Kingdom, 18th July 1816, addressed to the Earl of Moira, Governor-General, Fort William.
These polities – all ostensibly 'Gond' - were in some cases related by alliance but had their own discrete structure, culture, and mode of functioning, their mode of production ranging from foraging and hunting, through shifting cultivation, the cultivation of jowar, bajra and other millets and chena, to the irrigated cultivation of rice on the plains or hilly terraces. With the exception of the Raja of Deogurh, to some extent they had all been able to resist the incursions of outsiders until well into the eighteenth century. The did this by every landholder maintaining a substantial body of armed men, who could be combined to resist major incursions. They were also commonly employed to deter excessive exactions by local overlords and chiefs: a custom observed (however accurately) amongst both local Gond chiefs and Bundela Rajput landlords in the Satpura and Vindhya hills by William Sleeman in the 1830s:

This mode of levying indiscriminate war upon the territories of the chief, with whom the landholders of the military class are dissatisfied, is called Bhoomeawut, from Bhoom land, and Bhoomea a landed; and it is always to be a war for inheritance. But is often waged by men who have no inheritance to fight for, and whose object is plunder or service which may be enable them to provide for a gang of followers which shall always be ready to follow them in the same manner. He who wages this war has, unhappily, the sympathy of the very large class of men of his own rank whose tenure in their lands and office is improved by the atrocities he may commit. 18

With the advent of colonial rule, however, Gond and Rajput chiefs found themselves on a new playing field with significantly higher stakes. Initially, the British had little interest in intervening in this area, but with the defeat of the Marathas and the growth of the opium trade in Bundelkhand and Bagelkhand, the colonial interest in central India progressively increased. From the beginning of the 19th century therefore we see Gond, Korku and other tribal chiefs increasingly coming into contact with the British. Whilst they might imagine these to be local defensive conflicts, they were in fact being played on a far larger stage and sometimes, unwittingly, involved powerful indigenous elites. This would bring down upon them the might and wrath of the colonial state, culminating in the fully combined military force thrown at them in 1857.


Note on Archives: MPCRO = Madhya Pradesh Central Record Office, according to their original index. These are the records of the former govt. of the Central Provinces up to 1922, formerly held in the Nagpur secretariat but recently shifted to the Dept. of Archives in Bhopal, where they have been re-indexed (MPCRO is then omitted). All post 1922 CP records are still part of a working archive controlled by the Central Secretariat, General Admin. Dept, Vallabh Bhavan, Bhopal.
3. PRECURSORS AND ANTICIPATIONS OF 1857
When the Marathas swept across central India in the eighteenth century, they either bypassed adivasi areas or entered into treaties which left adivasi chiefs largely free from interference. These alliances began to break down with the arrival of the British, particularly in the Satpura Hills, where adivasi chiefs had formerly been allowed considerable independence in exchange for their keeping open to strategic communication passes and levying only modest tithes upon passing travellers. With the foundering of these relationships, there arose a dissatisfaction which might easily be aroused to arms whenever a suitable alternative tributary alliance apparently presented itself.

**Appa Sahib's Uprising, 1818**
The first major uprising involving several Raj Gond zamindars occurred in 1818, after the new Bhonsle Raja, Appa Madhoji Sahib (formerly regent to the young Parsoji Bhonsle who passed away), rebelled against the obligations imposed upon him by his subsidiary treaty with the British and attempted to expel the British contingent from Nagpur. Such treaties were imposed on all the Maratha chiefs at the end of the second Anglo-Maratha war, but Appa Sahib particularly resented having to submit to agreements signed by his predecessor and desired a return to his full power and authority. The endeavour was unsuccessful however and Appa Sahib's troops were routed following a battle on the hill of Sitabuldi in Nagpur on November 26th-27th. Following the cessation of hostilities Appa Sahib surrendered and agreed to terms including the direct cession to the British of the districts of Sagar, Jabalpur and others along the Narmada river, as well as his rights in Berar, Gawilgarh, Sirguja and Jashpur. Having agreed to these terms Appa Sahib was allowed to return to his palace, but continued to obstruct the British and encouraged the Raj Gond chiefs in the Satpura hills to attack convoys of British troops. He also expressly and secretly ordered the Killadar of Dhamoni and Raj Gond Killadars of Chowragarh and Mandla to refuse to surrender their forts to the British and mandated the Killadar of Chanda to raise an army. He then requested help from the Peshwa Baji Rao, who despatched a force towards Nagpur. Before Appa Sahib could escape from Nagpur to join his army in Chanda, however, he was arrested, and the fort at Chanda was stormed by British troops. Soon after, a number of other forts were seized, but a combined army of Gonds, 'Arab mercenaries' and Pindaris took control of the Satpura hills and Narmada districts with the encouragement of Appa Sahib after his escape from British custody (by bribing his sepoy guard) while on the way to Assirgarh in May 1818.
Appa Sahib took refuge in Pachmarhi and raised an army of Gonds with the support of ‘Chyne Sah’ (Shah?), the Dewan of Jusswant Singh, the Chief of Hurrie. Other immediate supporters mentioned in official correspondence were Khandu Rao; ‘Sahib Singh’, sent with a force to Appa Sahib's support by Ram Lal Lythary; Raja Singh sent by Bala Singh at Silway; 'Bal Sing' sent by Raja Keerut Singh of Putera; Thakur Mohan Singh, the powerful Gond chief of Pachmarhi; 'Motee Bai' and several other Raj Gond zamindars, jagirdars and village headmen. The Gond Raja of Dillern was loyal, but most of the rest of the Gond zamindars of the Satpura range from Betul to Sagar rose against the British including the powerful chiefs of Chichli, Dilheri, and Pithera. 19.

The first endeavours to quell this uprising ended disastrously with the slaughter of 100 horsemen, sent from Betul to Gaurha Garh under Captain Sparkes on 19th July 1818. They were attacked by 'a large body of Gaonds' along with purportedly 2,000 horsemen and 1,500 'Arabs' (although these figures were certainly greatly exaggerated) who had arrived from Burhanpur and were most likely Pindaris (ex Maratha mercenaries) now in the service of Appa Sahib. The surrounding villagers in Betul were described as 'not at all serviceable to us [the British]'. 20 Soon afterwards, the pass at Multai was blocked and the rebels began raiding into the Nagpur plains. It was further reported that two chiefs (including one Ramdeal or Rambhol) and a jagirdar of Bhopal state as well as Raja Keerut Sing, a Raj Gond zamindar in Sagar, and Raja Durug Singh of Jabalpur had been in communication with Appa Sahib and that Raja Keerut Singh was secretly amassing troops in the jungle. 21 To resolve this, the British had to send a large expeditionary force into the Satpura Hills and beyond in the winter of 1818-19 to force the Gonds and other rebels into subjection. By this time Appa Sahib was said to have a force of 2,000 Gonds along with a further 2,000 troops comprised of Arab, north Indian and Muslim mercenaries. He was said to be receiving money from one 'Laula Thakur' and regular supplies of grain sent secretly in the night by three Gond Rajahs of Futterypur in Hoshangabad. Bands of Appa Sahib's men led by Kurm Ali and Dyaji were defeated in early skirmishes with British troops but were reinforced by a force led by the Gond jemadar Nagun. This too was dispersed, but the commanding British officer commented:

19 E. Macmorine, Commander 1st battalion Nagpur Subsidiary Force, to R.Jenkins (Resident) Kalampore, 25 May 1818 in Govt. of Central Provinces and Berar, Collection of Correspondence relating to the escape and subsequent adventures of Appa Saheb, 1818-1840 (Nagpur, 1939), p. 32. See also D.E.U. Baker, p. 44.

20 Ibid. P. 50. Gamon (Commanding Officer Betul) to Scott, Adjt. General 21 July 1818.

21 Ibid. pp. 68-75.
'...the Gonds... have not shown any inclination whatsoever to submit themselves to the authority of the state or to accept the liberal terms which... I have offered to them; it has become more than probable that even after Appa Sahib shall have been seized or dislodged from the fastnesses now occupied it will be necessary to adopt active measures against them and to effectively subdue a tribe whose situation gives them every facility of carrying on plundering exploits, and whose present habits are totally incompatible with the security and tranquillity of the neighbouring districts.'

The inducements on offer included all or part of a reward of 25,000 rupees for assistance in Appa Sahib's capture and a jagirdar worth 10,000 rupees per annum. Remarkably, there were never any claimants.

In January 1819, Appa Sahib took refuge amongst the Gonds in the Pachmarhi hills whilst a body of 500 Arabs and 1,500 North Indian troops in his service faced the British on the plains below. 'Motie Baie, Chyne Shaw and Ragojee' were said to be the Gond chiefs immediately protecting Appa Sahib, whilst a 'Brahmin' called 'Dajee' commanded the North Indian troops and one 'Sheikh Abdullah' commanded the Arabs. At one point it was said Appa Sahib commanded as many as 7-8,000 followers (in addition to the Arabs), but by the beginning of 1819 this number had fallen to 4-5,000 in total 'of whom not more than 2,000 are armed or even clothed'.

By negotiations through an intermediary, one of the Gond chiefs, Rajaji, was persuaded by the offer of bribes to withdraw his men from the critical Barug Ghat during the night so that the British could launch a surprise attack on Appa Sahib's forces. A general massacre ensued on February 3rd 1819. At the same time troops was sent to defeat the rebellious Rajah of Soonakah and a small expeditionary force was sent into the jungles at Wyeagarh. Kisrode Singh of Butagarh, Jeswant Singh and 'Nawal Sah' of Hurrye, Chyne Sah and his two sons all surrendered. Appa Sahib nonetheless still managed to escape, in the direction of Asirgarh (in Sindiah's territory) along with one 'Cheetoo' and a body of Pindaris (otherwise referred to as 'the Arabs'), taking the treacherous Rajaji, firmly bound, along with him. They were pursued and some 200 slaughtered at Chauragarh and Futteypur in Hoshangabad. Appa Sahib then briefly took refuge in Sindiah's fort at Asirgarh, controlled by the Killadar Jeswant Rai [S]ar, before continuing his escape and losing his British pursuers. No more was heard of Rajaji.

22 Ibid. p. 79.
23 Ibid. p. 91-92.
Appa Sahib was subsequently reported five years later to be in Lahore, where he was endeavouring to raise an army to re-take his throne with the aid of hundis for 30 lakh rupees. In June 1824 it was reported that Maharajah Ranjit Singh had refused permission for the recruitment of troops and subtly informed the bankers at Amritsar that they should not cash the hundis. By July, however, there were contrary rumours that Ranjit Singh had changed his mind and given support, even offering Appa Sahib some of his own troops and adopting him as a son. Later still, in 1829, Appa Sahib was reported to be in Bikaner, whilst in Ajmere one Gunga Rao Singh, pretending to be the brother of Appa Sahib, and his agent Ram Rutten Baboo, endeavoured to lay hold of 3 crore of jewels deposited there by use of forged letters of recommendation from Sir John Malcolm. This may have been an elaborate fraud. Nonetheless, Appa Sahib was present, it seems, but was prevented from continuing on to Nagpur and forced instead by the Raja of Bikaner to return in the direction of Sind.24

Appa Sahib eventually died in exile in Jodhpur in 1840, still refusing to come to terms and give up his claims to the Nagpur gaddi, although colourfully an impostor, pretending to be the deposed Rajah, formed an army within the Nizam of Hyderabad's territory and attempted to invade Nagpur in 1841 – being forced to flee by a detachment of British troops in the banks of the Wurdah river. Appa Sahib’s story of determined resistance, a series of tactical retreats, exile beyond his state borders, and persistent rumours of his whereabouts coupled with the subsequent surfacing of various ‘imposters’ bears a striking resemblance to the careers of notorious rebel escapees in 1857-8, such as Nana Sahib and Firoz Shah. It demonstrates the power of rumour and also the persistence of a disaffection that was willing and keen to feed upon it.

A new Raja was placed on the throne of Nagpur: Baji Rao, the son of Ragojhi Bhonsle II's daughter and a Brahmin administrator, 'Narayan Pundit' - untainted by association with the uprising - was appointed as minister to oversee the administration, being required to report at regular intervals thereafter to the Resident. The districts of Mandla, Chhindwara, Seoni, Jabalpur, Narsinghpur and Hoshangabad were wrested from the Nagpur kingdom by the British, along with those of Sagar and Damoh from the Maratha Prince Sindhia, and the district of Nimar (formerly within the Holkar principality) from the Maratha Prince Scindia for their involvement, along with the Peshwa, in the abortive uprising. The entire army of Nagpur was simultaneously amalgamated into the British Subsidiary Force and thereby brought under British control – the costs of which were to be

24 Ibid. pp 116-123.
met from the Nagpur kingdom's revenue. Three chiefs in Betul were hung for supporting the uprising, but the majority of the Gond chiefs were offered new sanads which guaranteed their proprietary rights in exchange for maintaining order, recognition of the new regime in Nagpur and the paramountcy of the East India Company, and the right of the British in Narsinghpur, Hoshangabad and other Narmada valley districts to levy taxes on the zamindars.\(^{25}\)

The significance of the uprising in 1818 lay in its widespread but essentially feudal nature. Certainly scarcity conditions in 1818-19 were a contributing factor, as again in 1830, when Gonds were involved in dacoities in Betul and in 1833 in Hoshangabad. In Betul itself Gonds continued to raid settled villages until 1825 – probably for reasons of deprivation. Nonetheless it was largely the Raj Gond zamindars bound by treaty to the Nagpur Raja who rose in his support - almost certainly in exchange for food or money (which never materialised) and for many also doubtless the opportunity to raid and loot into the plains, from which they had hitherto been prevented. Some were possibly offered an extension of their territories, whilst some may have hoped for a revival of the former Garha-Mandla adivasi kingdom and their former autonomy. Perhaps even there was some element of personal loyalty to Appa Sahib as the current representative of the Deogurh regime, notwithstanding his Maratha origins. The details of this we shall never know, but the important thing to notice is that the uprising did not arise from a specific threat to Raj Gond territories, nor due to exorbitant tax demands or tributes imposed by the British – it was too early for that and the British had barely even began to establish their claims to paramount authority in the territory. Instead, it seems to have been similar in some respects to the conflicts described by Sumit Guha in Khandesh between Maratha princes and local tribal chiefs – a matter of political wheeling and dealing, albeit from parties with an entirely different status and power but nonetheless perceiving themselves as equals in their claims to rights and privileges and equally keen to prosper as they might from whatever conflict arises. This insurrection thus shared elements in common with later uprisings. However these later insurrections were in response to far more potent threats to the adivasi communities involved.

**The Bundela, Gond and Lodhi Uprising of 1842**

Whilst the Gond zamindars of the Satpura hills were temporarily subdued by 1825, the Lodhi thakurs of Damoh district (former subjects of the Garha-Mandla kingdom) and the Bundela Rajputs in Sagar district, at the head of the Narmada

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valley, continued to seek to resist demands for revenue payments from first Sindhia and then the British and to raid into other settled regions in order to assert their independence. This culminated in an uprising in 1842, when the Gonds took advantage once more of the opportunity to take up arms.

The Bundela uprising of 1842 is very different from that of 1818, since here there were issues more directly of conflict with the colonial power and endeavours by local chiefs to regain not merely territory (as seen far later in the colonial period), but political rights and independence which they had formerly enjoyed or to resist the exaction of new forms of revenue payment. However amongst the Gonds, at least, there seems to have been little conception that they were dealing with, in the form of the East India Company, anything more than a powerful superordinate chief from whom concessions might easily be extracted.

In this uprising there was a clearer alliance of material interest between the Bundela Rajputs who started the uprising, and the adivasi chiefs and (importantly) their subjects who joined in. The uprising began with an attempt by the British civil courts to serve processes in settlement of debt on the Bundela Rajputs in Sagar district: Dewan Jawahar Singh of Chandrapur, the sons of the Rajah of Narhat (Madhukar Shah and Ganedhju); and Thakur Bikramjit of Goorha. These Bundela chiefs all rose in revolt and were joined by Bundela chiefs in neighbouring Bundelkhand, who had also recently lost property as a result of British revenue demands, and by the Lodhi aristocracy of the region too – most prominently Raja Hirde Shah of Hirapur in Jabalpur. It was Hirde Shah who brought the Gond Rajas and Thakurs of Narsinghpur and Hoshangabad into the revolt, who joined small local Lodhi chiefs in plundering and raiding adjacent villages. Prominent amongst the Gond insurgents was Delhan Shah, the Gond thakur of Madanpur in Chawarpatha tahsil, Narsinghpur, behind whom most of the other Gond landlords rallied, including his closest ally, the thakur of Dilwar, and (though not openly) the Gond Rajas of Fatehpur (again) and Pithera. In Narsinghpur and Sohagpur parganas, south of the Narmada river, a band of as many 200 armed Gond from the Satpura hills raided into villages. Another band of about 300 Gonds, led by Theorajh Singh, Raj Gond Thakur of Deroi and Sawant Singh, Thakur of Sujahnpur, raided as many as nine villages in broad daylight in October 1842. An announcement went out that those dispossessed by the British would be restored to their lands and malguzars were told not to pay land tax to the British but to local Gond and Rajput chiefs.

26 MPCRO, Jabalpur Divisional Records, Political Dept, Case File no. 75 of 1842: ‘Lt. Doolan reports on the outrages committed by Gond insurgents.’
The revolt was eventually brought to a halt by a combination of military engagements, the payment of ransoms of Rs. 300, Rs 500 and even Rs 1,000 and offers of conciliation. Thus the thakurs of Madanpur and Dilwar gave up the struggle in 1843 in exchange for a guarantee of their lives and property. Other Gond thakurs proved their loyalty by rounding up and capturing fellow rebel leaders. The Rajah of Shahgurgh, a Bundela Rajput, similarly handed over the Lodhi chief Hirdee Shah, Rajah of Jytpur in the Jabalpur district, Jowahir Singh, his son Mieherban Shah, and cousins Esuree Singh and Rao Aman Singh at Heerapur on the Sagar border in late December 1843.27 Another ‘ring-leader’ Ganeshju Gond was soon captured, and the last of the rebel leaders Madhukar Shah, who had refused to surrender, was seized and slain by the British in May 1844. The Bundela uprising was a close run thing. At its end William Sleeman (then Judicial Commissioner for the Sagar and Narmada territories) had concluded:

Had not troops from the north and west poured into the valley of the Nerbudda in the month of October last, when it was exceedingly unsafe for them to pass through the deadly belts of jungle that skirt the Vindhya and Satpura ranges of hills, to predatory gangs of hundreds would soon have swirled into thousands, and the whole wealth of the country would have been at their mercy. The tillage for the Spring crops, which commences in October, could not have been carried on; the revenue of the season must have been lost; and thousands of the peasantry must have taken to plunder from the want of any other means of subsistence.28

The causes of unrest in 1842-43 bore striking resemblance to the factors provoking and enabling revolt in 1857 in many parts of north India. To begin with, immediately after the second Anglo-Maratha war there were large volumes of East India company troops picketed across the Maratha country. In the Sagar and Narmada territories there were also strong military detachment stationed into fortresses and other positions which had been occupied by the troops under the former government. After the campaign against the so-called ‘Pindaris’ (marauding mercenary horse men) was ended in 1817 and the uprising of Appa Sahib had been suppressed, these troops were gradually withdrawn. Except for a few chowkidars in towns there were no other police and all the duties performed by the police in Bengal or Madras were performed here by revenue officers. The local landlords, Indian and tahsildars and peons and the village watchmen were

28 ditto, p. 1223.
the only resource available for the maintenance of law and order. Other factors included an admitted overassessment of the land-tax, which was unwarranted in a time of declining prices. Secondly, there were attempts to interfere in land rights, including a prohibition on heirs succeeding to shares in estates without the consent of the surviving co-sharers; and attempts to prohibit subletting by landholders; the subjecting since 1836 of the heads of families amongst the aristocracy to the processes of civil courts; the liability of all estates to attachment in satisfaction of the decrees of the civil courts (thus threatening customs of primogeniture); the high-handed behaviour of officials; and, finally, the detailed interference of revenue officials between landlords and tenants in determining suitable levels of rent and the appropriate share of revenues that might be left to the landlord. This was an interference in the political relations of subordinates and elites, which struck at the very constitution of local polities. The defence of feudal relationships was thus important, but more than that, insurrection required a general threat to security, food scarcities to some extent, and a specific blow that might set it off which could not be defused in the absence of stable treaty relationships between the British and local chiefs. Finally, of course, there were instances of sheer opportunism: attempts to seize land and property from neighbouring territories in the absence of anxieties of possible retribution. In so many senses, the ‘Bundela’ uprising of 1842-43 in the northern half of the Narmada valley, thus anticipated the events of 1857 in the same region and beyond.

4. ADIVASIS AND THE 1857 REVOLT IN CENTRAL INDIA
Apart from the so-called ‘Bundela’ insurrection of 1842, there were other uprisings in adivasi territories in eastern Chattisgarh, leading up to 1857 and continuing after. There was, for example, the rising of the Khonds of Gumsur, ‘Oorladhoney’ and Madanpur in Orissa, led by Chokri Bissoyi, which briefly spilled over into the territories of the Rajahs of Jeypore and Kharonde (aka ‘Kalahundy’ or Kalahandi).\(^29\) This uprising against British interference was ostensibly in ‘defence’ of the custom of human sacrifice but was also intimately related to resistance to British revenue demands. The disturbances in Kalahandi were further related to the accession of a new Raja to the gaddi and rumours of a new and deity arising in one of the villages.\(^30\) There were additional disturbances in 1868 and 1870 in the locality of Kharonde, and in other parts the Orissa hill agency tracts bordering upon the Central Provinces in 1874 and 1876. But several

\(^29\) Chattisgarh Divisional Records, volumes 9 & 10, 1855. Lt. A.C. McNeill to Home Sec. HOI, 3 Jan. 1856.
\(^30\) Chattisgarh Divisional Records, volume 6, 1856. C. Elliott, DC Chattisgarh to GAC Plowden, Commissioner, 12 July 1856.
of these were merely intra-elite conflicts and succession disputes. It was not until the Khond uprising of 1878 in the Rampur district of Kalahandi, that rights and control over the produce of the land became a central issue in adivasi revolt: specifically an attempt by the zamindar to monopolise the production and sale of harra (a toddy liquor).\(^{31}\) This combined with an insurgency in the Golconda hills to the south was conceived of as a general threat to the authority of British tributaries in the region. The cause and incidence of these movements were nonetheless petty and local.\(^{32}\) In the Narmada valley, however, external, British influence had extended much further and control over the land itself was at heart of unrest in the 1850s and was key to adivasi involvement in the Great Uprising. The involvement of Gonds alongside other chiefs was thus far more widespread, calculated, and determined.

**The 'Mutiny' in Mahakoshal**

The involvement of Gond chiefs in the uprising of 1857 appears to have been a direct response to their indebtedness and the determination of the British authorities wherever possible to deprive them of their lands if they failed to keep up with their revenue payments. In the 1840s, after the Bundela uprising, many had been given exemption from civil prosecution. However in 1856 the government changed its position and demanded that all indebted malguzars and thakurs would be expected to either pay their debts or provide a schedule by which the payment would be effected, within 60 days, or their estates would be placed under the management of the District Commissioner until their debts were cleared.\(^{33}\) Should they obstruct this process their debts and estates would be disposed of by the civil courts. It was also clarified in 1856 that whilst the present landholders would have control of their estates for life, their heirs would be in charge only for the term of the current revenue settlement – thus abolishing at a stroke the heredity principle by which the power of many Raj Gond chiefs had been perpetuated.

Mandla was a particular focus of official ire, with Raja Bikramjit of Ramgarh condemned as an oppressive ruler and large numbers of villages taken under direct company administration to ensure the remission of revenue payments. Many other Malguzars were reported to have been 'completely ruined' by the scale

\(^{31}\) MPCRO Letters to the Govt. of India, 1878. Sec. to CCCP, 2\(^{nd}\) April 1878, forwarding report of Col. C.B. Lucie Smith of 27 March 1878 on the Kalahandi insurrection.

\(^{32}\) GOI Foreign and Political Proceedings, no. 222 of 1879, ‘Rumpa Disturbances’.

of revenue demands imposed by the government, with Mahajan moneylenders, like Raja Gokul Das of Jabalpur, the main beneficiaries.

This then was the background to the 1857 uprising in central India, the focus of which, as in 1842, lay mostly in the Lodhis, Bundela Rajputs, and Gonds of the Satpura hills and the Narmada valley, although this time the revolt was on a larger scale. The first attempt to raise the sepoys and peasants of central India came from Raja Shankar Shah, a descendant of the Gond kings of Garha-Mandla and his son, residing in Jabalpur, who were visited several times by sepoys planning an attack on the British cantonment. Both men were seized by the British and executed by being blown from cannon. The sepoys at Sagar nonetheless continued with their planned revolt and rallied around the Raja of Shagarh. Civilians joined in, including the Gond rajas and thakurs of Jabalpur, Mandla, Narsimhapur and Hoshangabad. They were inspired by the example of Raja Shankar Shah, but also radicalised by the sudden imposition of British restrictions on access to many forest lands from the 1840s onwards and their increasing commercial exploitation by outsiders. Others took up arms because of the intolerable level of government revenue demands. These included the likes of the Raja of Kanauj Bhutagaon in Jabalpur, who had enjoyed the use of land revenue free from the Gond raja, but from whom the British East India Company had demanded progressively rising assessments until, by 1857, he was a ruined man. In Jabalpur, many Gond taluqdars and thakurs joined forces with units of the rebel sepoy army, whilst to the south, the thakurs of Madanpur and Dhilwar in Narsinghpur once more took to arms. The Gond rajas of Fatehpur and Sobahpur in Hoshangabad gave aid to units of Tatya Tope's force after he crossed the Narmada with 2,500 of his remaining followers in October 1858, and in the Mahadev hills on the north bank of the Narmada, a Korku raja also joined the revolt.

The principal centres of the revolt in central India were Bundelkhand and Bagelkhand, where Rajput thakurs joined the insurrection almost to a man, taking their Gond subjects into battle with them. Also participating were the Gonds of Mandla and four Bagela thakurs in Sohagpur, who urged others to join and refuse further revenue payments to the British. Rebels here included the malguzar of Mandla pargana, who plundered several villages and destroyed the thana at Bichhia. The same happened in Shahpur, whilst in Ramgarh the Rani proclaimed the restoration of the kingdom, upholding the right of the rejected heir to rule, fortified the town, and then allegedly committed suicide (according to some accounts) rather than surrender as British forces closed in. Her followers were
described as 'so many coolies'. In Jabalpur, Sagar and Damoh, the Gond and Lodhi thakurs and malguzars were all supported by Gond followers in a clear expression of clan loyalties.

The involvement of very local level chiefs and leaders of various sorts is evident from the lists of persons whose crimes should not be pardoned, compiled by the commissioners of every district in the Narmada Valley in the summer of 1858. Those listed included Nihal Singh, son of Bhowani, a Korku tribal chief, described as ‘always the head of the Korkoos in the Nimawur Pergunnah’ who collected ‘ upwards of 200 of his tribe and placed himself under the rebel thakur Dowlut [Daulat] Singh’. Then there was ‘Baija’ Gond and ‘Bukroo’ Gond, both amongst the Ramgarh rebels in Mandla district, the latter ‘known to be one of the most energetic and desperate leaders [who] plundered a great number of villages…. [A]n old offender [who] has been in jail several times already’. They fought in alliance with Sitaram Dadu Lodhi, the brother of the Lodhi Rani of Ramgarh. Amongst those who should ‘never be forgiven’ was listed Gukher Singh, a Raj Gond of Mauza Narsinghpur. He was described as a subordinate chief of the rebel leaders Lachman Singh and Marut Singh and the cause of their turning against the government – a true case of subaltern leadership. He was said to have attacked troops, driven in several thanas, to have plundered numerous villages and to have stolen an elephant belonging to the government. Debi Singh Gond, was said to have plundered the whole of the district of Jabalpur, north of the Herun river, to have committed mass murder, to have murdered a duffadar and several officers amongst a party of police, and to have instigated the ‘whole of the Garughat’ people into revolt.

Apart from the Gond chiefs, there were several Muslim malguzars, including a pir – Kuda Baksh, son of Abdullah - in Nimawar pargannah, Narsinghpur district, who inspired their followers into attacking and occupying a Fort at Suturas. In this they were supported by the Thakur Lachman Singh, who in turn was supporting the rebel chief Dowlut Singh of Raghugarh on the north side of the Narmada valley, which lay within the Holkar Prince’s territory. This was a literal cascade of feudal alliances but initially, in part at least, from the bottom up. One of the most intriguing rebels in the Narmada valley was Gurur Singh, brother-in-law and Subhadar of Rani Sulakshan Kowar of Mandla district. Gurur Singh took the initiative very early on to drive in, plunder, and burn the government Kutcherry

35 MPCRO CP Secretariat Bundle Correspondence, 951 / 62 / 1858: List of Rebel Chiefs Not to be Pardoned.
and jail at Sohagpur. He allegedly assembled a large force and aided by Runwant Singh, a rebel chief from Sambalpur, opposed the advance of government troops from Raipur under Captain the Baron von Meyen. Following his defeat he then allegedly kidnapped the Rani (believed to be opposed to the uprising) and fled to Rewa, where he was said to have poisoned her. He then remained in hiding before petitioning to be pardoned.

Gurur Singh was said to have been ‘elected’ as Subha or governor of Jabalpur by the ‘rebels’ in anticipation of the collapse of British power. Bharut Singh, Bagel, similarly took a lead in opposing the government troops from Raipur and was said to have been ‘elected’ as Subha of that district by the rebels, in the event of his success.

Bijai Singh Lodhi of Shaipura seems to have fought alongside the Gond rebels in Ramgarh in Mandla district, leading the attack on the Ramgarh fort in person. His leading role and that of others was revealed in rebels letter captured in Sohagpur. He later petitioned for pardon as the British began to re-establish themselves, but could not resist resuming the plunder of villages, from which he extorted money with torture. The initial offer of a pardon, on the same terms offered to Gurur Singh, was then withdrawn.

So severe did the disturbances in various corners of the Narmada valley become that the British were eventually inspired to raise amongst the Gonds a corps of armed police, to use in action attacking the heavily defended encampments of scattered groups of rebels in the Satpura hills. British difficult is well compounded by desertions to the enemy camp. Thus the Harda police had to be entirely disband after being implicated in a planned attack on Hoshangabad jail in an attempt to release captured rebel chiefs. In January 1858 that Major W. C. Weston in Jabalpur further reported that his entire established force of 105 Barkandazi (armed constables) and 45 Musketeers had either joined the rebels or deserted and stated that he had raised Gond levees to replace them. They were imaginatively compared to Rohillas by Erskine, who he had heard were ‘naturally warlike in disposition, and fear nothing, capable of during enduring great fatigue and hardship and never dream of deserting their posts.’ This force totalled 250

37 MPCRO Jabalpur Division, Bundle Correspondence, Jail Dept, Case file no. 42 of 1858, Bundle no. 47.
38 MPCRO Jabalpur Division, Bundle Correspondence, Police Dept, Case File no. 7 of 1858, Bundle no. 46.
extra Barkandazi and 150 musketeers, arms for which were obtained from the Nagpur state. The main purpose, one imagines, was to raise a fit and large force at minimal expense and one that contained, above all, no Brahmins.\textsuperscript{39} The Salt Patrol was also pressed into service, with the recruitment of 550 extra Barkandazi, 200 Najibs (irregulars), and 40 extra sowars.\textsuperscript{40} So convincing were Erskine’s efforts that William Muir of the NWP government conveyed in March 1858 the Governor General’s sanction that yet larger force to be recruited and requests went out for the recruitment of 500 Gonds from the Betul district for service in the police of the Northwest provinces on a salary of six rupees per month.

The Gond police battalion raised by Capt Maclean first saw service accompanying a party from Sir Hugh Rose’ army in the attack on a small fort at Barodea in late February 1858. After the fort was seized, 50 Gonds under one a Gond Jemadars were left as a garrison. In Madanpur on March 3\textsuperscript{rd} the Gond police were again engaged and 100 left behind to garrison the fort of Surasi.\textsuperscript{41} Capt. F.W. Pinkey, Superintendent of Jhansi thus reported to Major Erskine on March 6\textsuperscript{th} 1858 that a ‘wild and half savage race’ were successfully induced ‘to take to a profession entirely new to them and foreign to their habits’.

The suppression of the 1857-58 insurgencies in the Narmada valley continued for many months. Both insurrectionary and counter insurrectionary activities went on apparently regardless of the activities of the more famous insurgencies reluctantly led by the Rani of Jhansi in Bundelkhand to the north.\textsuperscript{42} Elsewhere within the Central Provinces there was unrest reported amongst the Native Regiments in Nagpur, which came to nothing, and an attempted mutiny by a number of sepoys in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Native Infantry in Raipur, which was quelled after the killing of a Sergeant Major Sidwell.\textsuperscript{43} In Chanda there was a rebellion by two prominent zamindars, Bapu Rao and Venkat Rao, which was ended after the reluctant betrayal of Venkat Rao by the Zamindarin of Aheri (Gadchiroli district).\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{39} On 1 May 1858 captain GG Moxon, 52\textsuperscript{nd} Regiment BNI, reported that 1,037 had presented themselves at the morning playground in Jabalpur for recruitment, but that only 52 could be found who were under the age of 25, physically fit, and not Brahmin.

\textsuperscript{40} Ditto, Lt. J.C. Wood DC Hoshungabad, 26\textsuperscript{th} Feb. 1858.

\textsuperscript{41} MPCRO Jabalpur Division, Police Dept, case file no. 21 of 1858.


\textsuperscript{43} MPCRO Chattisgarh Divisional Records, Vol. 16 1857.

\textsuperscript{44} MPCRO Chanda District Office Records, 1858-9, no. 1: Rebellion by Bapoo Rao and Venkat Rao.
Perhaps the most serious revolt of all was that led by Surendra Sai in Sambalpur, then a part of the Central Provinces, bordering Orissa in the east.\(^{45}\) Surendra Sai was imprisoned in 1840 following his first attempt at insurrection but was released from prison in Hazaribagh by sepoys of two mutinous regiments of the Bengal Native Infantry in July 1857. Surendra Sai subsequently aroused not only numerous Gond zamindars and gaontias (headmen) and a large number of personal followers, but no less than eleven neighbouring tributary states – the so-called Garjat chiefs – into revolt. Five of these tributary states were ruled by a Gond Rajah or Zamindar.\(^{46}\) All feared losses under the British revenue settlements and longed for the restoration of the Sai’s Chauhan dynasty which had ruled Sambalpur until 1827 when Maharaja Sai had died without immediate heirs. At this point the East India Company had interposed an incompetent and corrupt puppet ruler, Raja Narayan Singh, denying Surendra Sai’s claim to the throne. From this date Surendra Sai had led a constant struggle of disaffected chiefs against Narayan Singh, an elite-led insurgency which became yet more desperate after the East India Company assumed direct control of the Sambalpur following Narayan Singh’s death in 1849. The insurrection of 1857 in Sambalpur was thus nothing less than the culmination of a thirty-year long struggle for freedom from Company interference. It is story that merits a detailed study in its own right, but for our present purposes it is sufficient to note both its uniqueness and the similarities between this insurgency and that of the Bundela Rajputs, for whom issues of local sovereignty were likewise paramount.

At its peak Surendra Sai’s insurrection extended into Raipur in the west and to Rewa in the north and he amassed a personal force of nearly 2,000, including several matchlockmen. Most, however, were armed merely with bows and arrows. Although he spent much of the time in retreat, Surendra Sai evaded capture by the British on numerous occasions, two British officers and several Police were killed in engagements, and Sai’s supporters withstood highly repressive measures, including the confiscation of estates in an attempt to bring his elite followers to heel. At no point did Surendra Sai manage to link up with leaders of the Mutiny in the north of India and he struggled on until well after the general Uprising had been suppressed. The struggle did not finally come to an end until Major Impey


\(^{46}\) The principal rebellious Gond Rajahs amongsts the ‘Gujrat chiefs’ were Rajah Ranjit Singh of Sakti, Rajah Sangrem Singh of Burgarh, Rajah Deonath Singh of Raigargh, Sundur Buria Zamindar of Phuljhar, and Rajah Umrao Sai of Bendranowagarh (sic).
replaced Major Forster as Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur and initiated a broad and general policy of reconciliation. A majority of the zamindars and Rajahs were offered pardons in exchange for their support and one by one Surendra Sai relatives and allies were persuaded to give themselves up in exchange for pardons, rewards, or promises that they would be restored to their lands. Ultimately Surendra Sai himself surrendered in May 1862 upon the guarantee of his life, liberty and a free pardon. He and his family were promised a pension, but sporadic dacoity and demands for his restoration to the gaddi of Sambalpur continued to trouble the district. In 1864, after Sambalpur was again transferred back from the administration of Cuttack to the Central Provinces, the reconciliation policy was cynically reversed and Surendra Sai and the leading members of his family were all arrested on charges of conspiracy to wage war. These charges were ultimately dismissed on appeal as being based upon forged evidence and mere hearsay, but Surendra Sai and four of the leading members of his family remained imprisoned for the rest of their lives in the fort at Asirgarh in Burhanpur district.

Twilight of revolt in the Narmada valley
The famous rebel general Tantya Tope of Lucknow, also known as Ram Chandra Pandurang, was defeated in Bundelkhand by Sir Hugh Rose at Kalpi in May and then at Gwalior in June 1858. Following the rout if his forces he determined to march south to raise the Marathas in revolt. Continuing his march south, pursued by Rose’s army, Tantya Tope entered the Narmada valley via Sagar in the north. Evading the British forces he crossed the Narmada river and then endeavoured to persuade the population of the adivasi district of Betul in the Satpura hills to join his cause.

In Chindwara district in the Satpura hills there were reports of a ‘Red Ochre’ flag circulating amongst Gonds in October 1858, which had originated from a village on the border with Betul. Red Ochre was the colour of the Peshwa’s flag and this was interpreted as a possible call to revolt. The flag though was handed in to the police by the Kotwar of the village of Etawah in Chindwara having apparently yielded little response. Earlier in Raipur ‘balls of Attah’, another supposed signal for revolt, circulated in September 1858, to cease soon after a proclamation that anyone involved in such activities would be punished to the fullest limit of the law.47 Continuing his march East into Nimar, then Khandesh, Tantya Tope enjoyed no greater success in rallying support. He was finally betrayed by the

Chief of Narwar whilst taking refuge in the foresto Peron, was captured, and hanged at Shivpuri in April 1859.

Unlike in 1842, the British campaign of suppression in the Narmada valley was ruthless. Dozens of malguzari estates were seized, including those of the Gond thakurs of Madanpur and Dhillwar, and their assets redistributed to the few who had shown 'loyalty' to the East India Company. The lucky recipients of the Madanpur and Dhillwar estates received them at half *jama* for two generations. The Gond rajas of Narsinghpur were rewarded for their loyalty, but everywhere else Gond chiefs were forced to disband their retainers and their arms were seized, the increased revenue from forfeited taluka running into lakhs of rupees. So ended the revolt of 1857, and with the completion of the malguzari revenue survey of the previous decade, an entirely new administration for the Central Provinces was established in 1861, paving the way for a brief boom in the trading of agricultural produce, but longer term instability for cultivators both small and large as a consequence of the many excessive revenue demands that were imposed. Progressively, more and more villages were acquired by mahajan-moneylenders and a slow decline of Gond landholding rights in both ryotwari and malguzari areas began.

**CONCLUSION**

From the above account it is evident that there were not one, but many adivasi communities in central India, and that each of these has experienced a variety of incarnations over time. Amongst the adivasis of Mahakoshal central India and old Madhya Pradesh, their location, problems and concerns have changed considerably over the last 200 years – and this is reflected in the forms and nature of their insurrections. Thus, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries adivasi insurrections in M.P. were aimed at a recovery of autonomy, a refusal of tribute, or the restoration of former kingdoms such as Garha Mandla. In 1818, 1842 and 1857 these uprisings although subaltern in nature commonly involved an important degree of leadership arising from feudal elites. Frequently they involved alliances tied by feudal links but leadership very often arose spontaneously from below. Insurrectionists were sometimes rivals but they could also unite against a common foe. Otherwise, they had little in common with each other beyond a shared desire to defend long-established and recognised, but clearly highly localised polities. In Chattisgarh these struggles continued on well into the twentieth century, but in the Narmada valley they were substantially crushed under the weight of British reprisals after 1857.
A refusal of 'tribute' or even land taxes was seen in parts of Chattisgarh in the 1860s, where Gonds would often simply abandon their village lands (thereby losing proprietary rights) rather than pay up the land revenue demands of the British. By the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century however, most adivasi elites had commonly either willingly or through coercion arrived at an accommodation with the colonial power, and were becoming themselves amongst the targets of insurrectionists. The later uprisings of 1868, 1878 and 1910 in the large adivasi state of Bastar in central India were thus nostalgic but commonly sought a solution in the replacement of a diwan or raja or the restoration of the previous balance of power between these elites and local chiefs. Dispossession was thus tinged with a sense of betrayal.

In the inter-war years of the early twentieth century (much earlier in some areas) the target of adivasi movements became increasingly and clearly the colonial regime itself: not just its local military presence, but its institutional structures. This is seen in the Gond land movement of Chattisgarh in the 1920s and the forest satyagrahas of the early 1930s, which were confined largely to British districts and did not greatly involve the zamindari or princely states. There were notable exceptions to this of course, such as the lawyer Sarju Prasad’s campaign against the Congress provincial government in 1937-39 and in the late 1940s; the late 1930s satyagrahas in the zamindari of Dondi-Lohara; and the 1951 uprising in Bastar, which was actively encouraged by the Maharaja, Pravir Chanda Deo. Even here, however, it is clear that the main target was British forest regulations and the sale of rights to forest contractors: policies which were imposed upon the zamindaris and princely states by the British. It is only this latter aspect of adivasi insurrection which neatly fits with the U.N.’s definition of indigenous peoples as an unresolved legacy of colonialism.

Overall, it may be noted the most common form of resistance to the loss of land was not violent insurrection, but passive, in the form of migration in search of work to the mines of Chota Nagpur or to the plains of the Narmada valley, Khandesh or Berar, or emigration to the cities, forest plantations in the north-east, or even overseas – to Mauritius, South Africa, the Caribbean, or Fiji. The agitations of those left behind are those upon which historians have largely focussed, but this alternative response should not be dismissed, as adivasis in these circumstances have often found a solution to their problems by acquiring entirely new identities and livelihoods in remote locations.
For those left behind, the solution to their problems has increasingly been couched in the legalistic terms devised by the British themselves in the 1920s: the restriction of land transfers and the restoration of alienated lands to the original inhabitants. The difficulty of the first of these is that it reduces the value of land assets and makes it still more likely that adivasis may become hopelessly impoverished and lose their access to the land altogether. The problem with the restoration of alienated lands is the variety of forms it might take and the unpredictable outcome of such a process. Thus, one of the problems with claims to occupancy rights based upon ancient heritage is that one day a populist government may just grant these demands: not just discrete morsels of land but an entire 'state' - controlled by a dubious democratic process as likely as not to put political control in the hands of non-adivasis. In the case of real transfers of land rights, there is a risk that as many adivasis are likely to lose as to gain by this, since successful adivasis are themselves are amongst the acquirers of the lands of others. Accepting compensation further undermines the case for regional transfers of funds and income redistribution which are needed, as much as land, if impoverished adivasis are to achieve the educational opportunities and health benefits necessary if they are to escape the poverty trap.

A further danger in claims to original occupancy as a solution to the impoverishment amongst of central India is that it ignores and even undermines those adivasis who earn their income through migration – a characteristic feature of modern adivasi economy - or who have migrated away entirely away from adivasi areas. Many still have need of assistance, but if this is determined purely in terms of geography and ethnicity rather than by income, they are condemned to be ignored.

Does this mean that the politics of armed resistance are entirely irrelevant to the concerns of the majority of adivasis and that there is never any possibility of their sharing objectives, let alone identities in common? The answer lies in the symbolism of these movements. Just as in the west, class or national solidarities can be invoked to galvanise the population in a political cause to which neither are strictly relevant: so it is with adivasi insurrections, in victory or (most commonly) defeat, a mythology of resistance is created, to which future generations can resort in pursuit of a variety of objectives. Although the identity of 'adivasi' or tribe may be as different from time to time to those involved as it is to outsider observers, its iconography may be wide-ranging and constant. Raja Shankar Shah, Surendra Sai, Birsa Munda and Alluri Sitarama Raju, like the Rani of Jhansi, Phoolan Devi, or even Veerapan, became symbols of resistance, suggesting ideals of solidarity and,
above all, alternative possibilities of existence. Thus it is that 1857, an event which was merely one in a string of adivasi resistance movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, retains a singular degree of symbolism and interest for modern day historians and adivasis alike.

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