

Amko-Simko: A Historical Analysis of Tribal Uprisings against Colonialism in Sundargarh District, Odisha

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Abstract: Amko-Simko and the surrounding area are used to examine the extensive resistance activities of native tribes against colonial control in the Sundargarh region of Odisha. By placing the complaints of indigenous groups in the larger context of colonial exploitation and oppression, the study illuminates the many signs of resistance and resiliency. The study explores the importance, chronology, and effects of the Amko-Simko migrations on the indigenous people and colonial authority through careful archival research and primary source interpretation.

The research emphasizes the indigenous people's agency and resilience in resisting colonial rule by analyzing the tactics, alliances, and leadership formed during these uprisings. It also examines how these activities influenced subsequent anti-colonial movements and how tribal identity and solidarity evolved in the region. Additionally, it explores the complex links between political mobilization, cultural identities, and socioeconomic factors that shaped these revolts. This study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of anti-colonial struggles in the Sundargarh district by critically analyzing historical narratives and questioning established facts, revealing the ongoing resistance of tribal populations against colonial domination.

Keywords: Colonial, Resistance, Amko-Simko, Munda Tribe, Sundargarh

1. INTRODUCTION

The incident at Amko-Simko during the Durbar administration reflects the feudal atrocity inflicted upon the people in the state in general and the tribal in particular, as far as the irrational taxation imposed by the Durbar under the behest of the British authorities. The Amko-Simko uprising, which began, is also known as the 'Munda Rebellion' due to the Munda community's contribution towards the movement.

Even though the participation of other communities like the Oraon tribe is also significant but reports highlight the dominant Munda tribal groups. The Tribal people of Amko-Simko wanted their legal right Khuntkatti system and opposed the Britishers' not to pay taxes, which reflects more on the Amko-Simko firing of the Gangpur state and the horror of the British administration. The Amko-Simko firing, also known as the Amco Simco massacre, is a painful chapter in the history of India that unfolded on April 25, 1939, in the peaceful village of Simko, located in the Gangpur estate, now known as Sundargarh, Odisha. This tragic incident involved the British Indian Army and tribal peasants who had gathered to protest unjust taxes and land rights denial.

2. AREAS OF STUDY

The present study area is in northwestern Odisha, bordering Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. It is characterized by dense forests, hills, and river valleys—notably the Ib River and Brahmani River. Rich in natural resources, especially iron ore, limestone, and coal. It is also known for vibrant tribal culture, festivals (like Karma and Sarhul), dance (Dalkhai, Munda dance), and oral traditions.

The area of Amko-Simko, located in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, holds historical significance as a center of tribal resistance against British colonial rule. Situated in the forested and hilly terrain of western Odisha, the region is home to indigenous communities such as the Munda, Oraon, Kharia, and Ho tribes. These tribes traditionally depended on forest resources, shifting cultivation, and communal land ownership.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- To document when and how the uprisings unfolded—highlighting key figures, tribal groups involved (e.g., Ho, Munda, Oraon, etc.), tactics used, and pivotal events.
- To explore the socio-economic, cultural, and political factors that spurred tribal communities toward revolting against colonial authority.
- To analyse how British colonial authorities responded—through military force, legal measures, co-optation of tribal leaders, or policy adjustments—and how these responses influenced the course and outcomes of the uprisings.
- Examining narratives passed down orally, the inclusion of the events in local histories, or their symbolic role in modern Odisha's political and cultural discourse.

4. METHODOLOGY

The author's approach to completing this research led him to adopt different methods and methodologies to bring out the best aspects of the Amko-Simko movement in a tribal-dominated area. Like;

- Archival Research (Odisha State Archives (Bhubaneswar), & District Collectorate Records, Sundargarh)
- Oral History and Ethnographic Method
- Literature Review and Secondary Source Analysis
- Interdisciplinary Approach (History, Anthropology, Political Science, and Indigenous Studies)

4.1. Munda Tribe

Literature Review and Secondary Source Analysis They are one of the strongest Kolarian tribes, a branch of the Austro-Asiatic spoken languages/Munda languages (Prasad, 1961). They liked to be called themselves 'Horoko', which means 'men'. But they do not mind being addressed as Munda. In the Mundari language, the word 'Munda' means 'a men of prestige and wealth.' The name 'Munda' was given by their Hindu neighbours.

Ethnically, they are proto-Australoid and speak the Mundari dialect of the Austro-Asiatic family. They also speak the local dialect called Sadri (Prasad, 1961). However, the Mundas seem to have migrated from Northern India southward successively to different regions, eventually reaching Bihar and then Chotanagpur. The Mundas were a liberty-loving people, and their socio-political and economic status in the Chhota Nagpur area was quite satisfactory in the early 1890s. The Mundas had attempted to oppose the erosion of their Khuntkatti land system by Jagirdars and Thikadars, who came from the northern plains as merchants and moneylenders.

Likely, following the suppression of movement led by Birsa Munda, these Mundas, to escape arrest and trial at the hands of British Police, might have migrated to the northern and eastern part of the Gangpur state. Not only the Mundas, even the Oraons have migrated from their original homeland and settled in the Gangpur state. It is necessary to mention that the Connolly settlement of 1907-11 revealed that several tribal inhabitants of the Zamindari were reported to have been born in the Ranchi district. At the 1901 census, 19,000 Munda Community were recorded in Gangpur.

4.2. Causes of the Uprising

Gangpur was a land of Tribals who depended upon forest products and agriculture as the only source of their income. And it was the tribal in Garjats, which became the immediate and sole victim of the feudal oppression exercised by the chief therein (Pradhan, 1985). Under the circumstances aforesaid, sporadic uprisings cropped up in different feudatory states in the 20th Century (Pradhan, 1985). The first agrarian uprising in the state of Gangpur was, however, suppressed with the help of the British Police force by Raghunath Sekhar Deo. All the Munda Adivasi of Raiboga declined to pay the land revenue demand enhanced in the revision settlement, which concluded in 1936 A.D (Sinha, 1964). Now, a peasant's agitation flared up among the Mundas. This uprising gathered momentum when the Oraons and Hindu cultivators joined hands with the refractory Munda Christians. Village Dahijira became the nerve centre of this agitation.

4.3. Khunt Katti System

According to the Khunt Katti system, lands in the forested hilly areas were made cultivable by the tribal. These were the most valuable lands, which lie in ravines and hollows and possess fertility. The survey and the settlement operations of 1902-1910 and the Chotnagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 could provide some recognition to Khunt Katti rights to the tribal peasants of the area (Sinha, 1908). But it was not completely successful, which dissatisfied the people.

4.4. Connolly's Settlement

Connolly's settlement commenced in 1907 and was completed in 1911. It was a ten (10) year settlement and its term expired in 1920-21. The revenue was collected in a huge amount from Hemgir Zamindari (Rs. 8,444/-), Nagra Zamindari (Rs. 21,233/-), Sargipalli Zamindari (Rs. 3,585/-) and Sarapgarh Zamindari (Rs. 1,854/-), and Hatibari (Rs. 5,375/-). He made the settlement of the wetland and sugarcane fields only. Upland was not assessed for rent.

Other Settlements on which Tribals had been demanding for abolition of like-

- **Nuabadi Settlement** (the settlement of newly cultivated lands was made in 1923-24)
- **Bethi** (used to construct palaces and beautify gardens/roads without paying any wages to the workers)
- **Begari** (to transport royal officers' personal effects and household goods for free) who were solely responsible for the Tribal uprising at Amko-Simko.

As a result, in the village of Dahijira, Munda ryots (tenants) had stopped paying rent, and other tribes supported their cause. Petitions were filed against the high rent rates, but the local government was inflexible about collecting taxes. The Queen of Gangpur, **Rani Janaki Ratna**, attempted to persuade the tribals, but her efforts were in vain. The agitation escalated, and **Nirmal Munda** emerged as a prominent leader of the no-rent campaign. In 1938, the movement intensified, with demands including land restitution, abolition of taxes, and more. Despite attempts to negotiate, the rebellion persisted.

4.5. Leadership under Nirmal Munda

In the history of the peasant movement in the former state of Gangpur, the name of Sri Nirmal Munda deserves special mention as a daring leader whose exceptional organizing skills, dynamism, and moral courage gave momentum to the peasant movement in that region. He had limited opportunities for higher education; however, he received formal education in a missionary school and was able to read and write. From a young age, he had the courage to protest against injustice, and the hills, forests, brooks, and rocks of the area fostered in him a deep sense of regard for his motherland and a love for liberty. He was greatly influenced by the Birsite Munda movement in Chhotnagpur. As a tribal leader, he could not ignore the oppression faced by aboriginals at the hands of the administration. Around 1936-37, dishonest individuals from the plains, such as moneylenders and contractors, prompted the tribes of the neighboring Chhotnagpur region to begin a movement for a separate state for the tribal people, called Jharkhand, under the leadership of Jayapal Singh. Nirmal Munda was greatly inspired by Jayapal Singh and Bahadur Bhagat from the nearby Andali Jambahal village. He contemplated launching a similar movement in the Gangpur states to address tribal issues.

Discontent arose among the aborigines over this arbitrary increase in land revenue. In September 1935, the Munda peasants, under Nirmal's leadership, petitioned the Governor General against the exorbitant rent rates suggested by the Mukharjee settlement. The new rents became payable from 1937, and Nirmal Munda stepped forward to protest this economic exploitation of tribal peasants by the Durbar administration. He traveled from village to village, holding meetings among the tribes to urge them to unite in fighting for their cause — reducing rents and restoring the Khuntkatti Tenancy Acts. By 1938, the agitation initiated by Nirmal Munda spread throughout every corner of Gangpur State. This no-rent campaign gained momentum when the Oraons and Hindu peasants joined forces with the Lutheran Christian Mundas. Nirmal Munda made Dahijira village the nerve center of the agitation. The Durbar administration appealed to the G.E.L. Church Council in Ranchi to influence Nirmal Munda and discourage him from continuing the movement. The council visited Dahijira and persuaded Nirmal Munda to suspend his activism. However, despite his spiritual loyalty to the church, Nirmal Munda did not yield to the council's persuasion.

The Regent Queen then embarked on extensive tours and held meetings at various locations, explaining to the people the reasonableness and necessity of making payment to the Durbar. But when all persuasive measures failed to calm down the movement, the Durbar took recourse to coercive measures to recover the arrears. To meet the challenges of the Durbar, Nirmal Munda called upon the people to be organized, and secret meetings were held in different villages like Purnapani, Surda, Luaram, Kaolalka, Jital, Jadakudar, Khariabandhs etc. The Durbar administration now wanted to arrest Nirmal Munda, the leader of this movement, and other agitators. Even the secretary of the Lutheran council (Ranchi) advised the Durbar to take every possible measure against Nirmal.

4.6. The Massacre Unfolds

As the situation worsened, the Durbar of Gangpur sought help from the British political agent in Sambalpur to suppress the rebellion. They planned to arrest Nirmal Munda, and it was falsely claimed that Rani Janaki had accepted the agitators' demands and was about to announce Simko village. On April 25, 1939, a large group of Adivasis gathered at Amko-Simko, led by Nirmal Munda.

Assistant Political Agent Lt. E. W. Marger and a British officer arrived to arrest Nirmal Munda on charges of sedition and assault. However, everyone present identified themselves as Nirmal Munda. This highlights Nirmal Munda's popularity as a leader and his significant influence over the tribal people, so no one was willing to part with this well-known leader. Moreover, the people believed that with Nirmal Munda's arrest, their movement would collapse in the absence of the captain. The crowd, armed with lathis, axes, arrows, and bows, surrounded Nirmal Munda's house. Tensions increased, leading to clashes between the police and the tribals. Unable to control the crowd, the police opened fire, causing numerous deaths and injuries.

4.7. The Aftermath

After the Amko-Simko firing incident, their leader, Nirmal Munda, along with others arrested. After the firing, many people died at the spot. Whereas many of them died in the forest due to hunger, some of them became the food of the forest animals. After one year of the incident, a stone was put at the spot in memory. In which the killing of 52 persons and the injury of 82 persons is mentioned.

The exact casualty count remains disputed. The Odisha government claims 39 deaths and 50 injuries, while unofficial records suggest nearly 50 fatalities and around 100 injuries. Some even claim more than 300 casualties. Many victims' names are not officially documented, but a list compiled from various sources is available. Lastly, Nirmal Munda and his followers were arrested and kept in Jashpur and Sundargarh jails. They were released in 1947 A.D. On the eve of Independence Day. Nirmal Munda died in 1973 A.D. (D.B.-1894 A.D.)

4.8. In Popular Culture

The Amko-Simko massacre is remembered among the tribals, which narrates the tragic events of that day. Thus, the Amko-Simko massacre serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made by tribal communities in their fight for justice and land rights during India's struggle for independence.

4.9. Significance Aspects

The history of the freedom struggle in the ex-state of Gangpur constitutes a significant chapter in the history of the freedom struggle in Orissa, and it impacts the history of the freedom struggle in India as a whole. It also taught a lesson to the Durbar Administration that the last ruler, Udit Pratap Sekhar Deo, committed himself to promoting the welfare of the people. Immediately after independence, this ex-state was merged with Orissa. The freedom movement in the Gangpur State, in this way, was too dimensional, i.e.

- Struggle for freedom from the feudal oppression and agrarian exploitation, and
- Freedom from the feudal authorities, which were subject to British paramountcy.
- The integration was the culmination of the oppressed peasantry's forbidding struggle for liberation from the prolonged despotism and feudal social order.

5. CONCLUSION

The history of the Amko-Simko uprisings in Sundargarh District, Odisha, offers a vivid portrayal of the resilience and resistance of indigenous communities against British colonial rule. These uprisings,

deeply rooted in the socio-political and economic struggles of the tribal population, underscore the relentless efforts of local tribes to protect their land, culture, and way of life from foreign exploitation. Through an analysis of the Amko-Simko movements, we observe how tribal groups, though marginalized and underrepresented in mainstream historical narratives, played a pivotal role in the broader national resistance to colonialism.

The uprisings were not mere isolated acts of rebellion but rather part of a larger continuum of tribal resistance movements across India during the colonial period. They highlight the intersection of various factors, such as economic hardships, cultural disintegration, and the exploitation of natural resources by the British, which collectively sparked widespread uprisings in the region. The Amko-Simko resistance is particularly significant as it showcases the unique forms of resistance strategies employed by indigenous communities, from guerrilla tactics to mobilizing local traditions and leadership structures.

Furthermore, the analysis of these uprisings in Sundargarh District reveals a broader understanding of how colonial policies affected tribal societies differently from their counterparts in more urbanized regions. The colonial state's disregard for tribal autonomy and traditional governance systems exacerbated tensions, leading to persistent uprisings throughout the period.

In conclusion, the Amko-Simko uprisings stand as a testament to the resilience and resistance of Odisha's tribal communities against colonial subjugation. Their struggles are an integral part of India's anti-colonial narrative, which calls for a more inclusive understanding of the freedom movement, one that acknowledges the significant contributions of marginalized and tribal communities. The legacy of these uprisings continues to be felt in the region, and their historical importance must be recognized not only in the context of Odisha's history but also in the broader spectrum of India's fight for independence.

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