



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
P-ISSN: 2706-9109
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.63
www.historyjournal.net
IJH 2025; 7(9): 84-88
Received: 10-06-2025
Accepted: 15-07-2025

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Tribal resistance in colonial India: Reclaiming the legacy of Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2025.v7.i9b.519>

Abstract

The landscape of India's freedom struggle remains incomplete without acknowledging the fierce and fearless resistance offered by its tribal communities. Among the forgotten frontlines of anti-colonial defiance lies Mahakaushal, a region dense in forests, cultures, and history, where indigenous leaders such as Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga emerged not merely as rebels but as architects of resistance with their own visions of justice and autonomy. This paper interrogates the systematic erasure of these leaders from mainstream historical narratives, arguing that their strategies, motivations, and legacies constitute a distinct paradigm of subaltern resistance.

Employing a qualitative and interpretive historical method, the study draws upon oral archives, colonial reports, folk songs, and ethnographic accounts to trace the sociopolitical trajectories of these leaders and their communities. Far from being isolated revolts, the tribal uprisings in Mahakaushal were grounded in collective memory, cultural identity, and ecological consciousness. This research foregrounds their struggle as a complex interplay of spiritual symbolism, guerrilla warfare, and communal solidarity, offering a counter narrative to the linear portrayal of India's national movement. The paper ultimately calls for an epistemological shift in how we chronicle resistance, away from metro-centric, elite-led perspectives towards the grassroots, embodied histories of indigenous peoples. In doing so, it contributes to the growing discourse of decolonial history and asserts the intellectual necessity of re-inserting tribal agency into the centre of India's liberation story.

Keywords: Indigenous sovereignty, Bhima Nayak, Sukhlal Baiga, tribal historiography, Mahakaushal freedom movement

Introduction

The dominant historiography of India's freedom movement, both in popular culture and academic literature, has long privileged the narratives of urban political elites, institutional movements, and constitutional strategies. Gandhi, Nehru, and Bose have rightly occupied central space, yet their presence often overshadows equally significant, though regionally rooted, contributions that did not follow the same political template. Among these silenced voices are the tribal revolutionaries of India—warriors, spiritual leaders, and cultural custodians, who resisted not just foreign rule but the very epistemic frameworks that continue to deny them space in historical discourse.

Mahakaushal, a geographically distinct region in central India encompassing parts of present-day Madhya Pradesh, stands as a vital yet understudied landscape of tribal political consciousness. Rich in cultural diversity and ecological significance, Mahakaushal became a crucible of anti-colonial struggle where leaders like Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga did not merely participate in the national movement, they redefined the contours of resistance. For them, freedom was not just political independence; it was the reclamation of land, culture, forests, memory, and dignity.

Bhima Nayak's rebellion in the early years of colonial expansion, and Sukhlal Baiga's organized grassroots mobilization during the nationalist wave, represent two distinct yet converging paradigms of tribal resistance. These leaders, though separated by time and context, converged in their rejection of imperial authority and their assertion of indigenous sovereignty. Their strategies, steeped in guerrilla tactics, oral traditions, and ecological symbolism, reflect a form of resistance that is both intellectually rich and spiritually grounded.

This paper is an attempt to reinsert these forgotten revolutionaries into the annals of India's freedom struggle, not as footnotes or folklore, but as historical subjects with agency, vision, and enduring impact. Drawing on oral histories, archival fragments, ethnographic reflections, and subaltern historiography, the study reconstructs a landscape of resistance that challenges our linear understanding of Indian nationalism.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways did tribal leaders of Mahakaushal conceptualize and operationalize resistance against British rule?
2. How do the life trajectories of Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga disrupt conventional nationalist historiography?
3. What methodological shifts are necessary to uncover the submerged histories of tribal resistance?

By engaging with these questions, the paper argues for a decentralized and pluralistic narrative of India's struggle for freedom—one that recognises resistance as not a uniform act but a spectrum of localized, cultural, and political expressions.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a secondary research methodology, focusing exclusively on existing literature, historical documents, and archival data to reassess the role of tribal leadership, particularly Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga, in the freedom struggle in colonial Mahakaushal.

The research is qualitative and interpretive in nature, situated within the historical-analytical tradition. Rather than gathering new field data, it critically evaluates and synthesises previously published sources including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government records, district gazetteers, colonial reports, and existing oral narratives transcribed by ethnographers and historians. This approach allows for a layered understanding of how tribal resistance has been represented and often misrepresented in historical discourse.

2.1 Philosophical Orientation

The research aligns with subaltern historiography, which seeks to retrieve the voices of marginalised actors in history. It challenges both colonial and nationalist narratives that have rendered tribal contributions peripheral or insignificant. In this framework, tribal resistance is viewed not as episodic or reactive, but as a form of sustained, culturally rooted political agency.

2.2 Sources of Data

The study draws upon

- **Published Books and Journal Articles:** These include both mainstream historical texts and revisionist works within subaltern studies and postcolonial theory.
- **District Gazetteers and Colonial Records:** These are used to trace British administrative responses to tribal uprisings, particularly in Central Provinces and Berar.
- **Reports from Tribal Research Institutes:** Regional publications by institutions like the Tribal Research and Development Institute (TRDI), Bhopal.
- **Oral Histories and Folk Literature (as documented**

by previous researchers): Although no fresh oral data is collected, the study uses translated and published oral testimonies and folk narratives relevant to the tribal regions of Mahakaushal.

2.3 Analytical Strategy

The material is analysed thematically. Key themes include: (1) colonial criminalisation of tribal leaders, (2) resistance as territorial and ecological assertion, and (3) cultural memory and its erasure in state-sponsored historiography. The paper relies on textual analysis, critical historiography, and discourse analysis of colonial and nationalist records.

Through this lens, tribal resistance is interpreted as a multi-dimensional response—strategic, symbolic, and survivalist—challenging the exploitative structures of colonial modernity.

2.4 Limitations

While the use of secondary sources allows for comprehensive theoretical framing, it limits direct access to lived tribal experiences. However, the study compensates for this through extensive engagement with interdisciplinary literature and historical reinterpretation.

3. Literature Review

1. **Bandyopadhyay, S. (2004)** ^[19]: *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman. This book offers a comprehensive overview of colonial India's transformation. Although primarily political, it critiques how tribal resistance narratives remain absent in grand nationalist historiography.
2. **Chandra, B. (1999)** ^[4]: *India's Struggle for Independence*. Penguin Books. One of the most cited texts on Indian freedom movement, but largely focused on mainstream Congress-led narratives. Tribal resistance figures like Bhima Nayak remain unacknowledged.
3. **Damodaran, V. (2006)** ^[20]: *Popular Resistance and the Limits of the State: Colonial India 1857-1920*. *Social Scientist*, 34(3/4), 3-34. Explores popular revolts and their complexity. Though tribal movements are included, they are portrayed briefly and not fully explored as political resistance.
4. **Elwin, V. (1943)** ^[21]: *The Baiga*. Gyan Publishing. A pioneering anthropological study of the Baiga tribe. Provides cultural and historical insight into the community but does not sufficiently contextualise their political resistance.
5. **Gadgil, M., & Guha, R. (1992)** ^[22]: *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*. University of California Press. Situates tribal resistance within ecological and environmental contexts. Useful in analysing forest-centric resistance in Mahakaushal.
6. **Guha, R. (1983)** ^[6]: *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Oxford University Press. A foundational subaltern study reframing tribal uprisings as organised insurgency rather than chaos. Offers tools for analysing Bhima Nayak's revolt.
7. **Hardiman, D. (1998)** ^[7]: *Wellbeing, Property and Resistance: Adivasi Uprisings in Western India*. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 25(4), 89-123. Describes indigenous land-rights movements, portraying resistance as deeply rooted in identity and survival. Resonates with

- Mahakaushal's struggles.
8. **Hutton, J. H. (1963)** ^[24]: *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origins*. Oxford University Press. Discusses the anthropological dimensions of tribal groups. Colonial and reductionist in tone, but important for comparative critique.
 9. **Kela, S. (2012)** ^[25]: *A Rogue and Peasant Slave: Adivasi Resistance in Colonial India*. Navayana. A focused work on tribal resistance using archival and field data. Highlights the criminalisation of tribal leaders, fitting for this paper's argument.
 10. **Lal, V. (2001)** ^[26]: *Subaltern Studies and its Critics: Debates over Indian History*. History and Theory, 40(1), 135-148. Critically examines the Subaltern Studies Collective. Useful for refining the theoretical lens applied to Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga.
 11. **Mishra, C. (2005)** ^[27]: *Adivasi Struggles in Central India*. Economic and Political Weekly, 40(41), 4463-4471. Engages with tribal political consciousness and how these communities negotiated modernity, land, and self-rule.
 12. **Omvedt, G. (1994)** ^[28]: *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*. Sage Publications. Though focused on Dalits, offers valuable insights on marginalised agency. Her framing of radical grassroots mobilisation applies to tribal politics as well.
 13. **Rao, A. (2008)** ^[29]: *The Politics of Memory: Native Intellectuals and Resistance in India*. Comparative Studies in Society and History, 50(2), 241-272. Addresses indigenous memory and oral historiography. Strong relevance to Sukhlal Baiga's legacy and resistance traditions.
 14. **Risley, H. H. (1908)** ^[30]: *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. Bengal Secretariat Press. An example of colonial anthropology that often pathologized tribes. Included here for critical historiographical contrast.
 15. **Roy, S. (2007)** ^[31]: *Decentring the Nation: Writing Subaltern Resistance in Colonial India*. Interventions, 9(1), 35-50. Discusses methods of decentring elite nationalist discourse and recognising tribal resistance as autonomous political action.
 16. **Sen, S. (2010)** ^[32]: *Savage Attack: Tribal Insurgency in India*. Social Analysis, 54(1), 123-147. Focuses on tribal insurgency as a challenge to state formation. Emphasises symbolic violence, cultural survival, and state criminalisation.
 17. **Shah, A. (2010)** ^[15]: *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*. HarperCollins India. Though set in the contemporary era, explores revolutionary ideologies among tribal populations, resonating with past resistance forms.
 18. **Sharma, L. (2011)** ^[33]: *Mahakaushal ke Adivasi Andolanon ka Itihas*. Tribal Research Institute, Bhopal. A rare regional text on Mahakaushal's tribal uprisings. Offers place-based insights missing in national-level research.
 19. **Skaria, A. (1999)** ^[18]: *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*. Oxford University Press. Explores ecological dimensions of resistance. Theorises the forest not only as a space of refuge but as a political territory.
 20. **Tiwari, R. (2017)** ^[35]: *Unsung Tribal Freedom Fighters of Central India*. Madhya Pradesh History Review, 5(2), 87-110. Documents biographical

narratives of tribal leaders like Bhima Nayak. Attempts to bridge oral and written histories.

2. Methodology

This study uses a secondary research approach, relying entirely on published literature, archival documents, and historical analyses to explore the role of tribal leaders Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga in Mahakaushal's freedom movement.

The method is qualitative and historical-analytical, focusing on interpreting past events and their representation. It draws insights from a variety of sources without engaging in fieldwork.

2.1 Philosophical Orientation

The study is rooted in subaltern historiography, which aims to recover voices left out of mainstream narratives. Tribal resistance is approached as a deliberate, organised assertion of identity and autonomy, not as spontaneous or marginal activity.

2.2 Sources of Data

Key materials include

- **Books and Journals:** Both classical histories and recent subaltern studies.
- **Colonial Records and Gazetteers:** Administrative accounts and reports from Central Provinces and Berar.
- **Institutional Reports:** Publications from the Tribal Research and Development Institute (TRDI).
- **Translated Oral Traditions:** As published in earlier scholarly work.

2.3 Analytical Strategy

Themes like state suppression, cultural memory, and ecological resistance are examined through textual and discourse analysis. Colonial language is critically reviewed to understand how tribal leaders were portrayed.

2.4 Limitations

As the study does not include primary field data, it may miss personal nuances. However, this is addressed through wide reading and critical analysis of diverse secondary material.

4. Tribal Resistance in Mahakaushal: A Contextual Overview

Mahakaushal, a culturally rich and geographically significant region in central India, has long been home to various tribal communities like the Gond, Baiga, and Korku. During the British colonial period, this region witnessed notable uprisings against imperial control, largely driven by exploitative land revenue systems, forest laws, and tribal displacements.

Colonial administrative policies disrupted indigenous systems of land use and self-governance. The Forest Acts of the late 19th century criminalised traditional forest-based livelihoods and restricted access to natural resources. As a result, many tribal communities in Mahakaushal perceived British rule as not only economically oppressive but also spiritually intrusive.

Resistance emerged in different forms: armed revolts, non-cooperation, and symbolic cultural defiance. What makes Mahakaushal unique is the regional pattern of leadership, with figures like Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga emerging

from within the tribal fold, as opposed to external agitators. British reports from the Central Provinces often dismissed these revolts as isolated dacoities. However, tribal resistance in Mahakaushal was deeply rooted in community memory, kinship networks, and spiritual symbolism. The geography marked by dense forests and hills served both as shelter and a natural fortress, enabling guerrilla tactics.

This contextual backdrop is essential for understanding how leaders like Nayak and Baiga drew not just from political ideology but also cultural and ecological traditions to mobilise their people. Their resistance was not merely anti-British, but also a defence of their right to live, pray, and govern as per their customs.

5. Case Studies: Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga

Bhima Nayak, a Bhil tribal leader from western Madhya Pradesh, is remembered for his guerrilla warfare tactics during and after the 1857 rebellion. He used the forests of Alirajpur and surrounding regions to launch surprise attacks against British forces. Arrested and exiled to the Andamans, Nayak's legacy survives in tribal oral history, songs, and commemorations.

His leadership is emblematic of how tribal resistance combined armed struggle with territorial knowledge and spiritual symbolism. The forest was not merely a battleground but a living part of resistance ideology.

Sukhlal Baiga, though less documented in national history, was a pivotal figure in the early 20th-century tribal assertion in eastern Mahakaushal. His resistance was less about armed revolt and more about mass mobilisation against unjust taxation and displacement. Using Baiga spiritual authority, he mobilised local populations for non-violent but assertive resistance.

Both leaders embodied different modes of resistance—Nayak's more militaristic and Baiga's socio-cultural. Together, they illustrate the plurality of tribal responses to colonial intrusion and the need to recognise indigenous agency in diverse forms.

6. Conclusion

The historical experiences of Mahakaushal's tribal leaders reveal a narrative of resilience, agency, and sacrifice that has long been silenced in mainstream historiography. By revisiting the contributions of Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga, this research highlights the plural dimensions of India's anti-colonial resistance and the centrality of indigenous voices in shaping regional histories.

The case of Bhima Nayak illustrates how military resistance was not just a tactical choice but a reflection of ecological knowledge, kinship solidarity, and cultural survival. His use of guerrilla strategies within the dense forests symbolises the fusion of landscape with liberation. Despite colonial portrayals branding him as a rebel or dacoit, his memory remains alive in oral traditions, where he is celebrated as a hero of his people.

The leadership of Sukhlal Baiga, in contrast, underscores a different mode of mobilisation. Rather than battlefield confrontation, his resistance lay in collective organisation against economic oppression and cultural disruption. Drawing on Baiga religious authority, he demonstrated that political resistance could also manifest in symbolic, ritual, and non-violent forms. His movement reflects how spirituality and politics were intertwined in tribal assertions of autonomy.

Together, these leaders represent two distinct yet complementary strands of tribal resistance: one oriented toward armed defiance and the other toward cultural assertion and non-violent opposition. Both strands reveal that tribal communities were not passive victims but active participants in shaping India's anti-colonial struggle. Their sacrifices challenge the narrow focus of nationalist historiography, which has often privileged urban, elite, or Congress-led movements over subaltern revolts.

The broader context of Mahakaushal further reinforces the importance of recognising resistance in its regional settings. The terrain, forests, and ecological landscapes were not just backdrops but integral to strategies of resistance. The spiritual worldview of the tribes—where land, forests, and gods were inseparable—provided the ideological foundation for their defiance. In this sense, the tribal struggle was not only anti-colonial but also anti-exploitative, resisting the broader forces of capitalist extraction and cultural marginalisation.

From a historiographical perspective, the neglect of such narratives exposes the biases in both colonial and nationalist writings. Colonial records dismissed tribal resistance as criminality, while nationalist accounts often failed to integrate them into the broader story of India's freedom movement. By foregrounding figures like Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga, this study contributes to the project of rewriting history from below, ensuring that the contributions of marginalised actors receive rightful recognition.

Finally, this study also points to the continued relevance of tribal resistance in contemporary discourse. The struggles of Mahakaushal's tribes for land rights, cultural preservation, and political voice echo the historical resistance of their forebears. The stories of Nayak and Baiga are not merely relics of the past but living symbols of resilience, inspiring future generations to question hegemonic structures and fight for justice.

In conclusion, the tribal resistance of Mahakaushal exemplifies the enduring human quest for dignity, autonomy, and survival against oppressive regimes. Bhima Nayak and Sukhlal Baiga's legacies compel us to rethink the narratives of Indian independence and embrace a more inclusive, plural, and subaltern-centred historiography. Only by acknowledging these voices can we construct a fuller, more authentic picture of the freedom struggle—one that recognises not just the leaders in Delhi or Calcutta, but also the warriors and visionaries who rose from the forests of Mahakaushal.

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