Flaming fields and forest fires: Agrarian transformations and the making of Birsa Munda's rebellion

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The purpose of this article is to question the overarching notion of 'millenarianism' as well as its applicability to various 'tribal' rebellions and social movements in British India. I do so by carefully re-reading the colonial archives and secondary sources concerning the Birsaite uprising afresh in order to rethink how certain forest-dwelling groups who came to be defined as 'tribes' in colonial times actually encountered the modern state as well as Christianity in the late nineteenth century. Why did the Birsaites take up arms? Who rebelled? Against whom? What was the role of religion in their uprising? In answering these questions, I follow the Subalternist's injunction to take the lifeworlds of the marginal and oppressed seriously in their own terms without imposing, in a vanguardist manner, the pre-existing conceptual order of 'millenarianism'. Yet I also intend to be faithful to the social historian's desire to uncover and examine the social location, aims and methods of Birsa and his followers.

Keywords: millenarianism, peasant politics, subaltern resistance, adivasis, agrarian history

The making of the modern 'tribal' subject in India and beyond remains as little understood today as in the nineteenth century. At the heart of the problem lies the persistence of 'primitivism' as a social theory that describes the ways and lives of so-called 'tribal' subjects in colonial and postcolonial times.[1] Resistance and rebellion by these 'primitive' subjects under colonial rule have been typically lumped together by historians and social scientists as instances of 'millenarianism'.[2] Millenarianism typically denotes an ideology of social protest in which those

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[1] On primitivism as a social theory and a ruling ideology, see Chandra, 'Liberalism and its Other'.
[2] See, most notably, Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion*; Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth*; Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium*.

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who have not fully adapted to the demands of modernity fall back on pre-modern 'religion' to express their material and non-material grievances, usually unsuccessfully. Through the analytic of 'millenarianism', the Anabaptists and Levellers in Reformation Europe as the Sioux Ghost Dance in North America and the Maji Maji rebellion in East Africa can be treated alongside each other as kin. Material distress, especially in early modern capitalist or colonial contexts, and religious political expression are thus taken to be the key socio-economic characteristics of millenarianism among those whom Eric Hobsbawm famously termed 'primitive rebels'.[3] Originally a word used to describe the rise of the Jesus movement in Palestine under Roman imperial rule and the subsequent promise of redemption through Jesus' return,[4] 'millenarianism' is now a respectable social–scientific concept with a vast, ever-expanding literature spanning disciplines. To some, the word itself symbolises a radical 'sociology of hope', even a yearning for utopian possibilities unlikely to be satiated in the mundane here-and-now.[5]

In the context of colonial India, Stephen Fuchs and Kumar Suresh Singh, the former a missionary-turned anthropologist and the latter a civil servant who retired as the director of the Anthropological Survey of India, were pioneers who tethered their studies of religious movements among 'tribal' groups to the wider discourse of 'millenarianism'.[6] But it was not until the publication of Ranajit Guha's celebrated *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* that 'millenarianism' came to be popularised as an anti-colonial response of 'tribal' and other peasant communities encountering the modern state and capitalism under British rule in India. Ranajit Guha's work relied heavily on Fuchs and Singh, and unlike his turn to the archives to reconstruct the events of the Kol Insurrection of 1831–32 and the Santal Hul of 1855, Guha's account of Birsa Munda's *ulgulan* depended entirely on the prior research of Singh.[7] Soon, there was 'millenarianism' everywhere in what colonial anthropologist-administrators and their latter-day amateur counterparts saw as tribal India.[8] 'Millenarianism' as a sociological affair thus came to be tied firmly and inextricably to 'tribal' politics: Hindus and Muslims, it was implied, did not experience these millenarian urges.

The purpose of this article is to question the overarching notion of 'millenarianism' as well as its applicability to various 'tribal' rebellions and social movements in British India. I do so by carefully re-reading the colonial archives and

[3] Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*. On these sociological characteristics, see Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed* and Thrupp, *Millennial Dreams in Action*.

[4] Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*; cf. Aslan, *Zealot*.

[5] See, for example, Desroche, *The Sociology of Hope* and Toscano, *Fanaticism*.

[6] Fuchs, *Godmen on the Warpath*; Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist*.

[7] I am grateful to Partha Chatterjee for sharing with me that Ranajit Guha and early Subaltern Studies took K.S. Singh's account of the Birsaite uprising as a faithful rendering of events by an 'insider' on tribal affairs.

[8] See, for example, Arnold, 'Rebellious Hillmen'; Dasgupta, 'Adivasi Politics in Midnapur, c. 1760–1924'; Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924–1932'.

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secondary sources concerning the Birsaite uprising in order to rethink how certain forest-dwelling groups who came to be defined as 'tribes' in colonial times actually encountered the modern state as well as Christianity in the late nineteenth century. Why did the Birsaites take up arms? Who rebelled? Against whom? What was the role of religion in their uprising? In answering these questions, I follow the Subalternist's injunction to take the lifeworlds of the marginal and oppressed seriously in their own terms without imposing, in a vanguardist manner, the pre-existing conceptual order of 'millenarianism'. Yet I also intend to be faithful to the social historian's desire to uncover and examine the social location, aims and methods of Birsa and his followers. This is important because, as Christian Lee Novetzke has recently explained, 'religion appears foundational, though largely untheorized' in the annals of Subaltern Studies except as a 'secret realm' of subaltern agency and resistance or 'a liminal state in reasoning about agency—the vanishing point of "rational" comprehension'.[9] More generally, how the cultural–religious relates to the political–economic is far from obvious in instances of 'millenarianism' worldwide. What seems to be sacred to both colonial anthropologists and subalternists such as 'tribal' religious traditions may, as I shall show, be far more deeply intertwined with the apparently profane workings of modern statecraft, agrarian political economy and the politics of conversion than historians have been willing to probe so far. As James Scott puts it recently in the context of the highlands of Southeast Asia, 'mobilization around a prophet is the idiom of both state formation and rebellion …, an ominous sign known well by rulers and their pundits'.[10] Indeed, all that is clubbed together as 'millenarian' may turn out to be rather central to the making and remaking of modern states and their subjects.

Accordingly, this article departs sharply from a recent essay by Alpa Shah that engages with Singh, Guha and Birsa Munda. Citing my doctoral dissertation, Shah argues against the received view that treats the Birsaite movement as an anti-colonial or even proto-nationalist affair. But Shah is concerned primarily with the relationship between the Maoist left and subaltern religiosity today. To her, the secular prejudices of the Indian left, whether Maoist rebel commanders or historians, prevent a fuller appreciation of adivasi religion, past or present. This line of critique may be worth pursuing, but it is hampered by Shah's conviction that 'Guha was not Guha enough' in his treatment of subaltern religious worlds in *Elementary Aspects*. Such a conviction merely reproduces what Novetzke calls a 'secret realm' of religion that defies all reason and yet encapsulates subaltern agency in the annals of Early Subaltern Studies. Elsewhere, Shah refers to this secret realm of adivasi religion as a 'sacral polity', uncontaminated by politics or economics and pure in its conception of an alternative politics beyond

[9] Novetzke, 'The Subaltern Numen', p. 101.
[10] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 307.

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the modern state.[11] There is no scope for Shah, as for Guha, to appreciate what later Subalternists would call the 'entanglement of power and resistance'.[12] The relationship between subaltern religiosity and modern statemaking, central to my argument here, remains impossible to explore in Shah's framework. Furthermore, the lack of archival research to support Shah's arguments makes it difficult to accept her blanket characterisation of Munda rebels and Christian missionaries as sworn enemies. Antagonisms as well as entanglements, as I show in this article, need to be carefully examined over time in the archival evidence before we can reach any conclusions. Lastly, treating the Birsaite uprising as an internal development within so-called 'tribal' religion, as Shah does in her essay, risks resurrecting the colonial anthropology of 'animism' and, completely neglecting the long shadow of 'monastic governmentality' that Indrani Chatterjee highlights so evocatively in her contribution to this issue.

More generally, I argue, it is vital to understand the agrarian and state-centric character of social protest as well as the nature of religious change prior to and during the Birsaite *ulgulan*. This is a departure from the vast majority of studies of 'millenarianism', including those by Fuchs and Singh, insofar as I avoid a singular focus on a prophet, his charisma, and his cult of followers.[13] It is also a departure in another sense: land and religion, as we shall see for the Birsaites, were far from opposed agendas for those attracted to the varieties of religious iconoclasm and innovation that are labelled as 'millenarian'.[14] Lastly, the argument in this article departs from earlier studies of millenarianism in British India and beyond by showing how Munda activists and rebels, far from seeking to overthrow colonial rule in Chotanagpur, reworked the terms of their subjecthood under British overlordship, and in fact, actively deepened the process of statemaking in these margins of modern India. We cannot simply presume, *pace* K. S. Singh, Stephen Fuchs and Ranajit Guha, an anti-colonial intent that expresses itself in 'tribal' communities during 'moments of madness'.[15]

This article is divided into two parts. The first part delineates the historical background of agrarian activism in Chotanagpur from c. 1860 to 1890. The second

[11] Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*.

[12] Haynes and Prakash, 'The Entanglement of Power and Resistance'.

[13] In doing so, I follow Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, pp. 295–96: 'Underpinning the individual gifts or radiant personality of a single figure … lie the more durable cultural expectations and desires that create … a kind of repertoire into which a prophet might fit … [F]rom this perspective, a charismatic connection might be conceived as a specific congregation looking for a preacher whose message it can wholeheartedly embrace and whom it believes it can trust. It is as if the destination is largely known and specified (however ambitious it may be), and the congregation is in search of reliable transportation. The prophet is, in this sense, a vehicle.'

[14] In particular, this argument runs contrary to that in MacDougall, *Land or Religion?* But it does recall older arguments about capitalist transformations and religious change in England by Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* and Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion*.

[15] The phrase is from Zolberg, 'Moments of Madness'.

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part reinterprets the *ulgulan* or uprising led by Birsa Munda between 1895 and 1901. There is, as social scientists have long recognised, a 'close connection' rather than a 'sharp division' between more and less peaceful forms of contentious politics,[16] and hence, it is necessary for us to see how different activisms crisscross rather than cancel each other out.

The Fruits and Limits of Peaceful Activism in the Margins

One of the paradoxes of writing adivasi history today is the recognition that the period in which 'tribes' began to be conceived as egalitarian, homogenous units is also the period in which these rural groups became increasingly differentiated internally and in relation to the modern state in British India. In this section, I sketch the socio-historical context of the Birsaite uprising by examining the growing political assertiveness of the better-off peasants or *bhuinhars* among the Mundas in the Chotanagpur region of eastern India in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The engagements of newly defined 'tribal' subjects with the colonial state, I argue, decisively shaped contestations over land tenure in nineteenth-century Chotanagpur as well as their own political selves. These adivasi-state engagements revolved initially around a land survey commissioned by E. T. Dalton, the Commissioner of Chotanagpur Division, in 1859. The survey, unique in many ways, intended to 'define and record' lands held by *bhuinhars* in Munda and Oraon villages.[17] The initial survey conducted by Lal Lokenath Sahi had to be abandoned after the surveyor's untimely death. But in the 11 years following the passage of the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act (1869), the Bhuinhari Settlement Survey, as it was known, came to define the structure of rural society in Chotanagpur. As rural society came to be increasingly peasantised and stratified over the nineteenth century,[18] the survey and settlement operations from 1869 to 1880 registered the claims of a growing upper peasantry (*bhuinhars*) vis-à-vis their zamindars and the lower rungs of the peasantry. Who would be included in the *bhuinhari* survey and what one needed to do to be included are, therefore, critical here.

In theory at least, everyone agreed on the definition of a *bhuinhar* until the survey operations ended in 1876–77. In the earliest statement on the *bhuinhari* question, in 1839, Dr John Davidson had written to Major J.R. Ouseley to indicate that the *bhuinhars*, being 'the original clearers … or their descendants' held lands free of any rent obligations in rural Chotanagpur. As 'acknowledged fair labour', however, they were, along with other peasants,

[16] Tilly, Tilly and Tilly, *The Rebellious Century*, p. 282.

[17] E.T. Dalton to A.R. Young, 25 March 1859, *Papers Relating to Chotanagpur Agrarian Disputes* (PCAD), Vol. I.

[18] On peasantisation in Chotanagpur, see Mohapatra, 'Class Conflict and Agrarian Regimes in Chotanagpur, 1860–1950'.

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> obliged to give the theekedar or land-owner … three days' ploughing, three days' work with kori [sickle] or kodal [spade], three days' work in planting rice and same at cutting it; to bring grass and bamboos and thatch their houses, and occasionally when on a journey to carry their bhangies [luggage].

Noting that many *bhuinhars* who 'leave the village' struggle to retain their ancestral lands, Davidson argued that the Commissioner's office ought to ensure that all *bhuinhars* who had 'not been more than twenty years out of possession' should have their lands restored to them.[19] Twenty years later, when commissioning Lal Lokenath Sahi's initial survey, the Secretary to the Bengal Government agreed with Davidson:

> [T]hroughout Chota Nagpore, a portion of the lands of nearly every village is, or has at some time, been occupied by a class of cultivators called [*bhuinhars*], who are descendants of the original clearers of the land, and as much entitled to hold it rent-free on condition of certain services to be rendered to the landlords.[20]

But, by the end of the Bhuinhari Settlement Survey, the leading scholar-administrator of the Bengal Presidency wrote:

> The headman had no superior rights in the lands cultivated by other villagers. They were not landlords but chiefs, and they and the people acknowledging them held the soil they cultivated in virtue of their being the heirs of those who first utilised it; and when it became necessary to distinguish such men from cultivators of inferior title, the former were called *bhuinhárs*, breakers of the soil … When the Mundaris and Uraons submitted to a Raja, ... [t]he more privileged, who retained the designation of *bhuinhár*, had to give honorary attendance and constituted the militia of the state. The remainder supplied food and raiment.[21]

Everyone agreed that *bhuinhars*, as first settlers, enjoyed superior rights to the land, but note that in the last of the three assessments above, the corvée obligations of the *bhuinhars* has been omitted. To explain why these official accounts changed, we need to understand the nature of *bhuinhari* activism during the survey and settlement operations.

Whereas paternalistic administrators had to decide who was truly a *bhuinhar*, upwardly mobile and aspiring peasants in rural Chotanagpur were keen to make claims to *bhuinhari* status. For the administrators, those peasants who were not *bhuinhars* were either holders of *korkar* lands who had made wastelands cultivable

[19] J. Davidson to J.R. Ouseley, 29 August 1839, PCAD I.
[20] A.R. Young to E.T. Dalton, 15 April 1859, PCAD I.
[21] Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, p. 271.

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or *khuntkattidars* who had cleared forests and converted them for cultivation. Unlike *bhuinhars*, *korkar*-holders and *khuntkattidars* were expected to pay rents at different rates fixed by customary arrangements and, later, colonial legislation. Below these three classes of peasants in nineteenth-century Chotanagpur, there were also *dhangars* who laboured in the fields of superior landholders and as migrants to rural and urban destinations in the Bengal Presidency. In practice, however, any peasant, besides the *dhangars*, could claim to be a first settler or clearer of forests, so 'a majority of the cultivators claimed to be proprietors on the grounds that they or their ancestors had first reclaimed the land'.[22] But those peasants, especially *bhuinhars*, who had converted to Christianity, were especially articulate and indeed vociferous in making their claims. As the authorities in Calcutta duly recognised,

> Some Native Converts being better informed and more independent than their fellows [had] not only successfully resisted the encroachments of the zemindars, and this [had] not only encouraged others to maintain their own existing rights, but [had] induced some to seek by force restitution of rights of which their families [had] for long periods been dispossessed, or to claim the same rights in lands in their occupation to which no similar privileges are, or ever [had] been attached.[23]

Our concern here is, therefore, primarily with the activism of the *bhuinhars*, particularly the Christians among this upper peasantry, and the different forms it assumed.

The simplest form of peaceful claims-making was, in fact, for peasants to simply go to government land surveyors to demand that their claims be recorded in official registers as *bhuinhars*. This tactic was motivated undoubtedly by the surveyors' tendency to 'take up the easier cases before the more difficult ones'.[24] But it was also driven by the belief that 'in future they would get decreed to them all the lands they might claim now as Bhuinharee'.[25] Accordingly, the *bhuinhars* were 'constantly complaining of not having what they claim as their rent free land marked off and given over to them'.[26] At the same time, some later settlers threatened to stall survey proceedings unless their lands were also registered.[27] In response, we read the surveyors writing about 'very unreasonable … claims' that

[22] E.T. Dalton to R.H. Wilson, Bengal Revenue Proceedings (BRP), July 1871, West Bengal State Archives (WBSA).

[23] A.R. Young to E.T. Dalton, 15 April 1859, PCAD I.

[24] R.D. Haldar to H.L. Oliphant, Bengal Revenue Collections (BRC) August 1874, WBSA.

[25] R.D. Haldar to H.L. Oliphant, BRC, December 1874, WBSA.

[26] W. LeF. Robinson to R.I. Mangles, Bengal Revenue Miscellaneous Proceedings (BRMP), June 1875, WBSA.

[27] E.T. Dalton to R.H. Wilson, BRP, July 1871, WBSA.

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slowed down the work of registering *bhuinhari* lands.[28] We read, too, of 'extravagant claims' by 'agitators', many of whom 'were not Bhuinhars' at all.[29] On one occasion, for example, some 'better informed and more independent' tribal subjects referred to a 'lal bahi or the red book' of the Chotanagpur raja, which apparently declared that 'half the quantity of the land in each village belongs to the Kols and the other half to the landlord'.[30] No such book was, however, found later.[31] What is evident across these different cases of subaltern claim-making is a firm conviction on the part of tribal peasants of, as one official put it, 'the necessity for fighting about [*bhuinhari*] lands'.[32]

The cases themselves present a complex portrait of *bhuinhari* claims-making before government surveyors. In one instance, a Lutheran convert named Tura 'claimed 14 *powas* wet fields and 150 *kats* upland Bhuinhari in village Hakhajang, without rent or services, alleging he was ousted from his lands in 1857, because he had embraced Christianity'. It was found during the survey, however, that in the village of Hakhajang, there were 31.75 *powas* of 'wet fields' or paddy-growing lowlands, of which 13.25 *powas* were *bhuinhari*. Moreover, Tura was found not to possess any land 'in 1857, or for several years previous to that period, though he was undoubtedly a descendant of a Bhuinhar of the village'. In other cases, ordinary *raiyats* sought to claim rent-yielding lands as rent-free *bhuinhari* tenures since time immemorial.[33] In a different context, a Lutheran Christian named Bishwasi, a resident of Beasi village claimed 3.25 *kharis* as *bhuinhari* land before the surveyor only to find that '[t]he heathen inhabitants of the village refused to appear as witnesses in [his] favour'.[34] This kind of discrimination against Christians allegedly took place within villages as well as by the surveyors themselves. A certain Asaf, a Christian elder in the Lutheran mission, argued that one of the three surveyors, Gopal Chandra Mukherjee, had been paid an unstated cash amount, some rice and two goats by the landlord's henchman to write in his books that Asaf 'had no bhuinhari'. He added that five other Christian families had their *bhuinhari* claims rejected, and three others received very little. In another similar case, the same surveyor, 'Gopal Babu' as he was known locally, allegedly consulted with a landlord's agent Manoram Tewari to deprive a Christian Munda named Masihdas of 'four bharis' of his *bhuinhari* lands. When Masihdas protested, he was told initially by Tewari that he would receive land only on condition of paying rent, and when he did not consent to this arrangement, he was 'fined one

[28] W. LeF. Robinson to R.I. Mangles, BRMP, June 1875, WBSA
[29] E.T. Dalton to R.H. Wilson, BRP, July 1871, WBSA.
[30] K. Paulit to H.L. Oliphant, BRP, July 1871, WBSA.
[31] R. Thompson to E.T. Dalton, BRP, July 1871, WBSA.
[32] E.T. Dalton to A.R. Young, 25 March 1859, PCAD I.
[33] R.D. Haldar to H.L. Oliphant, 29 August 1871, PCAD I.
[34] Onasch et al. to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, 17 May 1876, PCAD I.

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rupee by the Babu [and] [n]ot being able to pay this fine', imprisoned for five hours in the local jail.[35] The Commissioner of Chotanagpur, however, refused to take these complaints against surveyors seriously. He attributed the complaints to the people being 'difficult to deal with' and the surveyors' lack of experience working among them.[36] In sum, we find evidence of false or exaggerated claims to *bhuinhari* lands as well as legitimate claims being denied on false or unfair pretexts by colonial surveyors.

Given these difficulties faced by *bhuinhars*, especially Christian *bhuinhars*, it is hardly surprising that they took up a second method of peaceful activism, namely, petitioning the state. The petitions deployed the language of the colonial state to talk back to it as authentic 'tribal' subjects whose lineages numbered among the earliest settlers in Chotanagpur. Social scientists today call this 'rightful resistance',[37] but we may also see earlier incarnations of the same phenomenon in tsarist Russia or imperial China in the late nineteenth century.[38] Even before the passage of the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act, a petition to the Government of Bengal signed by two individuals representing their fellow 'Native Christians of Chota Nagpore', Noas and Eleazar, alleged that the Maharaja of Chota Nagpur ought to be held responsible for the influx of alien landlords (zamindars) and their lessees (*thikadars*), who 'oppress[ed] the poor and … cut their crops'. The petition also blamed the Commissioner, Colonel Dalton, for acting against the interests of the tribal peasantry, especially the Christians among them.[39] We see here how the tribal/alien distinction, so cherished in colonial anthropology, came to be used strategically in this manner by protestors negotiating the state. In a similar vein, in 1869, the year in which the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act was passed, the Deputy Commission of Lohardaga described 'many Kol Christians who are not contented with it, because under it they cannot get what they want and some can get nothing'. These discontented tribal subjects, who asserted their rights to 'half the lands in [their] villages', petitioned local civil courts, and then, the High Court, both of which rejected the petitions. Thereafter, they

> spent large sums of money collected under pressure from their brethren, Christian and Pagan, and because some interested persons whom they fee-ed and consulted in Calcutta and encouraged them to proceed, they object to the law as not upholding their silly and extravagant demands.[40]

[35] *Ibid*.

[36] E.T. Dalton to H.L. Dampier, BRC, August 1874, WBSA.

[37] O'Brien, 'Rightful Resistance'.

[38] See, for example, Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* and Allee, *Law and Local Society in Late Imperial China*, pp. 148–83.

[39] F. Batsch to H.L. Oliphant, 15 November 1867, PCAD I; MacDougall, *Land or Religion*, p. 41.

[40] Cited in Annual Report for the Chota Nagpur Division (ARCND), 1868–69, WBSA.

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These seemingly 'silly and extravagant demands' by different strata of the tribal peasantry can be explained, as Colonel Dalton did, by their preference for a bill for the registration of all lands.[41] These petitioners did not simply demand registration of their own land holdings under the new law, but laid claim to all of Chotanagpur as aboriginal clearers of these forest highlands. The petitioners were even willing to pay taxes to the colonial state instead of paying rents to the Maharaja or the zamindars.[42] These Sardars, literally 'leaders', as they came to be known among the Mundas, were 'able to raise contributions' to meet the costs of organising protests and working as full-time activists.[43]

Lutheran missionaries, too, participated in the petition campaign in the early stages of the Sardar Larai, but the Bengal government's response put an end to their activism by the late 1870s. In 1876, Reverend H. Onasch and 15 other Lutheran missionaries working in Chotanagpur petitioned the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal to urge him to act for the 'amelioration of the social condition of the Kolhs'. It took up cudgels in defence of 'a people oppressed by their landlords and tikadars', noting that

> it was a source of great encouragement to the Kolhs in their distress to have men (Europeans) in their midst who had a paternal interest for them, who were always ready to listen to their complaints, and who assisted them in their bodily and spiritual poverty gratuitously with word and deed.

Recognising the 'general dissatisfaction' among the Mundas and Oraons 'with [their] social status' and their tactics of 'passive resistance', Fr. Onasch and his companions wished to 'leave no legitimate means' to enable their tribal wards in Chotanagpur to achieve their aims and thus ensure the 'furtherance of [the] Mission'.[44] The Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Richard Temple, was sympathetic yet curt in his reply to the Lutheran missionaries. While lauding the missionaries for 'so full a memorial, so numerously signed' with 'benevolent motives … in promoting the material welfare of the Kolhs', Temple wrote that 'this matter is quite distinct from the spiritual concerns which are primarily and immediately the objects of the Mission'. 'The Government', he added, 'could never let it be understood by the Kolhs that they might attain any secular advantages by embracing Christianity', and the claims of tribal subjects would be 'entitled to the same consideration as other claims and no more'. This was because, he explained, 'the benefits asked by the memorialists so impressively on behalf of the Kolhs could be conceded in full only by depriving other classes, Hindu and Mahomedan,

[41] ARCND, 1869–70, WBSA.
[42] Orders by the Commissioner of Chotanagpur, 23 June 1873, WBSA.
[43] E.T. Dalton to H.L. Dampier, BRC, August 1874, WBSA.
[44] Onasch et al. to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, 17 May 1876, PCAD I.

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of something which they now enjoy'.[45] As their petition was rejected by the Bengal government, the Lutheran mission in Chotanagpur received a severe blow. Under duress, they withdrew from political activities and turned their attention to spiritual matters.

The Christian *bhuinhars*, disillusioned by this change of heart by their former patrons, nonetheless decided to continue the petition campaign on their own. In 1881, five years after the ill-fated missionary petition, the Sardars addressed the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal thus:

> We are the aboriginals of this place, i.e., of Chotanagpur, but at the present we are going to be destitute of our forefathers' land. Moreover, our power over the lands is going to be destroyed forever owing to our ignorance. Your Majesty [sic] will decide favourably after considering our ... state of ignorance. So that none of the heathen kings or *zemindars* may overrule us.[46]

The language of this petition admirably mimics the official discourse of colonial primitivism. Not only does it refer to the petitioners as 'aboriginals', but it even accepts their 'ignorance' as a statement of fact. In the same year, another petition from 'more than 14,000 native Christians of the Chota Nagpore Division' asked for permission to 'form themselves into village communities directly under the Government, and be relieved from all connections with their landlord, the Raja of Chota Nagpore, and his tenure-holders'.[47] The language of the petition here follows directly from that of Colonel Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, by then the leading work on the 'tribes' of the Bengal Presidency. The petitioners sought to form village communities directly under the British Raj sans any traces of proto-nationalism or anti-colonialism. As such, they beseeched the colonial state to remove the exactions of their landlords, and to be taxed directly by the state. As a subsequent petition from 1887 reads:

> We are willing to pay the roll (or revenue) to the English Government, but we wish to be free from the Nagbanshis (i.e., the Maharajah of Chota Nagpore)…Under the English administration we have become wiser than before, for which we are thankful to the English; now they should also free us from our earthly distress.[48]

Accordingly, petitions were sent not only to the Lieutenant-Governor and Governor-General in Calcutta, but even the Secretary of State for India in London. Each time, however, the Sardars met with rejection and failure: in

[45] R. Temple, Representations on Behalf of the Kolhs, 5 July 1876, PCAD I.

[46] MacDougall, *Land or Religion*, p. 261.

[47] A. Mackenzie to the Secy. to the Government of India (GOI), 22 February 1881, PCAD I.

[48] C.C. Stevens to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal (GOB), 19 November 1887, PCAD I.

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the state's view, the petitions were 'really prepared by one or two mischievous agitators, with the assistance of native legal advisers' and there was 'no such real and genuine discontent among the Kol population as the [petition] purports to embody and represent'.[49]

In response to failure, the Munda Sardars' petitions drew on the powerful imagery and metaphors of Biblical teachings to make their petitions more persuasive and to speak for what was increasingly represented as a quasi-national collective with common interests. Arguably, the nationalistic language was itself a by-product of the nineteenth-century missionary-tribal encounter: it is, after all, quite plausible that German Lutheran missionaries imported *völkisch* ideas into rural Chotanagpur, especially via their systematic codification of Munda, Oraon and other previously oral languages and myths.[50] For instance, an 1881 petition drew on new notions of national space and the wandering Israelites in the Old Testament to argue that

> [e]ach race has got their peculiar place of habitation, as for English in England ... We do not beg Your Majesty for a [different] ... right than that of the Israelites, who after wandering in the jungles, and suffering many trials became heir of the holy land.[51]

Later, in 1887, the General Conference of German Lutheran Missionaries in Ranchi received a petition from Munda and Oraon agitators made a claim to ancestral lands by virtue of being the original settlers of Chotanagpur; this, they did, using a Biblical warrant and an assertion of nationhood on behalf of the two largest 'tribes' in Chotanagpur, the Mundas and the Oraons:

> Our forefathers came into this country and cleared the jungle. Now the Hindus rob us of our fields…Every nation has its own Government; only we Mundas and Uraons have not. As every child inherits his father's rights, so we wish to have the rights of our forefathers. The transmission of ancestral rights is exemplified in the story of Abraham.[52]

In the same year, a petition drafted by two former students of a Lutheran mission school displayed the influence of Christianity on the Sardars even more explicitly: 'Anyone who reads Leviticus, chapter 25, can understand the conditions of our people; they were similar to those of the Israelites.' This petition went further to explicitly see the German Lutheran priests as the inheritors of the pre-colonial legacy of monastic orders enjoying sovereignty over lay

[49] A. Mackenzie to the Secretary to the (GOI), 22 February 1881, PCAD I.

[50] For a similar argument with respect to Santals and Norwegian missionaries in Chotanagpur, see Carrin and Tambs-Lyche, *An Encounter of Peripheries*.

[51] MacDougall, *Land or Religion*, p. 262.

[52] C.C. Stevens to the Chief Secretary to the GOB, 19 November 1887, PCAD I.

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forest-dwelling populations, including the right to tax them.[53] The authors of this petition end it with the following words: 'We are the Mundaris, the Oraons are the Kols.' Insofar as 'Kol' was a term of abuse levelled at Mundas and Oraons alike by upper-caste Bengalis in particular, this claim that the Oraons, not the Mundas, were Kols, must necessarily be read as one demarcating national boundaries and identifying the Mundas as a superior *volk*. In this manner, in claiming to speak not only for themselves but for all Mundas, the *bhuinhars* actively drew on the religious and nationalistic discourses that had been made available to them via the Lutheran fathers.

The third and final method of peaceful activism by the *bhuinhars*, particularly the Christians, was a radical theologico-political assertion of quasi-national autonomy under British colonial overlordship. The earliest expression of this radical political solution appears to have occurred in 1871, when a young man who had 'returned from [a stint in] the tea districts [in Assam or North Bengal] with money' claimed to be a 'spiritual as well as … temporal guide' of the agitating Mundas in Lohardaga. This man, who remains unnamed in the colonial archive, used his earnings from the tea plantations and his claims of spiritual superiority to organise a group of followers protesting the Bhuinhari Settlement Act, 1869. It is wholly plausible that this anonymous Munda spiritual leader was a *bhuinhar* by birth who had lost his lands when he was away in the tea districts. Yet his most active followers were not *bhuinhars* at all, but *korkar*-holders who had freshly transformed wastelands into cultivable spaces.[54] A decade later, in 1881, a small group calling itself the 'Children of Mael', headed by a self-proclaimed 'John the Baptist', pretended to establish a 'Raj' at Doisa, the old capital of the Chotanagpur rajas. Using their 'religious authority', they subsequently proceeded to send 'threatening orders to the Munsif of Lohardugga'.[55] A theologically based claim to sovereignty was, of course, implicit in these actions. Their view was, however, not necessarily any more anti-colonial than the more moderate Munda Sardars. As a similar group led by a certain Manmassih argued in 1884,

> subject to the dues of the State for revenue, the land of Chota Nagpore is the inalienable property of the Munda race, and…their title to it is not invalidated either by law or prescription.[56]

The Raj itself was not under any threat. It was the social order dominated by landlords and their henchmen that had come under attack, and the past came to be rejected in the search for a better future.

The theology of the more radical Sardars was undoubtedly indebted to Christianity, especially the Lutheran variant that attracted thousands until the

[53] MacDougall, *Land or Religion*, p. 261.
[54] E.T. Dalton to A.R. Wilson, BRP, July 1871, WBSA.
[55] C.C. Stevens to the Chief Secretary to the GOB, 19 November 1887, PCAD I.
[56] P. Nolan to the Secretary to the GOI, 17 May 1886, PCAD I.

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late 1870s, but it also strove to be independent of the churches and their missionaries. In 1887, 'Johan of Champaidih', a Christian *bhuinhar* in Lohardaga, 'began collecting subscriptions and went about circulating the most preposterous ideas regarding the existence of a suppressed decree which had followed a petition to the Queen and a Parliamentary Commission' outside the purview of mission authority. Johan and his supporters even sent a 'printed notice' of the fake decree to the civil courts in Lohardaga, 'demanding that the issues of all processes and the execution of all decrees should be stayed pending the orders of the Queen and Parliament', which apparently had upheld the petitioners' claims on tribal land rights.[57] Other Sardars told the Commissioner of Chotanagpur that the Lieutenant-Governor had looked favourably on their petitions, and hence, 'asked [him], pending final orders, to direct that they should "deposit into the Lohardugga treasury the rent of their bhuinhari lands in Chota Nagpore"'. Around the same time, other Sardars were meeting secretly in the Khunti area:

"1. To induce the 'brethren' to abstain from attending the churches or allowing their children to go to the mission schools.
2. To collect subscriptions, pressure being sometimes used for this purpose.
3. To dispute the authority and to throw discredit on the local officers.
4. To incite the people to take possession of the 'manjhihas: lands, or lands held and cultivated by the proprietor of the villages or their lessees."

Another set of Sardars, including two Munda men, named Nikodim and Johan, made their way to Calcutta to consult lawyers and sent back a letter to their 'Lohardugga brethren' to say that 'notices are being issued to the four hakims of Singbhoom and ten hakims of Ranchi'. 'Hakim', a Persian term used typically to refer to a doctor or healer, was used here to refer to Christian missionaries. Nikodim, Johan and others also told the Mundas of Sonpur pargana in present-day Khunti district, one of the main centres of the Kol Insurrection of 1831–32, to seize *manjhihas* lands from their current owners, whether 'tribal' or *diku* (hostile aliens), and to sow paddy in them.[58] Christian missionary authority, identified with unhelpful Lutheran priests, thus became a key target for *bhuinhari* activists even as it continued to nourish and inform the Sardar Larai.

It would be fair to say here that the Sardar Larai was anything but a coherent movement and that its methods and aims remained far from constant between c. 1860 and 1890. Equally, not *all* Mundas or Oraons participated in it, as subsequent chroniclers such as Kumar Suresh Singh and Ranajit Guha have suggested. The movement may have begun with claims addressed to government land surveyors adjudicating the true extent of *bhuinhari* lands in Chotanagpur. It then proceeded to supplement such claims-making with petitions to government

[57] ARCND, 1889–90, WBSA; Grimley to the Chief Secretary to the GOB, 28 November 1889, India Office Records (IOR).

[58] C.C. Stevens to the Chief Secretary to the GOB, 19 November 1887, PCAD I.

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officials in Ranchi, Calcutta and later, London. Finally, as the land survey operations came to close by 1880 and some discontent remained among leaders and followers, certain Sardars conceived of a more radical solution to the *bhuinhars*' problems, namely, to

> excite in the minds of the masses of a future of brilliant prosperity with a confiscation of land of all Hindus, this result being precede by a collection of subscriptions to be expended by the heads of the agitation.[59]

This project of agrarian radicalism not only reaffirmed the *bhuinhars*' position atop Munda village society, but also became the basis for remaking 'communities' in rural Chotanagpur in future. The aim was less a restoration of old land titles than a radical reordering of Munda social worlds by synchronising it better with modern state structures as represented by the paternalistic colonial administration of the region.

Rethinking the Birsaite *Ulgulan*

> In which land has the New King been born?
>
> Look up! The comet has risen in the sky!
>
> The New King has been born at Chalkad.
>
> In the West the comet has risen.[60]

The Birsaite *ulgulan* may have been built on the foundations established by the Sardar Larai, but there was no linear path connecting the latter to the former. We must consider seriously the catalytic role played by Christian missions in rural Chotanagpur during the late nineteenth century. For our purposes, Christianity was neither monolithic nor did it colonise the 'consciousness'[61] of 'tribal' subjects in these forest highlands of eastern India. Following Elizabeth Elbourne's path-breaking work on missions and the colonised in southern Africa, I question here any facile identification of Christian missions with the workings of empire and capital, and seek a deeper understanding of the many political meanings and uses of Christianity in colonial state margins.[62] In doing so, I suggest that missions ought to be seen at the centre of agrarian disputes in colonial Chotanagpur, and that their mutual rivalries and strategies were decisive in shaping everyday political subjectivities among modern 'tribal' subjects in the countryside.

[59] ARCND, 1878–79, WBSA.

[60] Popular Birsaite Song Commemorating the Birth of Birsa Munda.

[61] My analysis here departs from the well-known thesis of the Comaroffs in *Of Revelation and Revolution*. Instead, I follow the line proposed recently by Roberts, 'Is Conversion a Colonization of Consciousness?'

[62] Elbourne, *Blood Ground;* Lindenfeld and Richardson, *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism*.

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We saw the extraordinary impact of the German Lutheran missionaries on the Sardar Larai in the previous section; yet equally remarkable is the story of its rapid decline in rural Chotanagpur following the Lutheran fathers' failed petition to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in 1876. The German Lutheran church had already split in 1869 over, among other things, the divergent attitudes of priests to the agrarian disputes around them.[63] Those priests who favoured the colonial state's status quoism formed the Anglican mission with their own church, St. Paul's, in Ranchi, whereas those who hoped for a more radical solution to the problems faced by the tribal laity remained Lutherans. But the rejection of the 1876 petition by the Bengal government caused a change of strategy for the Lutherans. Told to concern themselves with 'spiritual' rather than 'political' matters, the Lutheran missionaries had little choice but to withdraw their support for their wards' petitioning campaign from the late 1870s onwards.[64] Their meagre finances led the Lutherans to subsequently levy a 'church tax' on every Christian family and to ask for land donations' from better-off converts in order to make their mission stations self-sufficient.[65] Coupled with the lack of assistance in agrarian disputes, the church tax was widely seen by the laity as a betrayal of their interests. Mass defections followed between 1876 and 1885. Some Lutheran converts gave up Christianity altogether to return to their ancestral ritual worlds; others sought a synthesis by reconciling Lutheran catechisms to older ritual beliefs and practices; yet others, who were active participants in the Sardar Larai, turned to the Belgian Jesuit mission for succour in their time of need. The final break between the Lutherans and their 'tribal' wards came in 1887, when some ex-Lutheran Sardars asked the German missionaries to intercede on their behalf in representations to the government and the missionaries refused. Thereafter, the Sardars lodged complaints against the missionaries, and the latter responded with a libel suit against the agitators on the land question.[66] Thereafter, the Sardars and their followers would, perforce, require new patrons.

The Catholic Church, represented by the Belgian Jesuit mission to Chotanagpur, was an obvious alternative as patron. Founded in 1869 by Augustus Stockman, the Belgian Jesuit mission had only begun taking an interest in agrarian matters in 1880–81.[67] In the 1870s, there had been an intense 'competition for souls' with the Lutherans and the eventual 'consolidation' of mission stations among the Munda and Ho 'rascals of the valley' located between Ranchi and Chaibasa.[68] It was Father Joseph Mullender who began assisting some tribal converts in their court cases

[63] Mahto, *Hundred Years of Christian Missions in Chotanagpur since 1845*, pp. 78–88. Mahto cites the Lutheran pastor Dr Notrott lamenting thus: 'By 1869, twenty-two Christian Kols were in the prison due to the land agitation, but the [other] missionaries did not care for them, nor reached them books nor visited them.'

[64] MacDougall, *Land or Religion*, p. 43.

[65] de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, p. 102.

[66] MacDougall, *Land or Religion*, p. 43.

[67] On the early history of the mission, see Ponette, *The Dawn of Ranchi Mission*.

[68] *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 48, 59.

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against their landlords. Unlike the Lutherans, who tested their laity on elements of the catechism, the Jesuits did not require much of converts except baptism. As such, the key to the Jesuits' success in the 1880s lay, in the words of a later mission historian, in its emphasis on 'offering direct assistance more practical than preaching'.[69] As C.C. Stevens, the Commissioner of the Chotanagpur Division, wrote at the end of the decade,

> [T]he conversions to Christianity were effected by the rough and simple process of depriving the new convert of his topknot, and also that those who allowed themselves to be thus easily converted to the new faith did so in the full hope and belief that they would be thereby enabled to escape from the exactions of their landlords, whether in the shape of rent cesses or predial services.[70]

Seeking to escape the rent and corvée demands of their landlords, as many as 60,000 Mundas and Oraons converted en masse to Catholicism between 1881 and 1889.[71] In the history of the Chotanagpur mission, this phase of expansion has been associated primarily with one Belgian priest, Father Constant Lievens,[72] and his exceptionally popular methods in intervening in disputes between 'tribal' peasants of different ranks and their *zamindars*.

Constant Lievens' interest in Chotanagpur's agrarian disputes was neither obvious nor pre-determined. Born and raised in a poor rural home in Moorsdale, Belgium, he participated as a young man in a movement seeking 'Christian independence' for the Flemish-speaking population in Flanders.[73] After his theological training in Bruges, Lievens arrived in Calcutta and soon began work in Chotanagpur. He began learning Mundari and sought to baptise whole villages. Whereas Fr. Mullender had drawn a line between assisting Munda converts in their court cases and advocacy concerning their 'rights and exploitation', Lievens obliterated this line to reach out to 'disaffected Protestants' abandoned by the Lutheran missionaries.[74] He did so apparently because a *jamadar* at Torpa, whose Anglican wife Lievens had cured, advised him:

> If you really desire the conversion of the natives, you have only to undertake the defence of their interests, especially in connection with the question of their rights regarding land tenure and landlord service, and you will have as many Christians as you desire.[75]

[69] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

[70] ARCND, 1889–90, WBSA.

[71] de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, p. 133.

[72] Lievens has, by far, the most biographies among all the Belgian Jesuits of Chotanagpur: Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens*; Bowen, *Father Constant Lievens*; Tete, *Constant Lievens*.

[73] Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens*, p. 23.

[74] Tete, *Constant Lievens*, p. 6.

[75] Bowen, *Father Constant Lievens*, p. 64.

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Following this advice, Lievens approached lawyers and pleaders in Ranchi to fight cases for his wards at reduced charges, testified in their favour, urged them 'to ask for rent-receipts from landlords, and to refuse *beth-begari* [corvée] beyond state-imposed limits', and hence, to 'look on Catholicism as a society, where they could be protected'.[76]

Interestingly, Lievens supported more or less the same demands as the Munda Sardars did, but since he saw theirs as a 'real socialistic agitation',[77] he did not endorse it. By contrast, he advocated non-violent protest of the kind that political scientists now call 'rightful resistance',[78] that is, protest politics within the contours of the law:

> Pay the legal amount of land-rent but nothing more. If the landlord is not satisfied with that, let him go to court … Insist on a receipt for your payments of land-rents. If the landlord refuses to give one, pay him nothing, let him go to court … Render no landlord service beyond the legal limits. If the landlord demands exorbitant service, refuse him your services. Let him go to court … If you are ill-treated by the landlord or his armed men, summon the landlord to court … You owe absolutely no payment to the police. Refuse to give them what they ask. If they ill-treat you, summon them to court.[79]

It was in this manner that the new converts to Catholicism came to see Lievens as 'their friend and protector' and 'learned about their rights, and how to oppose the illegal demands of the landlords'. But two problems were inherent in Lievens' approach. Firstly, there was no way for him to distinguish between participants and non-participants in the Sardar Larai, and hence, he could not have known that 'some of the converts seem to have regarded themselves as a league against the landlords'. As a later church historian puts it, 'though he seemed uncertain of their motives; he simply focused on defending and protecting them'.[80] Secondly, the rapid expansion of the mission meant that there was little scope to build rural stations as part of a lasting organisational structure to cater to the needs of the newly baptised. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the new converts later told the Deputy Commissioner of Lohardaga, Mr Renny:

[76] de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, p. 134.

[77] Lievens, cited in Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens,* p. 142. The phrase 'real socialistic agitation' ought to be intepreted in the light of conflicts in late-nineteenth century Flanders between socialists and liberals alongside Catholic clergy. Whatever their differences, especially over school education, liberals, and Catholics were united in their opposition to socialist mobilisation among the Flemish working classes: see Strikwerda, *A House Divided*, pp. 109–270. Echoes of these anti-socialist sentiments among Flemish churchmen back home may be seen in Lievens' remark here.

[78] O'Brien, 'Rightful Resistance'.

[79] Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens*, p. 143.

[80] de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, pp. 134–36.

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> I became a Christian because I was put to much trouble by [the *zamindar*] Gajadhar Deogharia. He used to make me render bethbegari almost daily, just as if I was a Dhanger, Leviens Sahib said that by becoming Christian I would only have to render *bethbegari* according to former usage. My *bethbegari* has not been reduced since I became a Christian; it is therefore that I am troubled in mind. I have learnt to make the sign of the cross only, nothing more. I have not seen the Padri Saheb since … the month after I became a Christian. No one has ever come to instruct us. My fellow castemen have not outcasted me yet, because I am only nominally a Christian.[81]

Christianity, as a political resource, was not yielding the gains that it had promised to deliver. For both reasons, it was almost certain that there would be an unavoidable clash between Lievens' intentions in maximising converts and the converts' intentions of using Catholic missionary aid to outdo their landlords.

The clash between the intentions of the Jesuit missionaries and their newly converted 'tribal' subjects in 1889–90, ultimately, led the Sardars to realize the limits of peaceful activism on the land question. The anti-landlord politics of the Sardars and their followers had attracted them to Lievens and the Catholic Church during the 1880s. Lievens had, after all, done everything except to endorse their movement:

> The inhabitants of this country ask neither for gold nor silver, nor medicines, nor miracles, nor schools, nor knowledge, nor learning, nor wealth, nor anything else we might think of. What do these Mundas, Oraons and Kharias want then? One burden is intolerable for them. They cherish the land they till, the land cleared by their fathers. Then the Hindus came and robbed them of their land and laid landlord service on them. Now, help the people within the limits of the law, you will become their friend and they become Christians with sincere hearts. A Munda will never become a Christian unless he has first received a favour.[82]

Emboldened by Lievens' support, the Sardars recommenced their agitation in the countryside. The Commissioner, at first, warned Fr. Motet at Lohardaga station of 'the extreme folly of meddling with the land question', and urged him to recall Lievens from his travels in 'the disturbed tracts'.[83] Lievens did not, however, return from his labours in the Lohardaga countryside. Some followers of the Sardar Larai began to argue that they had converted to Catholicism by Queen Victoria's order, and since she 'had now become their friend and relations … they were no longer

[81] Grimley to the Chief Secy. to the GOB, 30 November 1889, IOR.
[82] Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens*, pp. 202–03.
[83] Grimley to the Chief Secy. to the GOB, 30 November 1889, IOR.

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required to perform forced labour or pay high rents'.[84] Others said that 'they were informed by a certain Padri Saheb (naming [Lievens]) that if they became Christians they would not be subject to extortions or ill-usage'.[85] Soon, there were 'complaints made by various landholders of the action of the Roman Catholic missionaries', who were causing new converts to go 'from village to village … making people Christians by cutting their hair and threats of damage to crops'.[86] In Kurdeg, in the southwestern corner of Chotanagpur, 'a body of Roman Catholic Christians, numbering some 2,500' reportedly rescued four prisoners from the local jail, and the Commissioner noted that 'these men … armed with various weapons … were guarding the roads at every point'.[87] The Deputy Commissioner of Lohardaga, Colonel E.G. Lillington later noted that the Jesuits, especially Lievens, had 'not [been] careful about mixing up spiritual and temporal matters', and had, unwittingly, spurred a new phase of the Sardar Larai in his district. Lievens was summoned to Ranchi by the Commissioner, W.H. Grimley, and told to desist from his radical missiological methods. These methods, Lievens was informed, had led him to be construed by lay Catholic tribals as sympathetic to 'the most preposterous ideas' of the Sardar Larai.[88] Thereafter, in 1892, gagged by the colonial administration and his mission superiors as well as displaying from the first symptoms of tuberculosis, Lievens withdrew from Chotanagpur to rest in the mission station at Kurseong in the Himalayan foothills of north Bengal; a year later, when it was clear that his condition would not improve, he returned to his native Flanders where he died on 7 November 1893.[89] The Jesuit mission in Chotanagpur had, by then, collapsed due to mass defections from the Catholic fold.[90]

The Sardars' disillusionment with their missionary patrons led them to renew their struggle by adopting a more militant character. It should not be forgotten that these were the most educated among Chotanagpur's tribal subjects, and as descendants of *bhunhari* lineages, they represented the interests of the dominant sections of the Munda and Oraon peasantry. A later chronicler of this period has written that 'between 1890 and 1895 the atmosphere remained tense' and reports of plotted uprisings were rampant, though there were, in fact, no major incidents of protest. In 1891, however, the Sardars lodged a police complaint against the Lutheran mission, and the following year, some of these political activists had 'founded an independent Catholic sect'.[91] The discontent of the *bhuinhars* and their supporters was brewing, but colonial officials and missionaries had not anticipated the outbreak

[84] de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, p. 212.
[85] Grimley to the Chief Secy. to the GOB, 30 November 1889, IOR.
[86] ARCND, 1889–90, WBSA; *ibid*.
[87] Grimley to the Chief Secy. to the GOB, 30 November 1889, IOR.
[88] ARCND, 1889–90, WBSA.
[89] Tete, *Constant Lievens*, p. 11.
[90] de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, pp. 312–16.
[91] MacDougall, *Land or Religion*, p. 45.

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of violence in rural Chotanagpur in 1895, and then again in 1899–1900. The shift in the Sardars' strategy appears clearly enough in a remark made by one of them, revealed later by the German Jesuit priest, Father J.B. Hoffman:

> We have appealed to the sarkar for redress and got nothing. We have turned to the missions, and they too have not saved as from the Dikus. Now there is nothing left for us but to look to one of our own men.[92]

That man was Birsa Munda, a slender young man in his mid-twenties, who was destined to soon play a more elaborate variant of the role of Sidhu and Kanu in the Santal Hul.[93]

Birsa's year and place of birth are both disputed, but his biographers[94] agree on the broad contours of his early years before the launch of the *ulgulan* of 1895–1901. The dates for Birsa's birth range between 1872 and 1875, and two places, Ulihatu and Chalkad, vie in the popular imagination as his true birthplace. He was a *bhuinhar*, whose family had converted to Lutheranism a generation earlier. Birsa's father Sugana Munda was a Lutheran catechist or *pracharak*, and it was not surprising that young Birsa, like many others who grew up in the forest highlands of Arki and Bandgaon, attended the German mission school in Chaibasa between 1886 and 1890. Apparently, Birsa was present when Dr Alfred Notrott, the Chaibasa mission-in-charge, delivered a 'sermon … on the theme of the Kingdom of Heaven', assuring his students 'that if they remained Christians and followed his instructions, he could get back all lands they had lost'. But with the growing disaffection between the Munda Sardars and the Lutheran missionaries, Birsa increasingly heard the Sardars being called 'cheats'. By 1890, when the Sardars had parted ways with the Catholics, too, Birsa left his school in Chaibasa and his family abandoned the Lutheran mission on account of their political loyalties.[95] For the next three years, Birsa worked in the house of Anand Panre, under whom he adopted Vaishnavite habits, including wearing a sacred thread and a sandalwood mark on the forehead, vegetarianism, and the worship of the *tulsi* plant. Thereafter, increasingly drawn into political activism during the final stages of the Sardar Larai, he left the Panres and wandered from place to place in search of food, work and a sense of purpose in life. He is reputed to have had many romantic liaisons during this period in 1894–95 and

[92] J.B. Hoffman to A. Forbes, 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540.

[93] Chandra, *Negotiating Leviathan*, Chapter 3. For different perspectives on the Hul, see Guha, *Elementary Aspects* and Datta, *The Santal Insurrection*.

[94] J.B. Hoffman to A. Forbes, 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540; Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist*; Sinha, *Life and Times of Birsa Bhagwan*.

[95] Recently, however, Dr Notrott's great-great grand-daughter Mary Girard has drawn my attention to the possibility that one of Birsa's sisters remained under the mission's care and later ended up in Germany. I am unable to verify this, but if true, it would not only be a remarkable story but one that complicates the narrative that Birsa's family parted ways completely with the Lutherans.

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later, but none of them lasted long and their details were subsequently suppressed in the light of his strict advocacy of monogamy to his followers.[96]

Birsa first entered the colonial records in September 1895, when he was arrested for preaching radical ideas that alarmed government officials. This ambitious yet purposeless young man, whose brief life had seen a great deal of religious and political ferment, had started telling his friends that year that he 'had received the Divine word' through dreams and mystical visions in the forest. He told Bir Singh Munda, a well-respected Sardar in his village of Chalkad, that 'he had been entrusted with everything in the world by God himself. He would cure the sick; they would not have to pay rent etc.' When a smallpox epidemic broke out, a traditional healer complained that Birsa's upstart ways had caused it and he was compelled to leave Chalkad only to return later once it was shown that the epidemic had continued to wreak havoc in his absence. Drawing on Christian as well as Vaishnava teachings, he 'declared his faith in the efficacy of prayer as the cure of all diseases' and recommended that villagers 'bear their sickness, disease and suffering cheerfully'.[97] This was, undeniably, a challenge to the 'traditional' Munda order founded as it was on the ritual authority of the *pahan* and his intercourse with the spirits or *bongas*.[98] This challenge was made more explicit in Birsa's 'exhortations to live good lives and not do puja to "Bhuts," &c'[99] so that he could 'closely knit the Mundas like a garland' (*Gutukedam Birisam galangkeda*). Likewise, his campaign against the 'traditional' consumption of *hanria* or rice beer, including in rituals, is striking:

> Birsa says, give up drinking rice-beer and liquor.
>
> For this reason our land drifts away.
>
> Drunkenness and sleep are no good.
>
> The enemies laugh at us.
>
> The beer distilled from fermented rice stinks.
>
> A person's body and spirit too decay likewise.[100]

Here, then, was a conscious attempt to remake rural communities of newly minted 'tribal' subjects in a modern ritual and political idiom.

Alongside this challenge to the 'traditional' Munda order upheld by the colonial state, the Birsaites sought a viable alternative model of local sovereignty. Birsa

[96] Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist*, pp. 36–44.

[97] *Ibid.*, pp. 46–48.

[98] On the 'traditional' Munda ritual world upheld by the colonial and postcolonial states, see Singh, 'The Munda Land System' and Rosner, *Munda Worship and Witchcraft*.

[99] H.I.S. Cotton to C.W. Bolton, Foreign Proceedings B, 14 September 1895, NAI.

[100] *Birisae kajitana ili arkhi bagetape/Neatege disum tabu bualtana/Bunul durum do kare bugin/Bairikodo reko landabutana/Soea mandi rea' ili soantana/Horomo ji rati sowantana*.

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appointed two *dewans* or prime ministers, Deoki Paur and Sao Mundari, thereby mimicking the political structure of forest kingdoms that had dominated this eastern Indian region since at least the fifteenth century. At the same time, he and his growing band of followers broadened the scope of the Sardar movement by drawing enterprising members from the lower strata of the peasantry too. The blend of the old and the new is noteworthy here as it reminds us, as the anthropologist Bernard Bate reminds us, that modernity is, ultimately, 'about the newness of old things'.[101] In this spirit, the Birsaites argued that

> they [had] memorialized Government at a considerable cost, but justice was not done to them at all. If, therefore, they rise against Government in this part of the country, then Government will do justice to them and restore their lost Raj to them as before.[102]

Note that, here, too the onus was on the British government to restore the Munda Raj by evicting those hostile to the Sardars, whether *dikus* or Christian missionaries. It was not the case, as Ranajit Guha presumed without the slightest shred of evidence that 'the Birsaite *ulgulan* [was] launched with the declared aim of liberating the Mundas from British rule'.[103] However, unlike the radical historian of South Asia, bent on incorporating subaltern grievances into a singular anti-colonial narrative, the Commissioner of Chotanagpur W. H. Grimley understood the Birsaites' political aims very well:

> Any excitement which is mixed up with the land question accentuates the necessity of passing the Land Tenancy Bill as soon as possible. It may not be likely to settle all the difficulties of the people, but it will confer some boon upon them and convey to them the assurance that Government is mindful of their needs.

Upon being arrested, Birsa had purportedly told his followers in Chalkad and its adjoining areas that 'the "Sarkar" could not keep him over three days', after which he was certain to return. When he did not return, his disappointed supporters dispersed and wondered what lay next for them according to the Birsaites' eschatology. As it turned out, the colonial government saw him only as a 'fanatic' with 'preposterous ideas', which meant a limited jail term of only two years.[104] For his part, in the Jesuit Father J.B. Hoffman's words, Birsa 'observed a calculated good behaviour in jail and succeeded in having himself looked up as a rather simple and innocuous man' even as his followers 'sneered at the Government sentence against Birsa, and openly prepared the crowds to recommence the whole game over again

[101] Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*, p. xv.
[102] H.I.S. Cotton to C.W. Bolton, Foreign Proceedings B, 14 September 1895, NAI.
[103] Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 26.
[104] H.I.S. Cotton to C.W. Bolton, Foreign Proceedings B, 14 September 1895, NAI.

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as Birsa would be back'.[105] The project of remaking tribal communities in a modern theologico-political[106] idiom, therefore, still remained alive despite the setback of Birsa's two-year jail term.

On Birsa's return from jail, his political project resumed again in 1898–99. This time, however, it was accompanied by an explicit turn to limited forms of political violence against local powerholders in the colonial order, most notably 'traditional' heads of community or *mundas*, Christian missionaries, and lower-level government functionaries drawn from the upper echelons of 'tribal' villages nearby. Only the elect in the Birsaite order could engage legitimately in such violence against the putative enemies of the new community-in-the-making. Accordingly, the Birsaites 'form[ed] an entirely new caste of more than Hindu severity' to distinguish themselves from ordinary Munda tribal subjects. By doing so, they

> creat[ed] a distinct caste of Mundas, who absolutely refuse[d] to have any intercourse not only with their ordinary tribesmen, but who [would] not so much as allow their non-Birsaite brothers or grown up children to eat with them or cross their threshold. The house of a Birsaite was declared absolutely sacred, and no non-Birsaite was for any reason to cross it.

Thursday and Sunday were 'sanctified for nominal religious services', which would take place in the homes of gurus or *prachars* modelled along the lines of Lutheran or Catholic *pracharaks* (catechists). The Birsaites also had a closed inner circle of *puranaks*, who were responsible for spreading the new gospel and expanding the rebel group by recruiting new members or *nanaks* across Chotanagpur. Nocturnal meetings were regularly held at different organisational levels for new recruits, gurus and *puranaks*.[107] Here, then, are traces of what Indrani Chatterjee describes as 'monastic governmentality' in pre-colonial eastern India and beyond where Śaivite, Vaishnavite, Sufi and Tantric monastic orders flourished.[108]

The internal structure of the Birsaites was not too different from other warrior ascetic orders in northern India such as the Ramanandi Nagas[109] or the *fakirs* and *sanyasis* whose exploits during the early decades of Company rule were celebrated in Bankim's *Anandamath*. Ritual purity required violence as an expression of power, and violence demanded a prior purity in ritual terms. Contrary to Ranajit Guha's

[105] J.B. Hoffman to A. Forbes, 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

[106] I use the term 'theologico-political' here to describe the interplay between religion and politics, according to which questions pertaining to what is sacred are intimately tied to the (re-) constitution of society or communitas. Readers should be careful not to conflate the 'theologico-political' with the altogether different notion of 'political theology' popularised by Carl Schmitt.

[107] J.B. Hoffman to A. Forbes, 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

[108] Chatterjee, this volume.

[109] On these Śaivite ascetic orders, see Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* and Lorenzen, 'Warrior Ascetics in Indian History'.

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primitivist conception of rural or 'tribal' 'solidarities',[110] by no means was every Munda a part of—or even expected to be a part of—this *ulgulan*. As in any monastic order with clear rules of initiation and discipleship, only the *nanaks*, after reaching a certain level of discipline and purity in ritual matters, could launch attacks on the enemies of the Birsaites. Accordingly, attacks against Christian Mundas were planned and orchestrated in the *thanas* of Ranchi, Basia, Khunti and Tamar on 24 December 1899. On the same day, a Catholic priest Father Carbery was shot with an arrow to the chest.[111] A list of 38 victims in the area under the jurisdiction of the Chakradharpur thana indicates that, besides Christians, *mundas* and *pahans*, local powerholders in the 'traditional' order, were the primary targets of the Birsaites.[112] Buda Munda of Kochang, a prominent village *munda*, had earlier been threatened with death for refusing to submit to the authority of the Birsaites.[113] In the same vein, acts of arson against enemies within village communities and skirmishes with the district police followed in January 1900. On 6 January, the Khunti police station was attacked by 300 Birsaites, 'armed with axes, bows and arrows and guns', and a Munda constable killed and nearby houses burned. On the same day, 'they killed a constable and four chaukidars [low-ranked policemen] as well as a European timber contractor and his servant a few miles south of Barju'.[114] Given these incidents of limited but well-targeted violence by the Birsaites against those outside their fold, not only the Christian Mundas but also those that the Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi called 'the great majority of the heathen Mundas' were 'against Birsa' and were 'glad to help [the police] catch him'.[115] Eventually, of course, he was caught with the aid of his many enemies in the Munda villages between Khunti and Bandgaon.[116]

What, in retrospect, did the 'Munda Raj' of the Birsaites mean? For all previous chroniclers of the Birsaite *ulgulan*, the answer has been a proto-nationalist or anti-colonial utopia. These chroniclers have been misled by a common colonial misconception that Birsa's 'real enemies [were] the *saheblok* [white folk] and the Government'.[117] The songs of the Birsaites collected by the District Magistrate

[110] According to Guha, 'Ethnicity … was a correlate of class solidarity in some of the nineteenth-century peasant rebellions. At one extreme it could be expressed, positively in a ritual affirmation of the tribal identity of the peasantry involved in an uprising … At the other end of the spectrum the function of ethnicity could be and often was to help an insurgent group define its identity negatively … Such indeed was the logic of the discrimination showed by the Kol rebels in their raids on villages where tribal and non-tribal households lived side by side: the former were invariably spared and the latter alone subjected to violence' (*Elementary Aspects*, pp. 173–74).

[111] C.W. Bolton to the Secretary to the GOI, 10 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

[112] List of Outrages, 28 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

[113] C.W. Bolton to the Secretary to the GOI, Foreign Proceedings B, October 1895, NAI.

[114] C.W. Bolton to the Secretary to the GOI, 10 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

[115] H. Streatfeild, 4 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

[116] Munda Rising in Chota Nagpur, IOR/L/PJ/6/532, File 364.

[117] A. Forbes to C.W. Bolton, 12 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

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of Khunti, K.S. Singh, nearly sixty years after the *ulgulan*, also mislead scholars today. Consider, for example, the following verse from Singh's compilation of these songs in the 1960s:

> O Birsa, our land is afloat. Our country drifts away.
>
> O Birsa, reveal the ends of your wisdom. We shall listen to your words.
>
> The big enemy, the Sahebs donning the hat, seized our land.
>
> We shall fight armed with your religion. We will follow you.[118]

The memories of the nationalist movement, with its anti-colonial orientation are woven into this remembered history of the Birsaite *ulgulan*. Indeed, there is a *bhajan* dedicated to 'Birsa and Gandhi'.[119] To take these songs to be statements of historical fact is an unwarranted move. Moreover, as Father J.B. Hoffman understood from his mission station in Sarwada, '[p]ast events [had] given them reason to think that the Government [would] be readily on their side'.[120] The Birsaites also stated their reasoning impeccably to Lal Mritynujoy Nath Shahi Deo in Khunti: 'If … they [rose] against Government … then Government [would] do justice to them and restore their lost Raj to them as before'.[121] There is neither any anti-colonial sentiment nor proto-nationalism implied by these statements. The Munda Raj was, arguably, nothing but the Birsaites' vision of a new 'tribal' community under the direct rule of a paternalistic British state without *zamindars*, *mundas*, *pahans* and other local powerholders who upheld the oppressive 'traditional' order under which *bhuinhars*, *khuntkattidars* and other peasant strata laboured and lived. Yet, as with many new forms of politics in colonial India, both subaltern and elite, resources from the past were recycled to invent new traditions for a new kind of communitas.

Conclusion

> Afflicted by the oppression of the zamindars,
>
> The misery of the people grows,
>
> The country is adrift …
>
> Birsa Bhagwan is our leader.
>
> He has come down for us in the land …

[118] *Disumtabu atutana Birisa/Gamaetabu bualtana Birisa/Senra mundi udubabum Birisa/Ama' kaji aiumale soben/Marang bairi tupiakan saeob/Disumtabae eserkeda/Laraibu dharam hathiarte/Seneale ama' taeomte*.

[119] Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist*, p. 285.

[120] J.B. Hoffman to A. Forbes, 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

[121] C.W. Bolton to the Secretary to the GOI, Foreign Proceedings B, October 1895, NAI.

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This article has offered an alternative reading of a key episode in adivasi history in rural eastern India in the final years of the nineteenth century. It has done so by interrogating the notion of 'millenarianism' that is often invoked to describe subaltern protests in a religious idiom against modern political authorities. The implicit assumption in these subaltern studies, as Partha Chatterjee has recently acknowledged, is that 'the state and forms of governance were external to the immediate social world of peasants'.[122] Modern statecraft is treated by such scholars, following Max Weber, as secular, and subalterns are then taken to constitute an oppositional category marked by the absence of secularisation. I have called into question this dominant line of scholarly thinking on theologico-political movements that seek to remake political order in the margins of modern states. If the ultimate goal of such efforts is a new 'communitas' in Victor Turner's sense,[123] then we may think of movements such as those launched by the Sardars and Birsa as *rites de passage* in a ritual process of remaking political authority in Chotanagpur. This is why the likes of Saya San[124] in British Burma or Hong Xiuquan[125] in Qing China have posed a significant challenge to existing theological–political arrangements, which is also, of course, why states keen to suppress their popular influence have left us extensive records of the activities of rebellious prophet-cum-rulers and their followers. To the extent that land is a bundle of property rights as well as the cultural–religious basis of personhood and sovereignty across these cases, the ritual process of remaking political authority has, unsurprisingly, threatened to reorder socio-economic hierarchies rooted in landed property.[126] We cannot, therefore, continue to separate a 'secular' domain of political economy from 'religious' worlds in which peasant-subalterns, including those designated as 'tribal', are relegated by modern scholarship. As James Scott asks after an extensive survey of prophet-led calls for 'renewal' in highland Southeast Asia, 'when is politics not, at some level, a theological debate about moral order?'[127] This is why it is important to step outside the vast, ever-expanding body of scholarship on 'millenarianism' to closely examine the theologico-political agendas and contexts of the Sardars and Birsa instead of assuming that such movements and prophets are atavistic responses to the modern (colonial) state by those whose lives and ways are at odds with it.

Another assumption called into question in this article is that 'the Birsaite *ulgulan* [was] launched with the declared aim of liberating the Mundas from British rule'.[128] The participants in the Sardar Larai and the Birsaite *ulgulan*, eager

[122] Goswami, 'Partha Chatterjee', p. 182.

[123] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 95–166.

[124] Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King*.

[125] Spence, *God's Chinese Son*.

[126] For a different, albeit related, account of conflicts over land and efforts to reorder religion and society among the Oraons, see Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'Reordering of Tribal Worlds'; also Dasgupta, this volume.

[127] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 294.

[128] Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 26.

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as they were to remake local and supra-local political authority, were, as I have shown, neither anti-colonial nor proto-nationalist in their aims and outlook. This kind of misreading of the colonial archive, undoubtedly, derives from some contemporaneous interpretations of events by British officials themselves. But social anthropologists studying 'tribes' in India and historians of a radical persuasion have tended to reproduce colonial interpretations that fit their own sense of what happened in late nineteenth-century Chotanagpur. As radical historians put their own anti-colonial, even nationalist, concerns in the mouths of long-dead subaltern heroes, we must be wary of such exercises in political romanticism that grossly distort our understanding of adivasi and other pasts that are already difficult to access and interpret.[129] A careful sifting and interpretation of the historical record, however, reveals the creativity and complexity of negotiations between newly minted 'tribal' subjects and the Raj in the margins of the colonial state in nineteenth-century Chotanagpur. On careful consideration, Christian missionaries, too, appear less as colonisers of indigenous consciousness and handmaidens of empire than as catalysts and sometimes even patrons of political activism. Christianity itself is better seen as a political resource with uncertain consequences for those who adhere to it, not as a colonial imposition on hapless subjects. More generally, historical reconstructions such as those offered in this article enable us to appreciate the intertwined nature of statemaking and 'tribal' resistance in modern state margins. Similar reconstructive exercises by Gunnel Cederlöf for the Nilgiris and Bengt Karlsson for what is now Meghalaya,[130] likewise, help us rethink the commonplace conviction that 'tribal' or adivasi histories share an essentially anti-colonial character. And, insofar as the authors of the Chotanagapur Tenancy Act of 1908 regarded it as a direct consequence of the agitations of the Sardars and the Birsaites over four long decades,[131] we can hardly pretend that the events described in this article refer to yet another tragic tale of subaltern defeat that is open for romantics of later eras to appropriate for their own ends.

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[129] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'

[130] Cederlöf, *Landscapes and the Law*; Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*. In the latter, the case of Sonaram Sangma st closely parallels the claim-making of the Sardars and Birsa.

[131] The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal 'considered the changes to be made in the tenancy law of Chota Nagpur' because there was 'no doubt in his mind that the [Birsaite] rising was in fact agrarian'. The agrarian crisis could be resolved, he proceeded, only by the passage of 'a Bill … of which the main provisions [would] be a restriction of the enhancement of rent and the undertaking of a survey and record-of-rights', exactly what the 'millenarian' movement had demanded since c. 1860 (Buckland to Secretary to the GOI, Home (Public) Proceedings, March 1901, NAI).

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