British Rule and Tribal Revolts in India: The curious case of Bastar*

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Abstract

British colonial rule in India precipitated a period of intense rebellion among the country’s indigenous groups. Most tribal conflicts occurred in the British provinces, and many historians have documented how a host of colonial policies gave rise to widespread rural unrest and violence. In the post-independence period, many of the colonial-era policies that had caused revolt were not reformed, and tribal conflict continued in the form of the Naxalite insurgency. This article considers why the princely state of Bastar has continuously been a major centre of tribal conflict in India. Why has this small and remote kingdom, which never came under direct British rule, suffered so much bloodshed? Using extensive archival material, this article highlights two key findings: first, that Bastar experienced high levels of British intervention during the colonial period, which constituted the primary cause of tribal violence in the state; and second, that the post-independence Indian government has not reformed colonial policies in this region, ensuring a continuation and escalation of tribal conflict through the modern Naxalite movement.

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Note on the documentation of archival sources: All archival material for this article was collected from the National Archives of India in New Delhi (NAI), the British Library in London (BL), and the Deshbandhu Press Library (DPL) in Raipur. I use the following citation formats—for NAI: title, date, department, branch, year, file number. For BL: title, date, shelfmark, year. For DPL: subject number, bin number, article number. Sometimes larger files from these archives were numbered, so I also include page numbers where applicable.
The Pax Britannica is so firmly established that the idea of overt rebellion is always distant from our minds, even in a remote State like Bastar.

– B. P. Standen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Central Provinces, 1910

In February of 1910 the tribal population of the princely state of Bastar in eastern India rose in rebellion against a small British force stationed within the kingdom. This event, referred to as bhumkal (earthquake), established Bastar as a major battleground for tribal (adivasi) revolt during the colonial period. Almost exactly 100 years later, in April 2010, 76 members of the Indian Central Reserve Police Force were ambushed and massacred by Naxalite rebels, most of them adivasis, in the thick jungles of the Bastar region. The puzzling fact about Bastar, however, is that unlike so many other regions of India beset by tribal conflict, it never came under the direct control of the British during the colonial period.

A large body of historical literature has documented how British colonialism gave rise to widespread rural unrest in India. During the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a major increase in the number of tribal revolts throughout the country. Kathleen Gough has noted that ‘British rule brought a degree of disruption and suffering among the peasantry which was,
it seems likely, more prolonged and widespread than had occurred in Mogul times.\textsuperscript{5} Ranajit Guha writes, ‘For agrarian disturbances in many forms and on scales ranging from local riots to war-like campaigns spread over many districts were endemic throughout the first three quarters of British rule until the very end of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{6} Along these lines, scholars have shown how new colonial policies, such as the commandeering of forest lands and increased rural taxation, led to widespread discontent and rebellion among indigenous groups. Eric Stokes notes, for example, that ‘resentment against [moneylenders] boiled over most readily into violence among tribal people like the Bhils, Santals, and ... the Gonds’.\textsuperscript{7} Historians have also shown that after independence, the new Indian government did not reform a number of colonial-era policies, especially those dealing with forestry,\textsuperscript{8} and tribal conflicts continued to occur throughout the country, especially in former areas of direct British rule like Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand. The Naxalite movement became the main vehicle for tribal revolt in contemporary India.

But the fact that Bastar, a former princely state ruled by a Hindu dynasty, was one of the epicentres of tribal violence poses a major challenge for the literature linking colonialism and contemporary conflict.\textsuperscript{9} Although the British did exert final authority over the native states, princes often had large amounts of internal discretion within their territories, and these kingdoms—at the very least—featured less of a colonial footprint. Why then has Bastar experienced such intense periods of tribal rebellion—both in the colonial and post-colonial period?

This article makes two central arguments in offering answers to these questions. First, using a wide array of primary source material, I demonstrate that during colonialism, tribal conflict began in Bastar precisely because of increasing British influence in the state. Three

\textsuperscript{5} Gough, Indian Peasant Uprisings, p. 1392.
\textsuperscript{7} Stokes, \textit{The Peasant and the Raj}, p. 245.
\textsuperscript{9} Bastar is not the only former princely state that experiences tribal conflict—the Naxalites are also active in Orissa and Telangana. But the districts that comprise Bastar are unique in that they have the highest levels of Naxalite conflict in India, as I detail.
specific policies were implemented in Bastar that engendered tribal revolt: colonial officials took direct control over the forests, they displaced tribals from their land, and they heavily interfered in succession to the throne, which upset the native population. Second, I show that the post-independence Indian government continued—often in uncannily similar ways, as I detail—most of the same colonial-era policies in the region that had initially led to tribal uprisings. These decisions in Bastar led to the rise of the contemporary Naxalite insurgency, which is only the latest incarnation of tribal unrest in the region. The case of Bastar, therefore, reaffirms the central role of British colonialism in producing tribal conflict in India by showcasing its effects even in areas that never formally came under the ambit of direct rule. Importantly, however, the continuing violence in Bastar concurrently implicates the post-colonial government in failing to end the root causes of the bloodshed.

Despite its remote location, the political developments in colonial Bastar that led to persistent rebellion provide important insights for other states throughout Asia. The British practice of retaining areas of indirect rule within a colony was taken from India and exported to later colonial territories such as Burma and Malaya. Therefore, understanding contemporary violence in other post-colonial states in Asia—ethnic separatism throughout former areas of indirect rule in Myanmar, for example—can be informed by analysing what first transpired in Bastar.

This article contains four major sections. In the first two, I discuss the general history of tribal revolt in colonial and then post-colonial India. In the final two, I examine these broad trends within the kingdom of Bastar, again in the colonial and post-colonial periods.

**Tribal revolts in British India and the princely states**

Colonial rule in India produced several new policies that had deleterious consequences for the indigenous population of the country. In the broadest sense, the British approached the jungles with an overarching goal of bringing ‘primitive’ peoples under the

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control of a modern, centralized bureaucracy. This led to the official classification of tribal populations—a chief example was the institution of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, which sought to control the movement of certain tribes with a history of criminal activity. But under the Act all members of a designated tribe were considered criminals, even if they had never committed a crime, which led to widespread social stigmatization.

Another major change dealt with forest policies and tribal land displacement. Colonial rule marked the first time in Indian history that a government claimed a direct proprietary right over forests. This was something the preceding Mughals, for example, had not done. The British state became the conservator of forests when it passed the Indian Forest Act of 1878. Hundreds of thousands of acres of forest lands that adivasis had used unfettered for centuries were suddenly kept in reserve, a practice that did not change for the rest of the colonial period. With British control of the forests came the concomitant rise of moneylenders, traders, and immigrants, and the influx of these new intermediary groups led to widespread adivasi land displacement. These are only some of the major changes that have shaped the lives of the tribal peoples of Bastar.

instituted during the colonial period; myriad smaller developments—such as the introduction of money rather than a barter economy—also transformed the nature of tribal society during the course of British rule.

Consequently, revolts among the indigenous population became a routine occurrence during colonialism, especially in the nineteenth century. For instance, in 1855 the Santhals rebelled; in 1868 the Naikdas; in 1873 the Kolis; and in 1895 the Birsas. This is only a small smattering of the total number of conflicts. Guha has documented over 110 different colonial-era peasant revolts,¹⁷ and Gough records at least 77 since the advent of British rule.¹⁸

Colonial administrators, however, only directly governed three-quarters of the population of India; the remainder lived in semi-autonomous princely states. These areas did not experience nearly the same level of tribal discontent or conflict. Despite having a reputation as feudal autocrats, many princes pursued liberal policies towards the same tribal groups that rebelled in British India. In Rajputana, for example, both the Bhil and Mina tribes were incorporated into the structure of the princely government because Rajput leaders recognized them as the original inhabitants of the land. These tribes were also charged with ceremonially placing the raja tilaka (a red powder mark used during the coronation process) on the brow of the newly crowned king. In Jaipur, the Minas were designated the guardians of the royal treasury.¹⁹ In Travancore and Cochin, tribal groups were given ownership of their land, government subsidies to improve it, and were shielded by special policies that limited the imposition of the outsiders who were a major problem for adivasis throughout British India.²⁰ In Jammu and Kashmir, many members of the Bakkarwal tribe were employed as tax collectors (zaildaars) and became an important part of the Dogra government.²¹

¹⁷ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. Note, not all peasant revolts involved tribal groups, although Guha’s work discusses many tribal revolts specifically.

¹⁸ Gough, *Indian Peasant Uprisings*—see p. 1392 specifically for a discussion of pre-British peasant revolts. Data on these conflicts is, unfortunately, limited.


(although it was not implemented) declaring that tribal groups ought to be the first claimants to forest lands and should also have the right to be governed by independent panchayats (village councils). Princes displayed much more tolerance for tribal groups, and adivasis fared better under their rule than that of British administrators in the provinces. The same encroachments on tribal society that occurred in British India were largely absent in the princely states; as Verrier Elwin, famed anthropologist of Indian adivasis, summarized the situation, it was ‘most refreshing to go to Bastar from the reform-stricken and barren districts of the Central Provinces’.

Tribal revolts in contemporary India: the Naxalite conflict

Tribal revolts did not end once India gained independence in 1947, and in some parts of the country they became endemic. In the broadest sense, the new government did not end a number of colonial policies that were the cause of tribal revolts—in fact, it exacerbated the situation. For example, in comparing British and post-1947 forest policy, Ramachandra Guha notes: ‘The post-colonial state has taken over and further strengthened the organizing principles of colonial forest administration—the assertion of state monopoly right and exclusion of forest communities.’ Richard Haeuber similarly writes: ‘Despite the transition from colonial to independent status, forest resource management changed little: exclusionary processes accelerated ... to consolidate state authority over forest resources.’

Consequently, tribal conflict continued into the post-independence era, and the Naxalite movement became the face of contemporary rebellion. Though no one knows the precise constitution of the various Naxalite cadres, it is widely believed that the majority of members come from poor tribal groups such as Scheduled Tribes. Scheduled

24 Guha, Forestry in British and Post-British India, p. 1940, emphasis added.
26 For example, the Hindustan Times piece ‘Naxalites meet to analyse tribal revolt against them’ of 25 June 2005 noted that tribal groups are ‘considered the backbone of the ultra-left movement’—Deshbandhu Press Library [hereafter DPL], 24, IB, 210.
Castes are also involved in the movement. In the most general terms, Naxalites are poor peasants.\(^27\) Brutal poverty and landlessness has historically been a major problem among these groups, and the present Naxalite leadership has successfully mobilized them around these grievances. Home Secretary G. K. Pillai confirmed in a 2009 speech that the government and its policies were largely to blame for the rise of Naxalism.\(^28\)

The term ‘Naxalite’ encompasses several different communist militant groups operating guerrilla campaigns in various parts of the country. These movements are not necessarily working in tandem with one another. One of the historic and regional strongholds of the Naxalites is the former British areas of West Bengal and Bihar. Naxal insurgents also operate in Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh (the ‘Red Corridor’), and have been active as far south as the Malabar regions of Kerala. By some rough estimates, Naxalite cadres are currently functioning in roughly 180 out of India’s 631 districts.

The Naxalites come from the long and complicated history of the communist movement in India. The Communist Party of India abandoned violent revolution and adopted parliamentary politics in 1951, which subsequently led to the creation of a splinter faction, the Communist Party of India, Marxist. In 1967 another split occurred and the far-left Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist was established. Most contemporary Naxalite groups originate from the Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist. These groups are Maoist, drawing on the tactics of Mao Zedong’s insurgency during the Chinese Civil War.

There are generally considered to be three historical phases in the Naxalite movement. During the first, from 1967 to 1975, the campaign began in West Bengal and spread to the surrounding regions. The beginning of the conflict is dated to an uprising of peasants against landlords in 1967 in the West Bengali village of Naxalbari (providing the name of the movement). The uprising was led by former Communist Party of India, Marxist member Charu Majumdar—the nominal founder of the Naxalites—and most of the


peasants involved in the revolt belonged to the Santhal tribe. By 1975
the initial rebellion was effectively stamped out. Then, from 1975
until the early 2000s, the various Maoist groups became severely
fragmented and had limited success in carrying out attacks against
the Indian government. Beginning over the last decade, however, the
movement reorganized successfully under new leadership and has
now come to pose a major threat to Indian political stability. The
culmination of the rebirth of the movement came in 2004 when two
of the largest Naxalite factions, the People’s War Group and Maoist
Communist Centre, joined together to form the Communist Party of
India, Maoist. In 2006 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that
Naxalites were ‘the single biggest internal security challenge ever
faced by our country’. He later also admitted that the Government
of India was losing the war against them.

Naxalites were estimated at one point to control one-fifth of the
land mass of India. In many of these swaths of territory they operate
parallel governments, grouping together villages into new
districts, selecting administrators, and setting up police stations,
schools, and even courts where oppressive landlords and moneylenders
suffer retribution. The insurgents are said to be armed with advanced
weaponry such as AK-47s, improvised explosive devices, and even solar
panels to charge electrical equipment. Their attacks are sophisticated,
well-organized, and extremely deadly. The rebels are also aided in
that they operate in the deepest parts of India’s jungles, areas which
are often impossible to visit. In Bastar, for example, as far back as 1881
the deputy superintendent of the census for the Central Provinces
wrote to his superiors that ‘there is little prospect of a Census being
possible [in Bastar]’ and also noted that the figures from 1871 were
‘manifestly incorrect’. Even today, travelling from Jagdalpur, the
capital of Bastar district, to its surrounding villages can be difficult.

time/magazine/article/0,9171,1810169-1,00.html, [accessed 25 June 2015].
30 ‘India is “losing Maoist battle”’, BBC News, 15 September 2009; available at:
32 For an excellent overview from a journalist who camped and travelled with
the Naxalites, see Roy, A. (2010). ‘Walking with the Comrades’, Outlook India,
25 June 2015].
33 Deputy Superintendent of Census, Central Provinces to Census Commissioner
of India, 31 January 1881, NAI, Home Department, Census Part B, March 1881, #7.
The violence in the Naxalite insurgency has been immense over the past several years. According to conflict data from the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System,\textsuperscript{34} which is operated by the National Counterterrorism Center, 1,920 people died from Naxalite violence during the years 2005–2009, while another 1,412 were wounded. The Indian government has responded to this movement via a massive anti-terrorism campaign, begun in November 2009, in which over 50,000 troops are involved (Operation Green Hunt). The Naxalites, however, have continued their attacks relentlessly.

Given that princely rulers often enforced liberal policies towards adivasis, and that the Naxalite movement began and is still strongest in former areas of direct British rule, what accounts for the immense historical conflict in Bastar? How is it that this small and isolated princely kingdom became ground zero for tribal violence in both colonial and post-colonial India?

**British influence and tribal revolt in Bastar**

The former Bastar kingdom is located in the state of Chhattisgarh. During the British period Bastar was over 13,000 square miles, or roughly the size of Belgium. It had a population, in 1901, of 306,501. Adivasis constituted the largest segment of the population, and Gonds were the major tribe inhabiting the area. The state was governed by a lineage of Hindu kings who were not adivasis themselves but Rajputs. The founders of the Bastar state were, according to legend, driven from their former home in Warangal by Muslim invaders in the fourteenth century. They then settled in Bastar and became high priests of the goddess Danteshwari, whom the tribes of Bastar worshipped. The princely state was known for its unique celebration of the Dasera festival. The raja is ‘abducted’ by tribals on the eleventh day of Dasera and then returned to the throne the next day, a ritual that symbolizes the close linkage between the adivasis and their king.\textsuperscript{35}

During the pre-colonial period, Bastar had been incorporated as part of the Mughal and then Maratha empire. Due to its rough terrain and geographical inaccessibility, however, it always retained a certain


level of isolation—Deputy Commissioner of the Central Provinces and Berar Wilfrid Grigson remarked that Bastar was a ‘backwater in Indian history’. The entire region is one of the most heavily forested areas in India (it is the site of the Dandakaranya forest), and colonial officials often referred to Bastar as one of a number of ‘jungle kingdoms’.

When the British finally broke Maratha power in central India in 1818 they subsequently began to enter into a political relationship with Bastar (a former tributary state of the Marathas), and in 1853 the kingdom officially came under the system of British indirect rule. Bastar State was included as part of the Central Provinces administration.

The British immediately began to interfere in Bastar’s administration in three ways: by implementing new forest policies, displacing tribals from their land, and heavily interfering in succession to the throne—that is, removing rajas and replacing them with compliant officials. At first, this interference in the state came under the pretext of preventing human sacrifice. An official inquiry in 1855, however, showed that human sacrifice was not a local tradition. The reporting officer wrote that it was ‘pleasing to find that there did not exist ... a tradition of human sacrifices. In the low country it was said that these hill tribes never sacrificed human beings and for once the account was strictly true.’ A more likely cause of intervention was the fact that Bastar had extremely large iron ore deposits, as well as other precious minerals, timber, and forest produce. Over time, British influence in Bastar increased—beginning first with forest administration—due to efforts to appropriate its natural resources, and by 1876 colonial administrators effectively governed the state, the raja ruling in name only.

Colonial influence bred rebellion in Bastar. The state experienced two important tribal revolts during colonialism, in 1876 and 1910. The cause of the first rebellion was trivial enough—the arrival of the

37 Report of Captain J. Mac, 10 March 1885, NAI, Home Department, Public, April 1855, #47.
39 In the period before British rule Bastar was not immune to tribal conflict. There were, in fact, several violent episodes in and around the area—for example, the Halba Rebellion in 1774 and the Paralkot Rebellion in 1825. However, even these conflicts can be partially attributed to burgeoning British influence in the
Prince of Wales to India. The diwan of Bastar attempted to arrange a meeting between the prince and the raja. The *adivasis*, however, interpreted this as an attempt by the British to abduct the raja, and within hours they mobilized in large numbers and prevented him from leaving the state. Though traditionally referred to as a rebellion, the conflict in reality was relatively minor and featured little bloodshed. W. B. Jones, chief commissioner of the Central Provinces, summarized the incident in a confidential report from 1883:

In March of 1876 a disturbance broke out at Jugdalpur, the origin of which has never been quite satisfactorily explained. The immediate occasion of the outbreak was the Raja’s setting out for Bombay to meet ... The Prince of Wales. The people assembled in large numbers and compelled him to return to Jugdalpur. Their ostensible demand was not that he should not go, but that he should not leave behind the then Diwan Gopinath Kapurdar (a Dhungar, shepherd by caste) and one Munshi Adit Pershad (a Kayeth in charge of the Raja’s Criminal Court), whom the people charged with oppression ... They simply demanded that the two men mentioned above should be sent away.\(^{40}\)

Were the *adivasis* rebelling against the raja? The British themselves were sceptical. An officer sent to investigate disconfirmed the idea, noting that ‘Relations between Raja and subjects generally [were] good, very good.’\(^{41}\) Commissioner Jones also noted that ‘the insurgents committed no violence and professed affection for the Raja.’\(^{42}\) At worst, the *adivasis* were upset with the raja’s choice of appointees. But another central cause of the disturbance was creeping British influence in the state—for example, Jones made sure to note that the *adivasis* earlier in the year had reacted very negatively to new Christian missionaries who had arrived in the kingdom.\(^{43}\) A number of new region, although colonial administrators did not yet control Bastar. For instance, D. Banerjea notes about the Halba Rebellion: ‘The presence of Maratha forces and the terror caused by the East India Company ... precipitated the rebellion.’ About the Paralkot Rebellion, he similarly writes: ‘The presence of the Marathas and the British threatened the identity of the Abujmaria [tribe] and they resisted this through organising the rebellion.’ Though local tribes in the region had a long history of resistance to any outside influence, large-scale rebellions in Bastar seem to have coincided with the rise of the British in India. Quotations taken from: Banerjea, D. (2002). *Criminal Justice India Series, Volume 19: Chhattisgarh*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 12.

\(^{40}\) Memo by the Chief Commissioner W. B. Jones, 28 September 1883, NAI, Foreign Department, A-Political-I, January 1884, #117–125, pp. 6–7.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 13.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., pp. 6–7.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 16.
colonial policies combined to create a rising sense of embitterment among the tribal population.

After the death of Raja Bhairam Deo in 1891, the British began to penetrate the princely administration ever more steadily. As the raja’s son, Pratap Deo, was only six years old at the time, the British directly administered the state for the next 16 years. During eight of these years the state was even governed by Englishmen. This direct control over Bastar in reality also continued after Pratap Deo became raja in 1908. Extra Commissioner Rai Bahadur Panda Bajjnath acted as superintendent during the last four years of Pratap Deo’s minority, and then continued to act as diwan after the raja finally took the throne. E. A. De Brett, officer on special duty in Bastar, wrote about Pratap Deo’s lack of power, noting that he was ‘bound in all matters of importance to follow the advice of his Diwan and has never taken an active part in State affairs’. The chief commissioner of the Central Provinces concluded later that ‘the Diwan was the virtual ruler of the State’. 44

The 1910 rebellion was much more violent and widespread than its predecessor. One of the chief instigators of the conflict was Lal Kalendra Singh, the first cousin of the raja and a former diwan himself. He had been angling for a return to power after he had been removed by the British due to ‘incompetence’. He mobilized the adivasis by declaring that if he was returned to the throne he would drive the British out of Bastar completely. A contemporary report from a Christian missionary living in Bastar, Reverend W. Ward, sheds some light on the rebellion:

In the second week of February we first heard of the unrest among the Aborigines south of Jagdalpur. Vague rumours were afloat but none of a very serious nature. On the 18th a Christian living among the Prajas—Aborigines—came to me with the story that the Prajas were all armed and were moving toward Keslur, where the Political Agent, Mr. E. A. De Brett, I.C.S., was camping, to make known their grievances . . . A branch of a mango tree, a red pepper, and an arrow were tied together, and sent to all villages in the State. The mango leaves stand for a general meeting; the red pepper, a matter of great importance is to be discussed and that the matter is necessary and urgent; the arrow, a sign of war. 45

43 B. P. Standen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Central Provinces to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, 16 December 1910, NAI, Foreign Department, Secret—1, 1911, #34–40, p. 3.
The entire state rose in revolt and the existing British force of only 250 armed police was quickly overwhelmed. For weeks looting, robbery, and arson plagued the entire kingdom. By the end of February additional troops from Jeypore and Bengal had arrived and the rebellion was finally put down. Hundreds of prisoners were taken, including Lal Kalendra Singh, who was expelled from the state and later died in prison.

The British conducted several inquiries into the causes of the 1910 rebellion. The chief commissioner of the Central Provinces summarized the British government’s position in a December 1910 report that stated:

from an examination of the evidence before them the Government of India were of opinion that a too zealous forest administration might not improbably be the main cause of the discontent of the hill-tribes.46

De Brett also conducted an inquiry on the rebellion and discerned 11 main causes, ranking chief among them ‘the inclusion in reserves of forest and village lands’.47

Prior to colonialism, the rajas that ruled Bastar did not reserve forest lands, giving adivasis almost unrestricted access to these areas.48 Alfred Gell notes that prior to the arrival of British administrators ‘the tribal population [in Bastar] enjoyed the benefit of their extensive lands and forests with a degree of non-exploitation from outside which would hardly be matched anywhere else in peninsular India’.49 Nandini Sundar similarly highlights that prior to British rule there was not even a recorded forest policy for the kingdom.

The colonial state began reserving forests in Bastar in 1891, especially areas rich in various kinds of forest produce. This meant timber most of all, but also a class of items known as non-timber forest product, which included rubber, medicinal plants, berries, and tendu leaves, used for rolling tobacco. Due to this new reservation policy, entire adivasi villages in reserved areas were forcibly moved by

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46 Report from the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces, 16 December 1910, NAI, Foreign Department, Secret–1, 1911, #34–40, emphasis added.
47 Confidential Report by E. A. De Brett, Officer on Special Duty, Bastar State to the Commissioner, Chhattisgarh Division, Raipur, Central Provinces, 23 June 1910, NAI, Foreign Department, Secret–1, 1911, #34–40.
49 Gell, Exalting the King, p. 435.
colonial authorities. Corporations, like those involved in the timber trade or iron mining, entered areas where *adivasis* had lived and were granted a monopoly right over forest produce. Once a forest area was officially reserved, *adivasis* no longer had any claim to these lands and were charged fees for collecting produce or grazing in these areas.\(^50\) L. W. Reynolds, another officer stationed in Bastar, noted the singular importance of this policy of forest reservation in promoting rebellion:

The proposal to form reserves was not finally sanctioned until June 1909 and action giving effect thereto must therefore be nearly synchronous with the rising. In his telegram of the 17th March 1910 the Chief Commissioner stated that one of the objects of the rising was the eviction of foreigners. I believe it to be the case that in connection with the exploitation of the forests Messrs. Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Company, who have a contract in the State, have introduced a large number of workmen from Bengal ... the [tribes] resent the introduction of these foreigners. It is not unnatural.\(^51\)

All of the contemporary reports pointed to the same causes—foremost, new forest policies that displaced *adivasis* from their land. Sundar also found that the main participants in the 1910 rebellion were from areas that suffered the most under new colonial land revenue demands.\(^52\) Despite the admission to an ‘overzealous’ forest administration, British policy in Bastar did not change substantially in the wake of rebellion. They continued to sign various forest mining agreements or renewals of previous agreements—in 1923, 1924, 1929, and 1932. The 1923 agreement, for example, renewed a licence for Tata Iron and Steel to mine Bastar’s ‘enormous reserves of iron ore’.\(^53\) Forest lands also continued to be reserved. As late as 1940 the administrator of Bastar State wrote to the political agent of Chhattisgarh States that ‘Most of them [*adivasis*] dislike the proposals for forest reservation ... However if these areas are not reserved it will be impossible to reserve any good teak forests in the Zamindari.'

\(^51\) Report by Chief Commissioner L. W. Reynolds, 19 April 1910, BL, IOR/R/1/1/415, 1910, p. 15.
\(^52\) Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, p. 98.
\(^53\) ‘Bastar Mining’, 16 May 1923, NAI, Foreign and Political Department, Internal, 1932, #1424-1.
(It is a most unfortunate fact that the best teak areas and the thickly populated, well cultivated Maria [Gond] villages coincide).\textsuperscript{54}

Aside from new forest policies, the British also continued to directly govern the state through various machinations, although this, too, had been disastrous in 1910. In 1922 Rudra Pratap Deo died without a male heir, and his daughter, Profulla Kumari Devi, was placed on the throne as a child. One British administrator noted: ‘She is about eleven years of age and no reference is made as to her eventual fitness to rule, but this is unimportant as she could always rule through a Manager or Dewan.\textsuperscript{55} Bastar therefore experienced yet another minority administration. Then, in 1936, when the Maharani of Bastar died suddenly of surgical complications in London, the British installed her eldest son, Pravir Chandra Bhanj Deo, on the throne, although he was only seven years old at the time. The Maharani’s husband, Raja Prafulla Bhanj Deo, who was the first cousin of the ruler of the nearby Mahurbhanj State, had been passed over as a possible successor. This was an attempt to continue directly ruling the state instead of turning over power to the queen’s consort. In fact, colonial administrators in charge of the guardianship of Pravir Chandra were themselves confused as to the justification behind his minority administration. Administrator E. S. Hyde commented:

I am not altogether clear what is meant in this case by guardianship . . . It would, however, be of assistance to me and my successors if our position could be defined. It is certainly an unusual and somewhat delicate one, for normally when a Chief is a minor his father is dead.\textsuperscript{56}

R. E. L. Wingate, joint secretary to the Government of India, Foreign and Political Department, noted that passing over Prafulla for the throne was against the queen’s wishes:

It is her [the Maharani’s] desire that Profulla should have the title of Maharaja and that he should share her role as Ruling Chief, being co-equal

\textsuperscript{54} Administrator, Bastar State to Political Agent, Chhattisgarh States, 20 February 1940, NAI, Eastern States Agency, F. Files, 1940, #F-6-19/40(M), emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{55} Office Memorandum to Mr. Ghondu Singh, 14 March 1922, NAI, Foreign and Political Secretary, Internal, 1922, #319-I.
\textsuperscript{56} E. S. Hyde, Administrator of Bastar State to G. H. Emerson, Secretary to the Agent to the Governor General, Eastern States, 25 March 1936, NAI, Eastern States Agency, D. Files, 1936, #D-51-C136.
with her and succeeding her as Ruler in the event of her death before him, her son not succeeding to the gaddi [throne] until his death.\(^{57}\)

Despite this, Prafulla—who had been educated and gained high marks at Rajkumar College in Raipur—was deemed ‘exceedingly vain and filled with self-conceit ... he is a man of very questionable moral character and completely unstable\(^{58}\) and was denied the throne. Prafulla had also been very popular with tribal groups in Bastar. E. S. Hyde noted a meeting between adivasis and Prafulla in 1936 after he had been passed over for control of the kingdom:

First of all the Mahjis told Prafulla that they had confidence and trust in him and that he was their ‘mabap’ [mother and father]; to this he replied that he could do nothing for them, that he had no powers. He was willing to do anything for them but ... he could do nothing.\(^{59}\)

Even before the death of the maharani in 1936 there had been a movement to install Prafulla as the hereditary raja, in ‘joint rulership’ of Bastar with his wife; later came an attempt to at least establish a council of regency and make him the regent.\(^{60}\) Both movements were squashed by the British. They believed that Prafulla was responsible for several anti-British pamphlets that had appeared over the past several years in newspapers throughout India. Administrators noted, however, that ‘there is no actual proof as the printer’s name is absent from the pamphlets’.\(^{61}\) The British eventually even removed Prafulla as the guardian of his children and deemed that he should not be allowed to enter Bastar State.\(^{62}\)

The British found fault with almost all of the occupants of the throne of Bastar, and managed to have them removed from power in order to clear the way for direct colonial administration of the kingdom. Lal Kalendra Singh was removed as diwan because colonial authorities...
came to realise he was ‘totally unfit to be trusted with any powers’. Rudra Pratap Deo was a ‘very weak-minded and stupid individual . . . considered unfit to exercise powers as a Feudatory Chief’. Prafulla Bhanj Deo was an agitator, unstable, and needed to be kept away from his own children. And by the dawn of independence, colonial administrators were already beginning to have serious doubts about the abilities of his son, Pravir Chandra, who was heir to the Bastar throne.

The colonial history of Bastar after the mid nineteenth century featured British officials taking control over forest lands, displacing tribals, and finding ways to govern the state directly rather than through native rajas supported by the local population. All of these factors increased unrest among the adivasis of Bastar and led to two tribal rebellions against British rule.

**Tribal revolt in contemporary Bastar: the rise of the Naxalites**

After independence, Pravir Chandra was removed as the official ruler of Bastar, and was relegated to a ceremonial position. He retained his title as the raja of Bastar, as well as his personal fortune. Bastar State then acceded to the Central Provinces and Berar in 1948 and became part of the new state of Madhya Pradesh in 1950.

Despite the history of tribal revolt in the region, the new Indian government did not reverse many policies inherited from the erstwhile British administration. Foremost among them was colonial forest policy: just as the inclusion of forest and village lands as reserves was the major cause of pre-independence rebellions, the post-independence government continued and even exacerbated this policy. From 1956 to 1981, for instance, one-third of the total amount of forest felled in Bastar District was for a variety of development projects, and land displacement among adivasis in the region continued to constitute a significant problem. Similarly, the continuing influx of immigrants and traders exacerbated adivasi discontent; these
groups, often with assistance from corrupt local officials, were able to privately reserve forest and village lands, and buy forest produce at below-market prices.

Exceptional insight into this continuing maltreatment of adivasis even after independence comes from the writings of Devindar Nath, an Indian Administrative Service officer and collector of Bastar District in the 1950s. He notes how adivasis were often cheated out of their land, relating a story from 1955:

Each of the tenure-holders found himself in possession of property worth several thousands of rupees, but in their ignorance and illiteracy, they were neither conscious of their rights of property, nor had they any realisation of its value. Timber merchants belonging to different parts of the country made their appearance in the villages and purchased timber from the Adivasis for small sums. Gangs of labourers were employed to fell trees in the cultivators’ fields, and transport of teak on a large scale started. The Adivasis were not paid even a small fraction of the value of their teak . . . the stage was set for complete denudation of the Adivasis’ fields. 66

Furthermore, just as another cause of colonial-era revolts had been interference in succession to the throne of Bastar, the new Congress government also continued this policy. They began agitating against Pravir Chandra almost immediately after independence, exactly as the British had done against the previous rulers of the state. From the perspective of the Indian government, simply removing Pravir Chandra as raja would have upset the large tribal population in Bastar. Instead, they relied on the well-worn colonial policy of declaring as insane those rulers whom they did not support. In a letter to Lord Curzon in 1899, Lord George Hamilton, secretary of state, explained this policy:

I felt that, if ever it became necessary to take so strong a step as deposition [of a prince], you would be less likely to frighten the Native Princes generally if you took that step, not on a plea of misgovernment but of insanity. 67

For instance, in 1920 Raja Rudra Pratap Deo was briefly banned from entering his state when he returned from a trip abroad. The main reason was because he, on three occasions, refused to meet with the British Resident stationed in Bastar, which was considered a sign of

his instability. He apologized, stating that a family member of his had been ill at the time. He was also surprised by the British overreaction.  

The post-colonial Indian government attacked Pravir Chandra for similar reasons. The first step came in 1953 when the Madhya Pradesh government had the prince’s property taken from him and placed under the Court of Wards, which they argued was necessary because Pravir Chandra was insane. The prince was, by most private accounts, an enigmatic and bizarre man. His British caretakers noted that ‘he has always been delicate’. His father Prafulla considered him a ‘young puppy whom the British have ruined’. Home Minister G. B. Pant once wrote in a letter to a Madhya Pradesh minister: ‘Some people say that he was almost an idiot. I cannot say if that is absolutely correct; but there is no doubt that he is erratic and whimsical.’

But the Indian government also made numerous frivolous claims against him. For example, the secretary of the Ministry of States complained in May 1953 that ‘the Maharaja had now grown an enormous beard and his hair had come down right up to his waist. The nails of his fingers are very long. He looks just like a Sanyasi [renouncer] ... His is not a presentable appearance.’ About a subsequent meeting the secretary also wrote: ‘He [Pravir Chandra] said that he has taken to the practice of Yogic exercises. I suggested that he was too young for that and that he had better marry and live a decent family life.’ Finally, he recounted a conversation with the raja in 1953:

I told the Maharaja that he had acted very improperly in not paying due respect to the President of India when the latter had visited that part of Madhya Pradesh. The Maharaja in reply disowned any desire whatsoever to

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68 ‘Mal-administration of the Bastar State’, Undated, NAI, Foreign and Political Department, Deposit-Internal, 1920, #54.
69 E. S. Hyde, Administrator of Bastar State to G. H. Emerson, Secretary to the Agent to the Governor General, Eastern States, 25 March 1936, NAI, Eastern States Agency, D. Files, 1936, #D-51-C139.
70 Prafulla Chandra Bhanj Deo to Government of India, 23 October 1952, NAI, Ministry of States, Political (B) Section, 1951, F.26(23)-PB/51.
72 Note from Secretary, Ministry of States, 14 May 1953, NAI, Ministry of States, Political Branch, 1953, #18(4)-PB/53 (Secret).
73 Note from Secretary, Ministry of States, 1 July 1953, NAI, Ministry of States, Political Branch, 1953, #18(4)-PB/53 (Secret).
be disrespectful but said that his inability to be present at the President’s arrival was due to his illness. He was then down with high fever.\textsuperscript{74}

Even the evidence of insanity the post-independence state used mirrored that of the British—Pravir Chandra’s refusal to meet the president (legitimate or not), like that of his grandfather, was taken as proof that he should be removed as ruler of Bastar.

Pravir Chandra was embittered by losing his property. In 1955 he formed the Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Sangh (Tribal Peasants Workers’ Association), a political organization that was partly created to help restore his land, but also pressed for better policies for villagers in the state. In 1957 he was recruited by the Congress Party (apparently despite the fact that he was insane) to stand for election. He viewed this as another opportunity to have his property returned. However, Congress would not relent and the shaky alliance quickly ended. After that the Indian government began to work towards removing Pravir Chandra from the Bastar throne, intending to replace him with his brother, Vijay Chandra. In their internal memos they make a clear link to the past in pursuing this line of action:

The adivasis have seen and read the articles appearing in certain news-papers regarding the Maharaja’s derecognition. They have taken a serious view and are stirring up agitation ... There was a similar move at the time of the death of his grand-father Shri Rudrapratap Deo and the adivasis stirred up a violent agitation, but the British Government was wise enough to put his mother on the Gaddi. History will repeat itself now.\textsuperscript{75}

Congress finally succeeded in removing Pravir Chandra from the throne in 1961, and he was replaced by his brother.

The failure of the post-independence government to reform colonial-era policies led to two major post-colonial tribal conflicts in Bastar, both notable in that they featured the raja and the adivasis on one side and the new Indian government on the other. The first occurred in 1961. After his deposition in that year, Pravir Chandra was briefly arrested for anti-government activities, which led to the adivasis besieging the police station where they believed (incorrectly) he was being held. For several days Bastar was locked in a state of panic. Huge protests gripped the kingdom and the new raja, Vijay Chandra, was

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.

unable to quell the disturbance because the *adivasis* refused to accept him as their king. Thirteen protestors were killed in the ensuing violence. Thousands of signatures were collected to restore Pravir Chandra to power, and G. B. Pant bemoaned that the ‘Adivasis still continue to cherish their traditional feelings of respect and loyalty to the erst-while Princes’.\(^\text{76}\)

The second major conflict occurred in 1966. On 25 March of that year Pravir Chandra Bhanj Deo was gunned down by Jagdalpur police on the steps of his palace. Though the police and the government claimed that it was the *adivasis* that had been congregating near the palace who had led the revolt, most were in fact armed only with bows and arrows. A subsequent investigation by Justice K. L. Pandey also discredited this theory and blamed the police.\(^\text{77}\)

To this day the so-called ‘police action’ is highly controversial, and it is widely believed that Pravir Chandra’s death was a political assassination. Though only a small number of *adivasis* probably died, rumours still abound that hundreds or even thousands were killed.\(^\text{78}\) The *adivasis* in the former Bastar State today continue to venerate Pravir Chandra. Since, 25 March has been styled ‘Balidaan divas’ or ‘The Day of Sacrifice’.\(^\text{79}\) While both the British government and the new Congress government had a plethora of complaints about one ruler of Bastar after another, the only group not to complain were their *adivasi* subjects.

The continuation of colonial-era policies in Bastar opened up a political space for the Naxalites. They became an important local force when they entered the Bastar area in the early 1980s, mobilizing villagers around their economic grievances—one of their earliest promises was higher wages for collecting *tendu* leaves.\(^\text{80}\) Many of the


\(^{78}\) See, for example, the Amrit Sandesh article ‘Ambassador of the Revolution and Martyr Pravirchandra Bhanjdev Spilled His Blood in Sacrifice for Bastar’ in which the author suggests that ‘the total number of deaths to this day remains a mystery, as several people claim that hundreds or even thousands died’ (in Hindi, my translation). Sandesh, A. (2007). ‘Ambassador of the Revolution and Martyr Pravirchandra Bhanjdev Spilled His Blood in Sacrifice for Bastar’, 25 March, DPL, 24, 1B, un-numbered.

\(^{79}\) ‘Maharajah Pravirchandra Bhanjdev, Messiah of Tribals’ (Hindi, my translation), *Highway Channel*, March 2009, DPL, 24, 1B, un-numbered.

earliest Naxalites came from tribal movements in Andhra Pradesh, and they began a ‘Go to the village’ campaign in the Bastar area to enlist tribal support. Two of the main initial recruiting grounds for the Naxalites in Bastar were hostels and schools, especially special schools for adivasis. Youth hostels had also been an important recruiting ground for communists during the Telangana mobilization in the 1940s. The two main groups operating in Bastar now are the Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist and the People’s War Group.

From the 1980s to the 2000s, the Naxalites enlisted tribal support in Bastar by highlighting the failure of development efforts in the region to improve the lives of adivasis. On the surface there appear to be many attempts at reform. In Bastar alone there is an absurd number of overlapping development organizations: the Community Development Programme, Community Area Development Programme, Whole Village Development Programme, Drought Prone Area Programme, Hill Area Development Programme, Intensive Rural Development Programme, Tribal Area Development Programme, Intensive Tribal Development Programme, and the Bastar Development Authority. However, while various development projects have raised money for the Indian government as well as private corporations, adivasis have reaped few benefits. For example, every year some 50 million rupees is spent on development schemes in Bastar, but forest and mineral wealth in the region generates almost 10 times as much for the government.81 Another example is the Bailadilla iron ore mine in Dantewada, which is one of the most profitable in India but employs no local adivasis.82 By the late 1980s—despite numerous development efforts—only 19 per cent of the villages in Bastar were electrified, and there was only one medical dispensary per 25,000 villagers.83 Similarly, only 2 per cent of land in the entire Bastar region was irrigated.84 An Economic and Political Weekly piece on Bastar summarized the situation in 1989:

We have met representatives of almost all of the political parties, in addition to leading advocate [sic] and journalists. All of them are of the view that the Naxalite movement is essentially a socio-economic problem. The failure of

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81 Sundar, Debating Dussehra, p. 24.
82 Sundar, Subalterns and Sovereigns, pp. 8–9.
84 Navlakha, Days and Nights in the Maoist Heartland, p. 43.
development programmes, exploitation by middle-men and contractors, and corruption among the officials are the most commonly cited causes. Some of them even acknowledged the failure of the political parties to effectively champion the cause of the adivasis.85

Because development projects have not resulted in a higher standard of living for adivasis in Bastar, tribal violence has intensified over time. Bastar State is presently made up of the districts of Bastar, Dantewada (South Bastar), and Kanker (North Bastar), and from 2005 to 2009 these three districts experienced a total of 1,171 deaths and injuries from Naxalite violence. This constitutes 35 per cent of the total number of Naxalite casualties in India during that time span. Dantewada district alone experienced a staggering 516 deaths and 472 injuries—it is the single deadliest Naxalite-affected district in the country. In the end, it is fitting—considering how little has changed for the tribes of Bastar—that the name of the main contemporary Naxal front organization in the region is Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan, almost the exact name of Pravir Chandra’s tribal organization formed in 1955.

**Conclusion**

The rise of the British in India in the eighteenth century led to a number of major adivasi revolts throughout the country. Colonial officials implemented a number of policies that aggrieved the native population—in the broadest sense, they regarded tribals as primitive peoples that needed to be brought under the control of a modern, centralized state. They took direct control over and restricted access to forests, thereby displacing tribals from land over which they had had privileged access for centuries. While British officials implemented these policies in the provinces, native princes generally enforced liberal policies towards adivasis, and tribal rebellion was much less severe in the princely states.

After independence, the new Indian government did not reform many of the colonial-era policies that had led to tribal revolt in the first place; for example, they continued to exercise complete control over the country’s forests. This, in turn, led to a continuation of tribal rebellion in the form of the Naxalite movement. This insurgency,

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85 Bastar: Development and Democracy, p. 2241.
driven mostly by poor *adivasis*, is still strongest today in areas of former British rule.

Given these two facts—that tribal revolts mostly occurred in British provinces, and that princely rulers enforced liberal tribal policies—it is surprising that a major centre of tribal conflict throughout both the colonial and post-colonial period is the princely state of Bastar. What accounts for the immense historical conflict in this small and remote princely kingdom?

Using a wide variety of primary sources, I detailed that Bastar State experienced extensive British interference during the colonial period. Colonialism in Bastar led to the implementation of new forest and landholding policies, the dismissal of several popular rajas from power, and ultimately the rise of tribal rebellion in the region. The case of Bastar therefore reaffirms the negative impact of British rule on India’s indigenous communities. While Bastar experienced extensive colonial interference, it may not have been alone. Recent historical work suggests that the roots of the Telangana conflict in Hyderabad State, for example, may also have been due in large part to British policies imposed on the *nizam*.

But the case of Bastar also implicates the post-colonial government in continuing and even exacerbating many colonial-era policies that had initially led to rebellion—for example, removing another of Bastar’s rajas from power in the early post-independence period. Furthermore, the socio-economic grievances that originated during the colonial period have not dissipated in recent years, and Bastar remains one of the least developed regions of eastern India. Existing development projects have been beneficial to the state and private interests, but have done little to assist *adivasis* specifically. This explains the rise of Naxalism in the area, which is only the latest incarnation of a long history of tribal revolt. The colonial past, therefore, continues to cast a long shadow over the ongoing tribal rebellion in the vast jungles of the Indian republic.

As British administrators began to colonize other parts of Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they took with them the belief that maintaining some form of indirect rule was imperative to governing successfully. This was a lesson culled from the Indian experience. And so colonial officials created the Shan States, Chin Hills, and Kachin State of ‘Native Burma’ and placed

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them under indigenous rulers.\textsuperscript{87} In Malaya they likewise created the ‘Unfederated Malay States’ and placed them under the control of sultans.\textsuperscript{88} Contemporary conflicts continue to rage in many of these regions—in modern Myanmar, for example, former areas of indirect rule have seen a number of ethnic separatist movements since independence.\textsuperscript{89}

The history of political developments in Bastar State during colonialism can provide insights into explaining some of these other conflicts across British colonial Asia. The case of Bastar foremost prompts a fundamental question: was indirect rule in the British empire truly indirect, or was it merely a facade hiding the creeping influence of colonial administrators? If Bastar provides a preliminary answer, colonialism may be responsible for violence occurring even beyond the borders of direct rule. And whether the post-colonial leaders of states like Myanmar and Malaysia have dealt better with their colonial inheritances than the politicians of modern India is a question that will go a long way towards determining whether contemporary violence persists.

\textsuperscript{87} Taylor, R. H. (2009). \textit{The State in Myanmar}, National University of Singapore, Singapore.