ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 6| June 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

TRIBAL FREEDOM MOVEMENTS AGAINST BRITISH RAJ IN BENGAL: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra22263
DOI No: 10.36713/epra22263

ABSTRACT

The present study deals with the real nature of the tribal movements that had taken place in Bengal province against the British raj and assess the role played by them in the freedom struggle of India. Each resistance movement against the British rulers made by the Tribal people of British ruled Bengal province is described and the course of its development has been summarized with historical analysis and discussions. It rebuts the charge that tribal movements were not freedom struggles but a revolt against Indian moneylenders, Jaigirdars, and landlords. These tribal freedom movements of Bengal may be called the precursors of the revolutionary nationalistic movements which ultimately forced the Britishers to quit India. The point to be emphasised in this study is that these tribal freedom movements triggered the British Empire to its establishment long before the national political parties move up their slogan of "Swaraj".

KEY WORDS: *Tribal Freedom Movements, Bengal Province, British Raj, Historical Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The present study deals with the real nature of the tribal movements that had taken place in Bengal province against British raj. The Tribal people are orthodox and puritan; they have a great love and respect for freedom and self-identity. Since Mughal Empire, Bengal is the platform where its cultural configuration depicts the presence of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and pluricultural elements. Perhaps this is the only province or state where Dravidian, Proto-Australoid and Mongoloid tribes live with their distinct cultural identity in the leash of greater Hindu tradition. But after the emergence of British Power in Eastern India, the then Bengal tribal people experienced many political upheavals and different rules. There has been increasing encroachment on tribal hills and plain territories in Bengal province and oppression of the tribes by the aliens. The category of aliens included those non-tribals who were new settlers in the tribal regions, viz. landlords, Jaigirdars, money-lenders, merchants, Christian missionaries and British government agents. In this part of history, some significant change perspectives might be noticed: the habitual economy of the tribals faced a new challenge and new rudiments had been adopted. The overall socio-political system of land underwent a series of changes from a feudal system to colonial administration; the emergence of middle-class businessmen in the total system of political economy. The cumulative effect of these major changes resulted in the origin and development of tribal discomforts and discontents on different issues outbursts and gave birth to many tribal upsurges. Tribals by temperament are simple-minded and nature-loving people. When they found their lifestyle and culture jeopardized by aliens' activities, they strived against the latter who were exploiting their economic resources including land and forests. The outcome was that either the tribals themselves withdrew to the still unoccupied hills to escape the dominance of aliens or continued to remain victims of excessive economic exploitation and social degradation. It is during this time that one or two persons from their society came up and fought against the circumstances. Initially, their uprising was religious or reformatory but later on because of continued oppression by the British administration they turned into rebels. These tribal freedom movements may be called the pre-cursors of the revolutionary nationalistic movements which ultimately forced the Britishers to quit India. The point to be emphasised here is that these tribal freedom movements triggered the British Empire to its establishment long before the national political parties raise their slogan of "*Swaraj*". Tribal risings were short-lived, nonetheless, their leaders had unique command and respect among tribal masses and they left a legacy of inspiration for the people for whom they worked and sacrificed their lives. These uprisings still await proper assessment of their glorious role in the freedom struggle. They had made the earliest attempt to oust the British rule from their land. We have examples in history where several rulers had fought against the British at about the same time. But there is a basic difference between the tribal movements in Bengal and other wars/battles fought against the British rule in India. First of all the tribal revolts in Bengal during the close of the 18th and entire 19th Century were not led by any ruler/king to protect his kingdom. Rather the peasants and common mass, with the motive to protect their land and people, organized them. They had immense love for their country, they had stood firm with their bows and arrows against the muskets of the British forces until they killed the last man. This is a rare example in history of love for the motherland had shown by the tribal people against British raj. Besides, these tribal revolts had one and the only motive, i.e. to oust the foreign rule from their land. Liberty from bondage was their inspiring factor. It has often been argued whether there was any concept of nationalism among the poor and illiterate tribals people, who had fought for their country, during those early days. It is also argued that these revolts were directed against the landlords, moneylenders and other exploiters who were Indian and not foreigners.

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Nationalism is not a monopoly of educated people only. Love and affinity of one's motherland and urge for freedom exists in every society. Further, the moneylenders, landlords, and other exploiters represented the British rule in the Bengal presidency. They were Indians, of course, but they were defenders of the British raj. So they embroidered the act of savagery of the tribesmen to obtain the support of British troops against the tribal communities. In all the clashes between the outsiders and the indigenous, the British regiments were deployed to crush the tribal people. Therefore, it cannot be justified that the tribal rebellions were against the Indian people only, not against the foreign rule. In this work, efforts have been made to depict the story of tribal freedom movements against British raj in Bengal. As was indicated in the beginning, freedom, to the tribals, means 'keeping ethnic norms and cultural identity intact.' The contributions of tribal people to the freedom struggle of India are indeed exhilarating and adoring. They proved that absolute buoyancy in one's strength and power, the true love for the nation, boldness and the spirit to tolerate torture and humiliation would lead one to achieve one's objective. Their absolute dedication to the cause of the nation set the paradigm for others to be followed. Very little deep study has been done in the history of tribal freedom movements of Bengal province during the British regime in India. This paper is a humble effort to highlight the movement made by our tribal people in Bengal in margin whose strength and valour, the undaunted spirit to fight, the untold sufferings and self-sacrifice to liberate Mother India from the British yoke are not yet received proper recognition.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

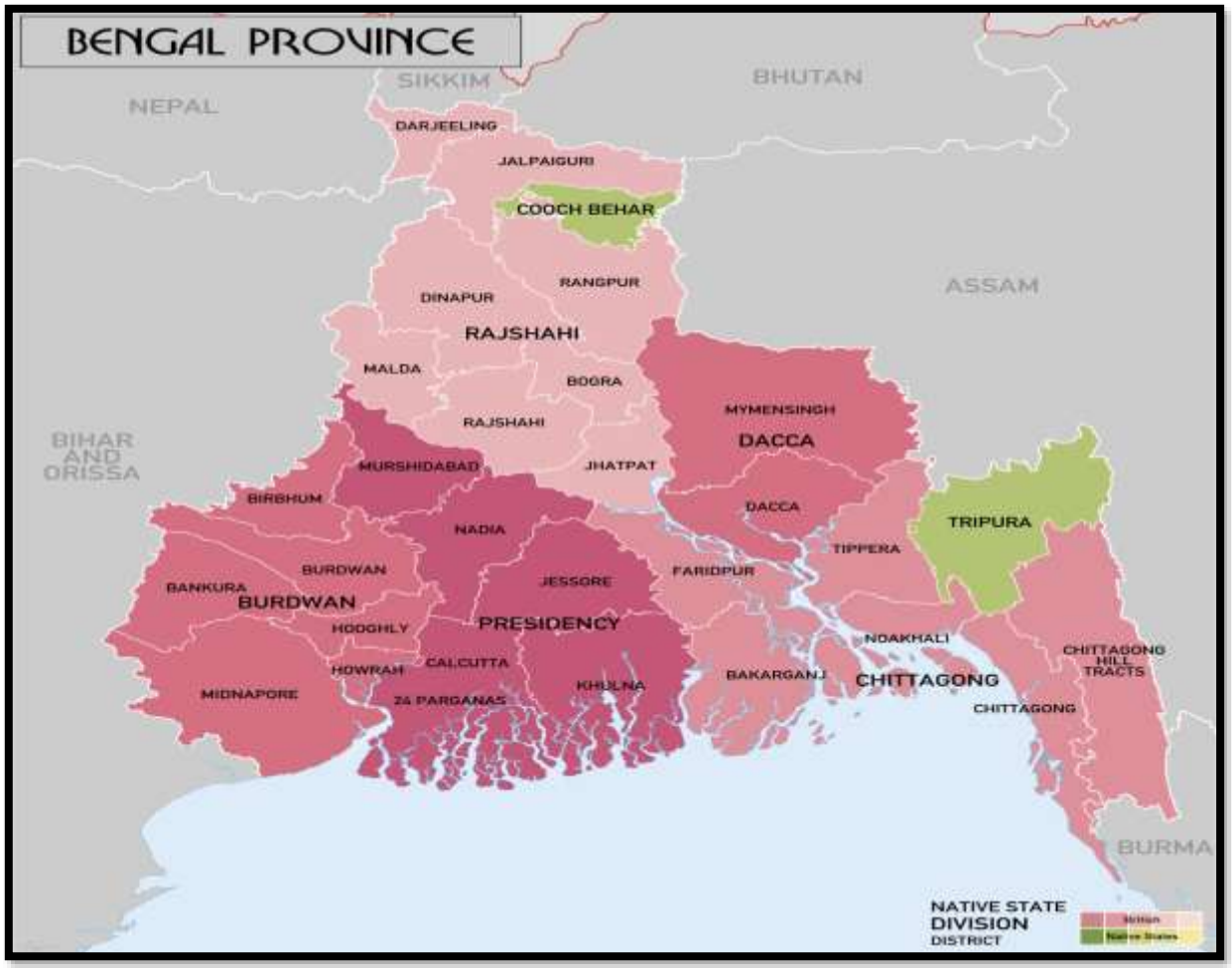
The main objective of this study is to highlight the major tribal freedom movements against British raj in Bengal as well as to generate acquaintance about reasons and the consequences of tribals' movements. Besides that, this study is also to highlight the contributions made by our tribal people of Bengal to the freedom struggle of India.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study is based on historical methodology. The primary data have been collected upon research especially through content and document analysis in public records preserved in the Directorate of State archives in Kolkata. For the sake of an independent and critical study, contemporary newspapers and magazines have been used. Besides that secondary data have been collected from books, journals, various research articles, souvenirs etc.

This study has been conducted on those Tribal movements which originated from the land of British ruled Bengal province area. Here a map of British ruled Bengal province in 1931 has shown below:

Map 01: Administrative Map of British ruled India's Bengal Province in 1931



Source: Imperial Gazetteer of India 1.4 M (Digital South Asia Library, University of Chicago

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings along with the discussion of this study have been depicted in the following subcategories:

I) MAJOR TRIBALS MOVEMENTS IN BENGAL: The main movements had organized by the Tribal people in Bengal during the British regime may be arranged chronologically in the following table 01:

Table 01: List of Tribal Freedom Movements against British Raj in Bengal

Year of Movement	Name of Movement	Participants/Leaders	Major Issues
1769-1774	Dhalbhum Movement	Chuars and Bhumijes of Jangal Mahal area, Midnapore district. Leader: Damodar Singh	1) Against the British Administration for excessive taxation on Land. 2) Right over Land. 3) Love for Freedom.
1769-1816	Paik also known as Chuar Movement)	Chuars of Midnapore region. Leader: 1) Chhatrapati Singh 2) Achal Singh 3) Subala Singh 4) Dubraj Singh	1) To evacuate the British from their Land. 2) Against the Taxation policy made by the British rulers. 3) Against high prices of Salt. 4) Against Maratha invasion on them.
1776-1787	Chakma Movement	Chakmas of Chitagong (At present in Bangladesh) region mainly.	1) To evacuate the British from their area. 2) Love for Freedom.
1789-1791	Mal-Paharia Movement	Malpaharias of Birbhum District.	1) Against Famine. 2) Against Exploitation by the British rulers and Mahajans.
1789-1832	Tamar Revolts	Tribals of adjoining areas - Midnapore, Koelpur, Dhadha, Chatshila, Jalda and Silli. Leader: 1) Bhola Nath Sahay 2) Ganga Narain Singh	1) Against the faulty align system of the British administration. 2) To evacuate the British from their area.
1831-1832	Kol Movement	Kols of Singhbhum, Manbhum area. Leader: 1) Surga Pator 2)Singrai Pator 3) Bindrai Pator 4) Khandu Pator	1) Against the enhancement of Tax. 2) Against infiltration of *Dikus* (Outsiders). 3) Against evacuation policy imposed by the British rulers.
1832-1833	Bhumij Revolt	Bhumijes of Manbhum areas. Leader: 1) Ganganarayan Singh 2)Raghunath Singh	1) Against land distribution policy adopted by the British administration. 2) Against the inheritance of Feudal Lordship.
1855-1856	Santal Revolt	Santals of Birbhum and adjacent districts. Leader: 1) Sido Murmu 2)Kanhu Murmu 3)Chand Murmu 4)Bhairob Murmu	1) Against corruption of the British rulers, Jaminders, Local traders. 2) In protest against the inhumane behaviour of the Britishers on the Santal engaged in Railway works. 3) Love for Freedom. 4) To oust the British rulers from their territory.
1918-1924	Tribal Movement in Midnapore	The Santals, Bhumij and Kurmi (Mahto) tribal people of Midnapore district and neighbouring tracts in Bankura and Siaghbhum. Leader: 1) Chittaranjan Das (Indian National Congress worker)	1) Against landlordism. 2) Against paltry wages paid to Tribal workers by British administration. 3) To participate in the National Freedom Fight movement against British rule.

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		2) Satcowripati Roy (Indian National Congress worker)	
1920-1921	Hajang Movement	The Hajangs (A Tibeto-Mongoloid Tribe) of North Bengal mainly from Tea Plantations area.	1) To oust the British administration from their Tree plantation area. 2) To participate in the National Freedom Fight movement against British rule.
1920-1925	Nebula Movement	The Nepalese, the Bhutias, the Leachas of Darjeeling district. Leader: 1) Ladenla 2) Lt. Govardhan Singh 3) Dr. Sitling	1) Cultural integrity among the Hill Tribes of Darjeeling. 2) Participated Non-Cooperation Movement called by Mahatma Gandhi, one of the greatest National Freedom Movement of India.
1921-1924	Santal Non-Cooperation Movement	Santals of Midnapore district. Leader: Sailajananda Sen (Indian National Congress worker)	1) To participate in the National Freedom Fight movement against British rule. 2) Participated Non-Cooperation Movement called by Mahatma Gandhi, one of the greatest National Freedom Movement of India.
1924-1932	Adina Movement	Santals of Pandua area of Malda district and Dinajpur district. Leader: 1) Jitu Santal 2) Arjun Santal	1) Hinduization. 2) Declaration of Independence.
1930-1940	Rabha Movement	The Rabha people of Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Behar district. Leader: 1) Bhabendra Nath Chowdhury (Religious leader) 2) Dhaneswar Bhattacharya(Religious leader) 3) Baneswar Bhattacharya (Political leader) 4)Deben Das [Belonged to Rabha Community people] (Socio-Political Leader)	1) Hinduization. 2) Participation in Indian Independence Movement.

From the list of Tribal Freedom movements against the British Raj in Bengal, depicted in table 01, it has been evident that the tribals of British ruled Bengal, 1ike other social groups, participated in the anti-colonial movement as well as took part in the national freedom movements against the British raj.

To depict the history of Tribal freedom movements not only in British ruled Bengal province but also in India should start with the Dhalbhum movement which took place during 1769-1774. It was the uprising of Chuars and Bhumij tribes of Jangal Mahal area of Midnapore district in Bengal province who fought against British rulers mainly for excessive taxation on their land. Then after the Chakma movement also started in the eighteenth century which continued from 1776 to 1787, in the Chittagong hill tract of Bengal province (at present in Bangladesh) under the leadership of Damodar Singh. The Chakma tribes aspired for their traditional freedom and wanted to revive their right over land. The Chuars and Bhumij tribal people of Midnapore district area once again revolted with force against the British raj in 1799, which continued up to 1816. This is known as Paik or Chuar Movement in the history of Tribal movements.

Around 1855, the Santals rebellion, locally called ‘Santal hul’ had been broken out by the Santals of Birbhum and adjacent districts of Bengal province which continued up to 1856. It is at this time that two Santal twin brothers, Sido Murmu and Kanhu Murmu came to the forefront providing leadership for mass uprisings. The 30th June of 1855 is a memorable day to the

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valiant Santals. On that day about ten thousand Santals assembled at Bhagnadihi. In presence of Sido and Kanhu, they took an oath to fight against the oppression and misrule of the British raj. They publicly proclaimed that they had received supernatural sanctions to guide the fortunes of their fellow brothers; their slogan was "we should slay all the *Dikus* (aliens) and become rulers of ourselves... We should only pay eight *annas* (fifty paise) for a buffalo plough and four *annas* (twenty-five paise) for a bullock plough and if the rulers (both British and Indian aliens) did not agree we should start fighting...." The subsequent results can well be imagined. Once determined, as the Santals were, they organised themselves, held public meetings and decided to launch mass agitation. Both old and young Santals equipped themselves with bows and arrows, axes and started killing money-lenders. When the local administration was unable to control the situation, a large number of British troops were brought to put down the revolt by applying the military rule on 10th November 1855 by the British administration, as a result, the massive killing of Santals took place and many of them were arrested. In this context, it may be cited that 30th June is a memorable day for all Santals. Each year they observe this day as *Hul Diwas* (Day). It should not be forgotten that the agitation was supported by local low Hindu castes, viz. the Kumhars (potters), Telis (oilmen), Kamars (blacksmiths), Momin (Muslim weavers) and Gwalas (cattle keepers). The Santal rebellion of 1855 cannot be regarded as a minor local encounter originating in insignificant causes. It was indeed a revolt against oppression, prevailing maladies in the administrative and economic system which needed scrutiny for their redressal. This rebellion opened a new chapter in the tribal history of the movement in India. It could be called the precursor of the national movement, which finally ended the foreign rule from the country. Rightly, it is said that the Santal insurrection of 1855 to 1856 was the prelude to the nationwide Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Besides this, the Santals of Midnapore district in British ruled Bengal province went on non-cooperation movement in 1920-1921 was called by our father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi.

Other remarkable tribal rebellions in Bengal against the British rulers include the movement among the Nepalese, Bhutias, and Lepchas of Darjeeling district which occurred from 1920-1936 and the Bhumij revolt of Manbhum district and Jungle Mahals areas of Midnapore district of Bengal province which took place during the time in between 1832 to 1833. Like most of the tribal movements, it was a hopeless struggle, the simple-minded and ill-informed against the concerted resources of a powerful system.

II) HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

To the tribals, freedom means emancipation from an alien system; or it means a demand of some concessions from the immediate rulers; restoration of traditional rights in lands and forests. Also, the term, in the context of tribes, implies keeping ethnic norms or cultural identity intact. Freedom movement among the tribals of India does not necessarily correspond to the struggle for acquiring independence in nationalistic terms. Several tribal movements occurred long before the independence movements initiated by the Indian National Congress. The tribal anti-colonial movements were of two types - .first, the movements against their oppressors i.e. landlords, money-lenders, thekedars (contractors), traders, government officials and Christian missionaries and second, the movements which were linked to and merged with the Indian National freedom fight movement. The British policies bothered the traditional tribal systems. They created the hitherto unknown class of zamindars (landlords) in the tribal areas. Following the introduction of the market economy, a class of traders also developed in the tribal areas. The tribal tenants had to pay the rent in cash. As they did not have cash with them, they had to borrow from the money-lenders. Hence, a class of money-lenders also came into being in the tribal areas. The money-lenders exploited the tribals by charging an exorbitant amount of interest from them. Many a time the tribals were forced to sell out their belongings and children and wives to meet the requirements of the landlords and money-lenders. The government officials took advantage of their innocence. They were the assistant of landlords, money-lenders, contractors and traders in the exploitation of the tribals. The tribals responded to their exploitation and oppression in the form of revolts and movements. They identified their enemies in the outsiders (*dikus*) - landlords, money-lenders, missionaries, and British government officials. They organized movements against their oppressors in their respective regions. Their agitations against the outsiders could be called anti-colonial. They revolted against them because of their exploitation in the form of infringement on their land, eviction from their land, for transfer of land to the tiller, abolition of the feudal and semi-feudal form of land ownership, against enhancement of rent, annulment of their traditional legal and social rights and customs. As a whole, these movements had social and religious connotations but they were directed mainly against the issues related to their existence. These movements were launched under the leadership of their respective chiefs. Although the movements initially began on social and religious issues and against the oppression of outsiders, in course of time, they merged with the National movement and with the no-tax campaign. The tribals fought against their enemies with their traditional weapons i.e. bows, arrows, lathis and axe! Most of the movements were ruthlessly suppressed by the government.

Dealing with the forms of ethnic movements in India a noted ethnographer of India observes: "Broadly, there are two types of ethnic movements among the tribals; one marks a phase of expansion of tribal entities by creating united symbols and organs of command among erst-while isolated tribal communities. In other type, the tribals are in close interaction with the larger nation society, and aware of national goals and symbols."(Ed. Singh, K.S., Tribal Situation in India, Simla, 1972, p. 19)

As is clear from above all tribal movements cited in table 01 were not politically motivated. In most of the cases the agitations took place on the issues of conflict between the adaptive behaviour of agro-based economy and exploitation by the landlords, traders, moneylenders and British administrable agencies who acted as the agents of exploitation. The exploitation, although in general is an economic phenomenon, but here, with indigenous people, but also encompasses the

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cultural and human aspects which the so-called gentlemen did not pay much attention to. The new avenues of exploitative machinery like the establishment of Railways, Tea-gardens, Chincona plantation before these were indigo plantation etc. in one way opened new job opportunities but side by side made the whole lot into as exploitative mass, and inhuman exploitation conducted. A famous social worker who did a lot for tribal welfare writes, "The tribals too initiated struggles to safeguard their honour, to protect their cherished freedom, and to get redress against money-lenders, the zamindars, and other, parasitic landholders, who tried to deprive them of all they had". (Raghvaiah, V. Tribal Revolts, Nellore, 1971, p. 14)

CONCLUSION

British rulers introduced a new economic system characterized by the commercialization of land and forests, property rights, occupational structure, marketing of agricultural surplus etc. in consonance with their economic benefits. The ultimate objective was to exploit the socio-economic resources of India for the prosperity of the British Empire. Therefore, British rulers had spread their capitalist network to everywhere our country; the tribals of the then Bengal province were not spared, as a result, the tribals of British ruled Bengal reacted fiercely against the British rulers. Tribal history is a history of struggle for survival. Tribals have symbiotic attachments with nature and land. So the tribal people always raised their voices against land grabbers both foreign and domestic and socio-economic injustice anytime and anywhere throughout the world. Indeed, Bengal tribes revolted against the Britishers, soon after the establishment of their authority over Bengal. Tribal freedom movements have been prevalent in Bengal since the days of colonial rule. During the British regime, the tribal people of Bengal province fought against the British administration to resist and drive out the British rulers to restore their traditional principalities, dignity, freedom and human rights. The grievances of tribal people of Bengal were not only directed towards the British rulers, all other supporters of the British administration like landlords, merchants, moneylenders, etc. Tribal folk of Bengal participated in the National movement of freedom at a later phase, being called by Mahatma Gandhi and other nationalist leaders. Thus one should take a holistic approach for understanding the nature of those tribal movements in Bengal against the British raj. Like non-tribals, they fought for driving out the British rulers from India. The tribes of Bengal as well as India since time immemorial have been engaged in protecting their land and culture from outsiders including powerful rulers like the British. Their potential, strength and energy for holding their fort till the last person is alive had always been a matter of great inspiration for common man and activists. Thus these tribal struggles could be called the precursors of the national movement, which finally ended the foreign rule from the country. They had shaken the British Empire long before the national political parties raised the slogan of *Swaraj.* Some means of freedom struggle, adopted by the leaders of the Indian national movement, much later, were already experimented in Bengal by the tribal people. They acted as the stooges of the imperial power and all their action and conduct were directed at cementing the foundations of the British rule. But the bitter truth is that no justice can be done to our tribal people without acknowledging the real fact that they were the earlier fighters and front rankers against the British rulers and had made enormous sacrifices. Many of our historians ignore their contributions to the history of our country's freedom movement.

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Volume: 11| Issue: 6| June 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

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