

Shifting Sands of Power: Secondary Data Insights into Significant Social Reform Movements in Bengal (British Period) A Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT: The article presents a wide range of anti-colonial movements in Bengal amid from 1757-1947 how the agrarian- resistance and socio-religious took place under the dominance of British-colonial rule. It showed how the localized movements such as- Fakir-Sannayasi, Santhal rebellion, Titu Mir revolt, the Rangpur Dhing of 1783, the Indigo resistance, the Sepoy Movement are studied as a connected pathway leading to one another. Inadequate uprisings such as the Faraizi and Wahhabi creativities, the Santhal rebellion, the revolt of Titu Mir, the Indigo resistance, and the great Sepoy Mutiny are studied here as part of a associated landscape of defiance. Far from being random or backward-looking episodes, these movements reflected organized responses to political control, economic corruption, and cultural interference. The study employs a qualitative explanatory line, illustrations on archival evidence, oral traditions, and contemporary accounts to show how belief, maintenance, and community life became reuniting points for ordinary people. Each movement is explored within its historical setting while also being linked to broader currents of protest, repression, and resilience. The findings suggest that although these struggles did not immediately dismantle colonial authority, they were turning points in shaping public awareness and collective identity. They fostered pride, unity, and the idea of self-rule, planting the seeds of nationalism that would later blossom into mass mobilizations. By foregrounding the experiences of peasants, workers, and marginalized communities, the article presents a more inclusive picture of resistance and highlights their crucial role in India's long journey toward freedom.

Introduction

This study examines the historical landscape of British colonial rule in India, with particular attention to the resistance, reform, and rebellions that emerged in Bengal during the era of East India Company rule. The political, economic, and social transformations initiated between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries profoundly reshaped the subcontinent and eventually contributed to the historical processes through which three modern nation-states India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh emerged. Understanding this trajectory requires close attention to the ways colonial authority was established and exercised in Bengal and to the diverse responses of local communities to these transformations.

Bengal provides a particularly significant context for examining the early development of anti-colonial consciousness. The expansion of Company power disrupted established political structures, agrarian relations, economic practices, and cultural institutions. Although the nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation of British imperial dominance, colonial authority was repeatedly challenged by forms of resistance emerging from different sections of society. Peasant uprisings, mutinies involving soldiers, tribal resistance, and socio-religious reform movements reflected widespread grievances concerning taxation, land dispossession, economic exploitation, religious practices, and cultural identity.

These movements were often localized, fragmented, and shaped by distinct social and religious circumstances. Nevertheless, they demonstrated the capacity of ordinary people to organize collectively against oppressive structures and to defend their livelihoods, dignity, and cultural traditions. Although they did not always articulate nationalism in its modern political form, such struggles contributed to the gradual development of political awareness and collective consciousness. In this sense, Bengal's early resistance movements can be understood as important precursors to the broader nationalist mobilizations that emerged more prominently during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schendel, 2009).

Background

Modern Indian history is generally associated with the decline of colonial and traditional structures and the emergence of new intellectual, political, and economic ideas influenced by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Many historians regard the period after 1850 as a significant threshold, particularly because of the uprising of 1857, variously described as the Sepoy Mutiny, the First War of Independence, or the Indian Rebellion.

The rebellion was the culmination of deep-rooted grievances rather than a sudden revolt. The immediate trigger was the introduction of Enfield rifle cartridges allegedly greased with animal fat, offending both Hindu and Muslim soldiers. Beneath this lay widespread resentment against exploitative land-revenue policies, racial discrimination, and British annexation strategies that weakened indigenous rulers. The resistance associated with figures such as Mangal Pandey soon developed into a broader uprising involving soldiers, peasants, and sections of the landed elite.

Although the British suppressed the rebellion, its consequences were far-reaching. The East India Company was abolished, and India came under direct Crown rule. Meanwhile, railways, canals, irrigation systems, and administrative institutions expanded, often primarily to serve colonial economic and strategic interests.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also witnessed the growth of political and cultural consciousness. The formation of the Indian National Congress and later organizations such as the All-India Muslim League reflected emerging forms of political mobilization. The Indian Renaissance, associated with reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore, encouraged debates on social reform, education, women's rights, caste, and religious practices while strengthening cultural self-awareness.

Famine, economic exploitation, and India's extensive participation in the two World Wars further intensified dissatisfaction with colonial rule. The Quit India Movement of 1942 articulated the demand for complete independence. Together, these political, cultural, and economic developments fostered a powerful nationalist consciousness and strengthened the aspiration for self-rule, cultural dignity, and freedom from foreign domination.

Research Gap

Although colonial resistance in India has been extensively studied, the role of the Bengali masses in early anti-British mobilization remains comparatively underexplored. Historiography often emphasizes elite reformers and pan-Indian nationalist leaders, overlooking grassroots movements in Bengal between 1760 and 1857. Peasant uprisings, socio-religious reforms, and local resistance reflected both opposition to colonial structures and efforts to preserve indigenous values. This study addresses this gap by positioning Bengal as a foundational site in the emergence of popular political and cultural consciousness (Bayly, 2018; Chandra, 2022).

The research adopts a qualitative and interpretative historical approach, drawing on archival records, contemporary pamphlets, folk songs, oral traditions, and secondary scholarship. It combines macro-level analysis of colonial policies and socio-economic structures with micro-level accounts of local resistance and reform movements. By foregrounding peasants, artisans, and marginalized communities, the study examines how cultural pride, unity, and attachment to land gradually contributed to the development of nationalist consciousness in Bengal (Guha, 1999; Sarkar, 2014).

Early Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Emergence of Popular Consciousness in Bengal

The Fakir-Sannyasi Resistance (1760s–1790s): A Proto-Anti-Colonial Movement

The Fakir-Sannyasi Resistance was one of the earliest large-scale challenges to East India Company rule in Bengal. Lasting from the 1760s to the 1790s, it brought

together Muslim fakirs and Sufis with Hindu sannyasis, ascetics, and yogis. Although the movement initially arose from restrictions on religious practices and traditional livelihoods, it gradually developed into a broader expression of rural opposition to colonial authority.

The Company disrupted the customary system of alms collection that supported many wandering religious groups. Colonial officials interpreted these practices as extortion and imposed restrictions without understanding their religious, social, and economic significance. The acquisition of Diwani rights in 1765 intensified the crisis by introducing heavier taxation, revenue pressure, and land dispossession. The devastating famine of 1770, which caused immense suffering and loss of life, further exposed the destructive consequences of Company rule.

Fakirs and sannyasis became important organizers of rural resistance. Their religious influence enabled them to mobilize peasants, while small zamindars, artisans, and disbanded soldiers also joined the movement. Leaders such as Majnu Shah, Musa Shah, Chirag Ali, Bhawani Pathak, and Devi Chowdhurani led attacks on Company factories, revenue offices, and other colonial institutions. By the 1770s, the resistance had become serious enough to alarm the colonial administration and attract the attention of Warren Hastings.

The rebels sought to defend customary rights, oppose excessive taxation, and challenge foreign officials. Their demand for replacing British magistrates with local administrators suggests an early desire for indigenous and more accountable governance. The movement eventually weakened because of internal divisions, caste tensions, military pressure, and the deaths of important leaders. Nevertheless, it survived in popular memory and later influenced literary representations such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*. Despite colonial descriptions of the rebels as criminals or fanatics, the resistance was a religiously diverse and mass-based challenge to colonial rule that preceded organized nationalism.

The Rangpur Dhing of 1783: Peasant Agency and Colonial Oppression

The Rangpur Dhing of 1783 was an important early peasant uprising in Bengal. Centered in Rangpur and Dinajpur, it arose from widespread opposition to the revenue policies of Devi Singh, a revenue farmer known for excessive demands and coercive methods. The expansion of Company authority after the acquisition of Diwani rights placed increasing pressure on Bengal's agrarian society.

Devi Singh raised revenue demands and imposed exploitative practices involving household goods, livestock, and agricultural production. Many zamindars fled their estates, leaving peasants exposed to the demands of revenue officials and their agents. Rural communities responded through organized resistance. Although some zamindars supported the movement, peasants, artisans, and laborers formed its main base.

The rebellion challenged both the Company's revenue-farming system and the local structures that enabled colonial exploitation. It demonstrated that rural people could act collectively as a political force rather than remain passive victims of official policy. Their resistance expressed demands for fair taxation, protection from abuse, and accountability from those exercising authority.

The colonial administration appointed an investigative commission under Paterson. Although the inquiry acknowledged abuses in the revenue system, justice remained limited. Some zamindars received relief, but the peasants who had suffered most directly gained little. The official tendency to dismiss the rebellion as unjustified reflected the colonial state's unwillingness to recognize the legitimacy of peasant grievances.

Despite its suppression, the Rangpur Dhing revealed the organizational capacity and political awareness of Bengal's rural population. It anticipated later agrarian movements and contributed to a broader culture of collective resistance against exploitation.

The Faraizi Movement (1818–1862): Religious Reform and Rural Resistance

The Faraizi Movement began in nineteenth-century Bengal under Haji Shariatullah. Initially a movement for Islamic religious reform, it gradually developed important social, economic, and political dimensions. Its name came from *fard*, meaning obligatory religious duties. By emphasizing religious purification, the movement also helped preserve Muslim identity in a society increasingly shaped by colonial rule.

The movement attracted many marginalized Muslim peasants in areas such as Dhaka, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Chittagong, and Noakhali. Its appeal extended beyond religious concerns because peasants faced exploitation by landlords, colonial officials, and European indigo planters. The Faraizi message combined spiritual renewal with opposition to social and economic injustice.

After 1837, under the leadership of Shariatullah's son, Dudu Miyan, the movement became more openly agrarian and confrontational. Dudu Miyan challenged landlord authority by arguing that land ultimately belonged to God and that landlords therefore had no absolute moral right to impose rents. He encouraged peasants to resist excessive taxation, refuse indigo cultivation, and avoid cooperation with colonial officials.

The Faraizis developed organizational networks that enabled rural communities to challenge landlords and colonial institutions. They also promoted vernacular education, social reform, and opposition to exploitative customs. For this reason, the movement has been interpreted not merely as religious revivalism but as a response to colonial agrarian pressures and changing Muslim social identity.

Although the movement faced increasing repression, especially after 1857, it gave ordinary Muslim peasants a framework for understanding themselves as members of a moral and political community. Its combination of religious identity, social justice, and resistance helped strengthen collective consciousness in rural Bengal.

The Revolt of Titu Mir (1831): Peasant Militancy and Religious Resistance

The revolt of Syed Mir Nisar Ali, popularly known as Titu Mir, represented another important combination of religious reform and agrarian resistance. His uprising in 1831 developed in a context of colonial expansion, landlord oppression, heavy taxation, and social discrimination. Influenced by Islamic revivalist ideas, Titu Mir sought both religious reform and justice for oppressed rural communities.

Muslim peasants faced arbitrary rents, forced labor, and discriminatory practices. The tax imposed on beards became a powerful symbol of the connection between economic exploitation and attacks on religious identity. Titu Mir transformed these grievances into a broader movement that attracted peasants, artisans, and other marginalized groups.

The construction of the bamboo fort at Narkelbaria, known as the *Bansher Kella*, became the central symbol of the revolt. It served as a base where peasants, artisans, and disbanded soldiers gathered and organized resistance. Unlike many earlier scattered uprisings, Titu Mir's movement developed a relatively disciplined and militant structure.

Colonial accounts often portrayed the revolt as religious fanaticism or communal disorder. However, its wider significance lay in the way it connected religious identity with resistance to landlord and colonial oppression. Titu Mir transformed local grievances into organized opposition to the colonial state and its allies. His movement showed how faith could provide a language for expressing demands for justice, dignity, and self-determination.

The British eventually crushed the revolt, and Titu Mir was killed in 1831. Nevertheless, his memory survived in Bengali popular culture as a symbol of courage and resistance. His uprising demonstrated how religious solidarity, class grievances, and political militancy could combine to produce collective defiance.

The Santal Rebellion (1855–1856): Tribal Defiance and Agrarian Resistance

The Santal Rebellion of 1855–56 was one of the most important tribal uprisings in colonial India. Centered in the Rajmahal Hills, it reflected the Santal community's resistance to economic exploitation, political marginalization, and the destruction of traditional land and social structures.

The rebellion developed from changes introduced by the colonial agrarian system. Santals who had been encouraged to settle in the Rajmahal Hills gradually became victims of zamindars, moneylenders, revenue officials, and other outsiders. Debt, land alienation, forced labor, and administrative harassment undermined their customary way of life. The Santals referred to exploitative outsiders as *dikus*, viewing them as threats to their land, culture, and communal autonomy.

In 1855, Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairav Murmu mobilized tens of thousands of Santals against colonial authority and the *dikus*. The rebellion was notable for its scale, organization, and determination. Its objectives included the recovery of land, protection of community life, and restoration of political autonomy. Cultural survival and resistance to colonial domination were closely connected.

The British responded with overwhelming military force, causing extensive loss of life and eventually suppressing the rebellion. However, the uprising forced the colonial administration to acknowledge the distinctive nature of Santal grievances. Later measures included the creation of the Santhal Parganas and restrictions on the transfer of tribal land to outsiders.

The Santal Rebellion demonstrated that marginalized indigenous communities could generate their own political consciousness and organize resistance around land, identity, and autonomy. Its memory became associated with courage, unity, dignity, and opposition to external domination.

The Sepoy Rebellion of 1857: A Turning Point in Colonial India

The uprising of 1857 was a major turning point in the history of British India. It began among sepoys at Meerut and spread across parts of northern and central India. Historians have variously described it as a military mutiny, a collection of regional rebellions, or an early expression of Indian nationalism. Its importance lies in the range of grievances and social groups it brought together.

The immediate cause was the introduction of Enfield rifle cartridges believed to be greased with cow and pig fat, offending both Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs. The punishment of soldiers who refused to use the cartridges intensified the crisis. Rebels marched to Delhi and declared the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar their symbolic leader.

The rebellion also had deeper political, economic, and social causes. British annexation policies, including the Doctrine of Lapse, alienated rulers and aristocratic groups. Heavy taxation and exploitative revenue systems increased rural distress, while the decline of traditional industries harmed artisans and traders. Cultural and religious anxieties further deepened opposition to colonial rule.

The revolt spread to Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, Gwalior, and other centers. Sepoys were joined by peasants, artisans, landlords, and sections of the urban population. Leaders such as Bahadur Shah Zafar, Rani Lakshmibai, Nana Sahib, and Tantia Tope emerged in different regions. Although the rebellion lacked unified leadership and a common national program, its ability to unite diverse groups revealed the potential for collective resistance to foreign rule.

The British suppressed the uprising by 1858. The East India Company was abolished, and India came under direct Crown rule through the Government of India Act of 1858. The army was reorganized, and new administrative policies were introduced to prevent another large-scale rebellion.

Although defeated militarily, the uprising acquired lasting symbolic importance. It exposed the vulnerability of colonial authority and demonstrated that different

sections of Indian society could unite against foreign domination. Its memory later became an important part of nationalist thought and the developing idea of Indian independence.

The Indigo Rebellion (1859–1862): Peasant Consciousness and Colonial Challenge

The Indigo Rebellion, or *Neel Bidroho*, of 1859–62 marked a significant stage in the development of peasant political consciousness in Bengal. Beginning in Nadia and spreading to areas such as Jessore, Pabna, and Dinajpur, it challenged the coercive system through which European planters forced peasants to cultivate indigo.

Under the *Ryoti* and *Nij* systems, cultivators faced coercive contracts, inadequate payment, debt, and pressure to devote fertile land to indigo instead of food crops. Planters often relied on local officials, police, and colonial courts to enforce their demands. As a result, peasants had little protection against economic exploitation and physical coercion.

The rebellion was distinguished by collective and largely non-violent resistance. Peasants refused to cultivate indigo, organized boycotts, rejected planter demands, and participated in demonstrations. Leaders such as Digambar Biswas, Bishnu Biswas, Rafiq Mondal, Kader Molla, and Ramrattan Mullick helped coordinate the movement.

The Bengali intelligentsia and Christian missionaries also publicized peasant grievances. Dinabandhu Mitra's play *Nil Darpan* played a particularly important role by exposing the abuses of indigo planters and generating sympathy among educated urban groups.

The scale of the resistance compelled the colonial government to establish the Indigo Commission in 1860. Its findings criticized the coercive practices of the planters and showed that sustained rural mobilization could force the colonial administration to acknowledge peasant grievances.

The importance of the Indigo Rebellion extended beyond the indigo industry. It changed perceptions of peasants from passive victims into organized political actors. By linking livelihood, dignity, and justice, the movement contributed to the growth of rural political consciousness and anticipated later peasant and nationalist

mobilization. It demonstrated that collective action could challenge colonial economic power and weaken the legitimacy of exploitative institutions.

These movements show that resistance to colonial rule in Bengal began long before the rise of organized nationalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the Fakir-Sannyasi Resistance and Rangpur Dhing to the Faraizi Movement, Titu Mir's revolt, the Santal Rebellion, the uprising of 1857, and the Indigo Rebellion, diverse communities repeatedly challenged colonial authority and the local structures that supported it.

The movements differed in their religious identities, social composition, objectives, and methods. Yet they shared several central concerns: protection of land and livelihood, opposition to excessive taxation, defense of religious and cultural practices, and the demand for dignity and accountable authority. Peasants, artisans, ascetics, tribal communities, disbanded soldiers, and local leaders all demonstrated forms of political agency often overlooked in elite-centered accounts of nationalism. These struggles did not always express nationalism in its modern form. Nevertheless, they created important foundations for later nationalist consciousness. Their collective memories preserved ideals of unity, justice, cultural loyalty, courage, and self-rule. Bengal should therefore be understood not only as a later center of organized nationalism but also as an early region where popular resistance and political consciousness developed through direct experiences of colonial domination.

Conclusion

The story of resistance in colonial India is far more layered than the sweeping accounts of nationalist history often allow. From the earliest uprisings in Bengal to the widespread rebellion of 1857 and the defiance of indigo cultivators, each movement carried its own distinct character yet spoke to the same underlying truth: ordinary people refused to remain silent in the face of injustice. These struggles were not the work of monarchs or elite reformers but of peasants, tenant farmers, tribal leaders, and spiritual guides who drew upon their lived realities to challenge a foreign power that sought to dominate their land, culture, and dignity.

Together, these movements reveal not just isolated sparks of rebellion but the steady growth of a shared consciousness among the oppressed. Some, like the Faraizi or Wahhabi initiatives, arose from a desire to safeguard cultural and religious life, while others, such as the Santal revolt or the Indigo resistance, struck at the heart of

economic exploitation. Each challenge, whether spiritual, agrarian, or militant, chipped away at colonial authority and made visible the power of collective defiance.

Seen in this light, the uprising of 1857 becomes not an isolated eruption but the culmination of decades of indignation and struggle. It was the point at which scattered grievances and local rebellions gave way to a broader, if still fragmented, vision of unity. By that time, the values of pride, loyalty, and the belief in self-rule had already been seeded in the minds of countless ordinary men and women through earlier resistance.

These movements were never simply failures because they did not overthrow colonial rule. They were declarations of agency and early blueprints for justice. They proved that even the most marginalized communities could shape history by asserting their right to live with dignity. Their legacy lies in how they inspired future generations and carved out the space for nationalism to take root, not as an abstract idea, but as a lived conviction born of suffering, solidarity, and hope.

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