LEX LOCALIS-JOURNAL OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT
ISSN:1581-5374 E-ISSN:1855-363X
VOL. 21, NO. S2 (2023)

BEYOND COLONIAL ARCHIVES: ORAL TRADITIONS AS SOURCES OF ADIVASI HISTORY

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Abstract
India's official historical record of its Adivasi communities was built almost entirely from colonial administrative documents: revenue records, forest settlement reports, ethnographic surveys, and accounts of "tribal uprisings." These sources are important but deeply limited. They were produced to serve the interests of colonial governance, not to preserve Indigenous memory. Outside this written record, however, Adivasi communities have maintained their own historical archives in the form of oral traditions, including migration songs, cosmological narratives, genealogical recitations, and place-based memory systems. This article argues that these oral traditions are not supplementary to written history but constitute parallel and often more complete historical sources that have been systematically underused in Indian historical scholarship. Drawing on case studies of the Santal Hul of 1855 to 1856, the Ulgulan of 1899 to 1900, and oral traditions from Odisha and Jharkhand, the article examines what oral sources reveal that written archives conceal. It also considers the growing legal and political role of oral testimony in forest rights claims and land disputes, and the methodological challenges involved in incorporating oral tradition into academic historical practice. The article concludes that a genuinely inclusive Indian historiography requires listening to these living archives with the same seriousness currently given to colonial documents.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Adivasi history, Colonial archives, Santhal Hul, Birsa Munda, Forest Rights Act, Historical methodology.

Introduction

Every national archive tells a story about what a society considered worth preserving. In the case of British India, that story was overwhelmingly administrative. The vast collections of the India Office Records, the district gazetteers, the forest settlement reports, and the revenue registers document land, taxation, insurgency, and the machinery of government with extraordinary detail. What they rarely document is the inner life of the communities they governed, their histories as those communities understood them, their systems of governance, their ecological knowledge, and their own accounts of conflict and resistance.

For Adivasi communities across central, eastern, and western India, this archival silence has had significant consequences. When historians reconstruct the history of the Santhal uprising of 1855 to 1856, the Munda Ulgulan of 1899 to 1900, or the Bhumij revolt of 1832, they rely primarily on the accounts of British officers and administrators who were on the other side of those conflicts. The categories these accounts use, words like "tribal disturbance," "messianic movement," or "primitive resistance," reflect administrative assumptions rather than the understanding of the communities involved.[1]

Yet these communities did not leave their histories undocumented. They preserved them in a different medium. Songs, ritual narratives, genealogical recitations, migration stories, and place-based memory systems have carried Adivasi histories across generations without relying on writing. These oral traditions are not rough summaries of events. They are structured, carefully maintained historical archives with their own methods of validation and transmission.[2]

The Colonial Archive

The relationship between colonial knowledge and colonial power has been a central concern of historians since at least the 1980s. The historian Bernard Cohn argued in his influential work that British rule in India operated through the production of knowledge as much as through military and

[1] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 18–33.
[2] Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 11–27.

administrative force. The census, the survey, the gazetteer, and the ethnographic report were not simply descriptions of Indian society. They were instruments through which Indian society was reorganised to make it legible and governable.[3]

For Adivasi communities, this process had specific and damaging effects. The Forest Settlement Reports of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries converted complex, overlapping, and communally governed forest territories into fixed administrative categories. Forests were classified as reserved or protected. Communities were classified as forest-dwellers, encroachers, or cultivators. Practices of shifting cultivation, seasonal forest use, and communal grazing were redefined as illegal, not because they were destructive, but because they did not fit into the categories required for revenue collection and forest management.[4]

What the colonial archive preserves is therefore a selective record, shaped by what mattered to the administration. It records Adivasi communities most thoroughly at moments of conflict with the state: when they resisted revenue demands, when they rose in uprising, when they challenged the authority of landlords or forest officials. Their daily lives, their governance systems, their ecological knowledge, and their own interpretations of their history enter the record only obliquely, as background to administrative events.[5]

This is not to say that colonial archives are useless for Adivasi history. They contain important information that oral traditions do not preserve, including chronological data, records of negotiations, and evidence of administrative decisions. The problem is not the existence of the archive but the assumption that it is sufficient, that the history of Adivasi communities can be adequately reconstructed from documents produced by their administrators and opponents.

Table 1: Colonial Written Archives and Adivasi Oral Traditions Compared as Historical Sources

Dimension	Colonial Written Archive	Adivasi Oral Tradition
Producer	British administrators, missionaries, ethnographers	Community members, elders, ritual specialists, women
Purpose	Governance, revenue, surveillance, control	Memory preservation, moral guidance, community cohesion
Form	Written reports, gazetteers, census data, court records	Songs, myths, genealogies, rituals, place narratives
Transmission	Institutional preservation in libraries and archives	Oral performance, communal repetition, ritual practice
Treatment of Adivasi Communities	Object of administration; classified as primitive, tribal, insurgent	Active historical agents with governance systems and ecological knowledge
What Is Recorded	Events of political and administrative concern to the state	Daily life, ecological knowledge, kinship, spiritual practice, resistance
Strengths	Dated, verifiable chronology; institutional accountability	Community-validated; preserves what archives exclude; ecologically embedded
Limitations	Biased by governance agenda; excludes non-literate voices	Variable across performers; subject to reinterpretation over time

[3] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–11.
[4] Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 57–71.
[5] Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 7–21.

Oral Tradition as Historical Evidence

The use of oral tradition as historical evidence has a long scholarly history, though it has been unevenly applied across different fields and regions. The Belgian historian Jan Vansina, in his landmark study of African oral tradition, established that oral histories are not simply folklore or entertainment but structured mechanisms of historical transmission that can be rigorously analysed. His framework distinguished between different types of oral texts, formal recitations, praise songs, narrative accounts, and genealogies, each with different relationships to historical events and different methods of validation.[6]

Vansina's key insight was that oral traditions should be evaluated not by comparing them to written sources but by understanding the internal logic of their own methods of preservation. A narrative that is recited in a fixed formulaic form in ritual contexts has a different kind of reliability than a spontaneous personal account. A genealogy maintained by a specialist reciter and cross-checked against other genealogies in the community has a different status than a casual family story.[7]

The oral historian Alessandro Portelli has further argued that even where oral accounts differ from written records, these differences are themselves historically significant. The way a community remembers an event, what it emphasises, what it suppresses, what moral meaning it assigns, tells us about that community's historical consciousness and political identity in ways that external documentary sources cannot.[8]

In the Indian context, oral traditions have been used selectively in historical scholarship. Nationalist historians drew on folk songs and legends about figures like Birsa Munda and Sidhu Murmu to construct narratives of anticolonial resistance. Anthropologists documented myths and ritual narratives as evidence of cultural systems. But the systematic use of oral tradition as a primary historical source, with the same methodological rigour applied to written sources, has remained relatively rare in mainstream Indian historiography.

Table 2: Major Forms of Adivasi Oral Tradition and Their Historical Functions

Form of Oral Tradition	Communities Where Documented	Historical Function	Key Scholarly Reference
Migration Songs (Sereng)	Santal, Odisha and Jharkhand	Records territorial movement, settlement histories, and ecological adaptation	Archer, W.G., The Hill of Flutes (1974)
Ritual Narratives (Karma, Sohrae)	Munda, Ho, Santal	Preserves seasonal agricultural cycles, kinship norms, and forest governance rules	Bodding, P.O., Santal Folk Tales (1925)
Cosmological Myths (Lingo Pen cycle)	Gond, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh	Encodes relational ethics between humans, forests, and ancestral spirits	Elwin, Verrier, Myths of Middle India (1949)
Genealogical Recitation (Gotra narratives)	Baiga, Kond, Oraon	Establishes land claims, lineage rights, and ancestral territory	Sundar, Nandini, Subalterns and Sovereigns (2007)

[6] Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 50–57.

Women's Agricultural Songs	Santal, Mundari, Ho	Preserves crop knowledge, seasonal labour patterns, food systems, and displacement memory	Kelkar and Nathan, Gender and Tribe (1991)
Place-name Oral Narratives	Kondha, Juang, Mayurbhanj	Links geography to historical events, migration routes, and sacred ecology	Pfeffer, G., Status and Affinity (1985)

The Santhal Hul

The uprising of the Santal community in 1855 to 1856, known as the Hul, is one of the most extensively documented events in the colonial history of eastern India. British administrative records describe it as an outbreak of violence involving tens of thousands of Santals who attacked moneylenders, landlords, and railway workers in what is now Jharkhand and West Bengal. The uprising was suppressed with considerable force, involving artillery and cavalry operations that caused large-scale casualties among the Santal fighters.[9]

The colonial interpretation of the Hul framed it primarily as a breakdown of order: a spontaneous outburst by a primitive community that needed to be contained. The administrative response focused on establishing new institutional mechanisms, the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act and a separate administrative district, to prevent future disturbances. In this framing, the Santals were objects of policy rather than historical agents with their own political understanding.

The oral traditions of the Santal community preserve a fundamentally different account. In songs and narratives that have been transmitted across generations and documented by researchers including W. G. Archer and, more recently, scholars of Santali literature, the Hul is remembered as a moral and political act of resistance. Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, the brothers who led the uprising, are not simply military commanders but figures of ethical authority who responded to the systematic injustice of moneylender exploitation, land alienation, and the breakdown of the communal ecological governance that Santal communities depended on.[10]

The oral accounts preserve details that colonial records either missed or had no interest in: the process of community deliberation that preceded the uprising, the ritual mobilisation through which communities were called to participate, and the specific grievances, including the destruction of forest access and the manipulation of debt by outsiders, that drove the movement. These details situate the Hul within a framework of Santal governance and ethics rather than as a spontaneous outbreak of violence.

Ranajit Guha, in his analysis of peasant insurgency in colonial India, argued that the administrative language used to describe such uprisings systematically converted political action by subordinate communities into evidence of their incapacity for rational agency. The Santal oral tradition can be read as a direct corrective to this framing, preserving the rationality, organisation, and moral seriousness of the Hul in terms that colonial records were structurally unable to acknowledge.[11]

Birsa Munda and the Oral Archive of the Ulgulan

Birsa Munda, who led the Ulgulan or Great Tumult among the Munda community of what is now Jharkhand between 1899 and 1900, occupies an unusual position in Indian historical memory. He appears simultaneously in colonial records as a dangerous millenarian agitator, in nationalist historiography as a freedom fighter, and in Munda oral tradition as a figure of spiritual authority,

[9] Saptarshi Sengupta, "From Hul to Heritage: Indigenous Resistance and the Emergence of Thakur during the Santal Insurrection in Colonial Bengal," *National Identities* (2026): 1–29

[10] W. G. Archer, *The Hill of Flutes: Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 38–54.

[11] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 18–33.

ecological justice, and community sovereignty. These three portraits overlap but do not coincide, and the differences between them are historically revealing.[12]

Colonial records of Birsa's movement focused on its disruptive elements: attacks on churches and landlord properties, the gathering of armed followers, and the threat to administrative order. The arrest of Birsa in 1900 and his subsequent death in custody are documented in considerable administrative detail. What the records do not preserve is the internal meaning of the movement for its participants.

K. Suresh Singh, in his detailed study of Birsa Munda's movement, drew extensively on oral traditions and interviews with Munda community members to show that the Ulgulan was grounded in a specific understanding of land tenure, forest rights, and communal sovereignty. Birsa's followers understood their action as a defence of the Munda concept of khuntkatti, the system of communal land rights held by founding lineages, against its systematic erosion by landlord encroachment and colonial land settlement.[13]

Songs and narratives associated with Birsa's memory continue to be performed in Munda communities. These oral accounts frame his significance not only as a historical leader but as a symbol of the continuing claim to land, forest, and community self-governance that the Ulgulan expressed. They connect the events of 1899 to 1900 to present-day struggles over forest rights and displacement in ways that formal historical chronology does not.[14]

The Geography of Memory

One of the most distinctive features of Adivasi oral traditions is the way they locate historical memory in physical landscapes. In many communities across central and eastern India, specific hills, rivers, trees, and sacred groves are not simply natural features but memorials of historical events, migration routes, and ancestral territories. The landscape is, in this sense, a historical text that can be read by those who know its language.

Among Kondha communities in Odisha, for example, the names of hills and rivers carry migration histories. The destruction of a sacred grove is not only an ecological event but an act of historical erasure, removing the physical marker of a specific memory from the community's landscape archive. The Dongria Kondh community's resistance to bauxite mining on the Niyamgiri hills was grounded in part in this understanding: the hills are not a resource that can be extracted without remainder but a historical and spiritual archive that is irreplaceable.

Fikret Berkes, in his research on traditional ecological knowledge, has argued that Indigenous communities develop highly detailed knowledge of their environments through generations of accumulated observation. This knowledge is often embedded in oral traditions, including place names, seasonal narratives, and ritual practices tied to specific ecological events. When communities are displaced from their territories, this knowledge is disrupted because the physical environment that carried it is no longer accessible.[15]

This spatialisation of memory has important implications for both historical methodology and policy. From a historical perspective, it means that oral traditions cannot be fully understood without attention to the landscapes they reference. From a policy perspective, it strengthens the argument that displacement from ancestral territories involves a form of historical and cultural loss that goes beyond material livelihood, a loss that compensation frameworks based on market value of land do not address.

Women's Oral Traditions

Official archives, colonial and postcolonial alike, are profoundly male-dominated. The administrators who wrote reports, the landlords who signed documents, the lawyers who prepared cases, and the

[12] K. Suresh Singh, *Birsa Munda and His Movement, 1874-1901: A Study of a Millenarian Movement in Jharkhand* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1983), 62–79.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Virginius Xaxa, *State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India* (New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2008), 44–58.
[15] Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 44–58.

historians who drew on these sources were overwhelmingly men. The lives, labour, and knowledge of Adivasi women enter the written record only occasionally and almost always through the lens of male observers.

Adivasi women's oral traditions offer a corrective to this exclusion. Research by Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan in Jharkhand documented the role of women's agricultural songs in preserving knowledge of crop varieties, planting seasons, soil management, and forest produce collection. These songs are not simply cultural expressions. They are encoded practical knowledge systems that have sustained agricultural and forest-based livelihoods across generations.[16]

Women's oral narratives also preserve histories of displacement and labour migration that rarely appear in formal economic records. The experience of leaving an ancestral village when a dam was built, of working as seasonal labour in distant states, of maintaining household food security through forest access while male members worked in mines, is preserved in women's songs and stories in ways that economic data and administrative reports cannot capture.

The historian Paul Thompson has argued that oral history is particularly valuable for recovering the experiences of groups whose lives are poorly represented in documentary sources, including women, the poor, and members of minority communities. In the Adivasi context, women's oral traditions represent an archive within an archive: a body of historical knowledge that is doubly marginalised, first by the exclusion of oral tradition from mainstream historiography and second by the gendered biases of both colonial archives and academic historical practice.[17]

Migration Narratives and Oral History in Mayurbhanj and Jharkhand

Mayurbhanj district in northern Odisha is one of the most ethnically diverse regions of the state, with significant populations of Santal, Ho, Munda, and Bhumij communities alongside several smaller groups. Its history of migration, inter-community relations, and ecological adaptation is poorly represented in written sources, which tend to focus on administrative boundaries and revenue questions rather than the complex social geographies of forest and hill communities.[18]

Oral traditions among Santal and Ho communities in Mayurbhanj preserve detailed accounts of migration across forest regions, describing movement in terms of ecological conditions, kinship obligations, and encounters with previously settled communities. These narratives do not present migration as the economic displacement that administrative records record. They embed it within cycles of ecological adaptation, describing why certain territories were left, what conditions made new territories attractive, and how relationships with existing inhabitants were established through negotiation and ritual.

These oral migration histories are relevant not only for understanding the past but for the present. Forest rights claims under the 2006 Forest Rights Act require communities to demonstrate traditional occupation of specific territories. In many cases, the documentation required is not available from written sources. Oral accounts of settlement histories, cross-referenced with genealogical recitations and landscape memory, provide the best available evidence of the kind of long-term territorial connection that the Act is designed to recognise.[19]

The challenge is that administrative bodies adjudicating Forest Rights Act claims are accustomed to documentary evidence. Oral testimony is accepted in principle but often given less weight than written records. Training officials to understand oral evidence as a valid form of historical documentation, rather than as a weak substitute for documents, is one of the practical challenges involved in moving beyond the colonial archive.

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[16] Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan, *Gender and Tribe: Women, Land and Forests in Jharkhand* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991), 55–66.

[17] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 67–80.

[18] Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-2006*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14-29.

[19] Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, *Status of Implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006: Report as on 30 November 2023* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023).

Oral Tradition in Legal and Political Processes

The most concrete measure of oral tradition's growing recognition is its increasing role in legal and political processes. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 did not explicitly define acceptable forms of evidence, but its recognition of traditional and historical occupation as the basis for claims opened space for oral and community-based testimony. In practice, the implementation of the Act has created a new context in which oral accounts of land use, settlement history, and forest management carry formal weight.[20]

The Niyamgiri case of 2013 represents the most significant instance of oral tradition functioning as legal and political evidence in recent Indian history. The Gram Sabha consultations mandated by the Supreme Court gave the Dongria Kondh community a formal space to articulate, in their own terms and through their own forms of expression, the nature of their relationship to the Niyamgiri hills. The arguments presented were not translated into standard legal categories before being heard. The oral and ritual dimensions of the community's claims were part of the proceedings.[21]

Table 3: Instances of Oral and Traditional Testimony in Legal and Administrative Proceedings in India

Legal Case / Process	Year	Community	Role of Oral / Traditional Evidence	Outcome
Niyamgiri Gram Sabha Consultations	2013	Dongria Kondh, Odisha	Oral testimony on sacred landscape and ancestral rights presented before Gram Sabhas	12 of 12 Gram Sabhas rejected mining; Supreme Court upheld outcome
Forest Rights Act Claims, Odisha	2008 onward	Santal, Kondha, Juang	Oral testimony on traditional occupation and use submitted to sub-divisional committees	Over 4 lakh individual claims approved in Odisha as of 2023
Scheduled Tribes Advisory Council Hearings, Jharkhand	2016 to 2018	Munda, Santal	Community elders presented oral accounts of village boundaries and land-use history	Partial recognition of community boundaries; ongoing disputes
Vedanta Arbitration (Lanjigarh Refinery)	2010 to 2012	Dongria Kondh	Traditional oral knowledge of forest use submitted as part of rights documentation	Project halted pending Gram Sabha consent process; eventually rejected
National Green Tribunal, Forest Diversion Cases	2014 onward	Multiple tribal communities	Oral and community-recorded evidence of pre-1980 forest occupation used in hearings	Varies by case; growing acceptance of community testimony as supplementary evidence

[20] Ministry of Culture, Government of India. *Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India: Report 2022-23* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023).
[21] Supreme Court of India. Orissa Mining Corporation Ltd. v. Ministry of Environment and Forest. Civil Appeal No. 4628 of 2012. Judgment dated 18 April 2013.

The outcomes recorded in Table 3 show that the use of oral evidence in legal contexts is growing and has in several cases contributed to significant outcomes. However, it also shows that success is uneven and often depends on the specific institutional context and the level of support available to communities. The National Green Tribunal has shown increasing openness to community testimony, while district-level Forest Rights Act committees have been more variable in their treatment of oral evidence.

Survival International documented the Niyamgiri outcome as a global precedent for Indigenous territorial rights, noting that it was the first case in India in which communities were given a formal legal process to voice their own understanding of their relationship to their territory. The significance of this precedent for other Adivasi communities facing mining and development pressures has not yet been fully realised, partly because the institutional conditions that made Niyamgiri possible are difficult to replicate.[22]

The Ethics and Challenges of Working with Oral Sources

Taking oral traditions seriously as historical sources raises a set of methodological and ethical challenges that historians must address directly. The first concerns the relationship between the oral account and the specific performance context in which it is recorded. An oral narrative performed in a ritual context carries different meanings and operates under different constraints than the same narrative told in response to an interview question. Historians working with oral sources need to attend to these contextual differences rather than treating the content of a narrative as free-floating text.

The second challenge concerns change over time. Oral traditions are not static. They adapt to new circumstances, incorporate new events, and shift in emphasis across generations. This is sometimes treated as a weakness compared to the fixed text of a written document. However, as Jan Vansina pointed out, it is more accurately understood as a feature of living knowledge systems, just as historiography itself changes its interpretations of events over time without thereby losing its claim to be a serious discipline.[23]

The third challenge is ethical. Oral traditions are not simply information to be extracted by researchers. They are community property, often with restricted dimensions that are not meant for outside circulation. Researchers working with oral traditions have an obligation to negotiate access transparently, to respect restrictions on what can be published, and to ensure that communities benefit from the research process rather than simply contributing to it. This requires a different model of research relationship than the one that has historically governed academic work with Adivasi communities.[24]

UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage established international standards for the protection of oral traditions and other forms of intangible heritage. India ratified the convention in 2005. The Ministry of Culture has implemented programmes for the documentation and preservation of endangered languages and oral traditions, though the scale of these efforts remains limited relative to the diversity and extent of the traditions at risk.[25]

Table 4: Major Adivasi Uprisings: Colonial Records versus Oral Tradition Compared

Uprising / Event	Year(s)	Community	What Colonial Records Emphasise	What Oral Tradition Preserves

[22] Survival International, "Niyamgiri: The Dongria Kondh Win," *News release* (2013), https://www.survivalinternational.org/campaigns/niyamgiri.
[23] Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
[24] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.
[25] UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO, 2003), Articles 2 and 13.

Santhal Hul	1855 to 1856	Santal	Violence, rebellion, military suppression	Moral leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu, community deliberation, ecological justice
Ulgulan (Munda Revolt)	1899 to 1900	Munda	Messianic disturbance, criminal conspiracy	Land rights, forest protection, spiritual authority of Birsa Munda
Bhumij Revolt	1832 to 1833	Bhumij	Tribal unrest, revenue disruption	Resistance to zamindari exploitation and land alienation
Kol Uprising	1831 to 1832	Munda, Ho	Tribal violence against settlers and officials	Defence of customary land tenure and communal governance
Naikda Movement	1868	Bhil	Disturbance, millenarian cult activity	Cultural revival, rejection of landlord authority, ecological memory

Towards a Methodology That Listens

The argument of this article is not that oral traditions should replace written archives as the primary source for Adivasi history. The two types of sources have different strengths and different limitations, and the most productive historical work uses them together. The question is how to do this in a way that gives oral sources genuine methodological standing rather than treating them as anecdotal illustration of conclusions drawn from documents.

Several principles can guide this integration. First, oral sources should be evaluated on their own terms before being compared to written sources. This means attending to the internal structure of oral narratives, the contexts in which they are performed, the systems of validation through which they are maintained, and the community authorities who are responsible for their transmission. A genealogy maintained by a trained specialist and cross-checked across multiple community performances is a different type of source than a personal recollection, just as a formal administrative record is a different source than a private letter.

Second, when oral and written sources conflict, historians should resist the reflex to privilege the written source. Conflicts between the two types of record are often the most historically interesting moments, revealing different perspectives on the same event or the same structure of power. The Santal oral tradition's account of the Hul does not contradict the colonial record so much as it situates the same events within a completely different framework of meaning and causation.

Third, historians should be attentive to the silences of both types of source. The colonial archive is silent about Adivasi governance, ecology, and internal social life. Oral traditions may be silent about specific dates, about the experiences of communities other than one's own, or about events that are associated with shame or defeat. Reading both types of silence together produces a richer historical understanding than either source alone can provide.

Conclusion

The histories of India's Adivasi communities have been poorly served by the assumption that history is what is preserved in documents. Colonial archives are rich, but they are also systematically biased in ways that are well understood. They record what mattered to administrators, not what mattered to the communities being administered. The oral traditions of those communities represent an alternative

record that is equally structured, equally serious in its relationship to historical truth, and in many respects more complete.

The case studies examined in this article, the Santhal Hul, the Ulgulan, the landscape memories of the Kondha, the migration histories of Santal and Ho communities in Mayurbhanj, and the growing role of oral evidence in forest rights and land disputes, all demonstrate both the richness of this alternative record and the consequences of ignoring it. A historiography that relies only on colonial archives will continue to misrepresent Adivasi history, understating the complexity of Indigenous governance, the sophistication of ecological knowledge, and the depth of community agency in moments of conflict and resistance.

The growing use of oral evidence in legal proceedings, particularly in the context of the Forest Rights Act and the Niyamgiri judgment, shows that institutional frameworks can be adapted to accommodate oral tradition as a valid form of evidence when the political will to do so exists. This development should encourage historians to move in the same direction, developing methodologies that treat the living archives of Adivasi communities with the same rigour and respect that they bring to paper documents.

To write history that includes Adivasi voices is not a concession to political pressure. It is a correction of a long-standing methodological error. The archives are not empty. They simply require a willingness to listen to forms of historical knowledge that colonial scholarship was designed not to hear.

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