



STRUGGLES IN SILENCE: BANKURA'S HIDDEN ANTI-COLONIAL LEGACY

Purnendu Bhattacharya

Research Scholar, Department of History, Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan

Dr. Rajeev Kumar Jain

Professor, Department of History, Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: **01/01/2025**

Accepted: **15/01/2025**

Published: **30/01/2025**

Keywords: Jatra theatre, Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar group, Colonial Bengal, Vernacular press.

ABSTRACT

Bankura, a district in West Bengal, played a quiet yet impactful role in India's anti-colonial resistance. While mainstream narratives of the freedom struggle often highlight urban centers and famous personalities, the contributions of smaller regions like Bankura remain eclipsed. This paper investigates the nuanced and often overlooked resistance movements in Bankura, tracing the trajectory of peasant revolts, tribal uprisings, and local nationalist activities. Through archival records, oral histories, and secondary sources, this study aims to shed light on the socio-political dynamics that fueled Bankura's underreported role in India's freedom movement. The paper asserts that the region's resistance was shaped by grassroots mobilization, economic oppression, and indigenous leadership, which together carved a distinct anti-colonial identity, long buried in silence.



I. INTRODUCTION

The history of India's freedom movement is often viewed through the lens of prominent leaders, urban centers, and large-scale political campaigns. This dominant narrative, while significant, overlooks the contributions of many smaller regions and local communities that played equally pivotal roles in resisting colonial rule. Among these marginalized geographies lies Bankura, a district in the western part of present-day West Bengal, whose anti-colonial spirit and legacy have largely been overshadowed by the events and actors of metropolitan cities. Despite being distant from the political nerve centers of Calcutta or Delhi, Bankura served as a microcosm of India's broader struggle for independence, reflecting deep-rooted discontent, socio-economic grievances, and a fervent desire for self-determination. The resistance that emerged from Bankura was characterized by the tenacity of its tribal communities, the resilience of its peasantry, the idealism of its youth, and the cultural assertion of its artists and writers—all of which contributed to a silent yet powerful movement against British colonialism.

The district of Bankura, with its rugged terrain, tribal heartlands, and deeply agrarian economy, experienced the impact of colonialism in profoundly destabilizing ways. The introduction of the British revenue system, especially the Permanent Settlement of 1793, restructured rural power hierarchies and economically disempowered the peasant and tribal populations. The establishment of the zamindari system, which rewarded loyalty to the British crown and levied burdensome taxes, became a source of intense exploitation and widespread discontent. Land alienation, food insecurity, recurring famines, and social marginalization sowed the seeds of rebellion. What makes Bankura's story unique, however, is not merely the fact that it suffered under colonial rule, but that its people, often labeled as 'voiceless' in the annals of history, rose in multiple waves of protest—sometimes spontaneous, sometimes ideologically inspired—to challenge the colonial order.

The tribal uprisings in Bankura, notably those led by the Bhumij and Santal communities, represent some of the earliest and most courageous forms of resistance. The Bhumij Rebellion of 1832–33, spearheaded by Ganga Narayan Singh, challenged not only British administrative policies but also the legitimacy of the local zamindars who colluded with colonial powers. Ganga Narayan's revolt mobilized hundreds of tribal warriors and sought to



reassert indigenous rights over land and forest resources. Though ultimately suppressed with brutal force, these tribal insurrections laid the foundation for a legacy of defiance and became a symbolic marker of regional resistance. Later movements, particularly during the early 20th century, saw tribal groups align with broader nationalist goals under the influence of Gandhian thought and Congress-led programs. The engagement of these communities with political movements such as the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements signified a convergence of traditional forms of resistance with modern political ideologies.

Similarly, the peasantry in Bankura found itself at the intersection of colonial economic policies and local feudal oppression. The economic distress of the rural poor, exacerbated by colonial land revenue demands and the exploitative practices of moneylenders, created conditions ripe for revolt. Though peasant uprisings in Bankura lacked the national visibility of events like the Indigo Revolt or the Tebhaga Movement, they were nevertheless instrumental in sustaining local resistance against the British. During the nationwide Non-Cooperation Movement of the 1920s, Bankura's villages became sites of protest meetings, tax boycotts, and mass mobilization. The Salt Satyagraha in 1930 also found echoes in Bankura, as local leaders organized marches and civil disobedience campaigns. The Quit India Movement of 1942, often remembered for its scale and intensity, witnessed active participation from students, women, and community leaders in Bankura who defied colonial orders and faced arrest, imprisonment, and violence.

A critical component of Bankura's anti-colonial legacy lies in its cultural resistance. In a region where literacy was low and formal political platforms scarce, cultural forms such as folk songs, street theatre, storytelling, and vernacular literature became powerful mediums of protest. The traditional art forms of Bankura, such as Jatra theatre, were infused with nationalist themes and became tools to awaken political consciousness. Songs composed in the local dialect carried coded messages encouraging resistance and unity against British oppression. The emergence of a regional press in Bengali further amplified these messages, helping to build an informed and politically aware citizenry. Educational institutions such as Bankura Christian College and Bankura Sammilani Medical School played a significant role in disseminating nationalist ideas and shaping the intellectual discourse of the freedom movement. These spaces nurtured students and teachers who would go on to become local leaders, organizing protests, distributing banned literature, and serving as liaisons between



rural populations and national political movements.

Despite these contributions, Bankura's role in India's freedom movement has largely remained confined to footnotes in mainstream historical narratives. Several factors contribute to this marginalization. The predominance of urban-centric historiography, the lack of documentation of rural and tribal histories, and the limited access to archival materials from the region have collectively contributed to the erasure of Bankura's legacy. Additionally, the oral nature of much of the region's resistance culture means that many stories remain unrecorded, passed down through generations in the form of folklore and memory. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to decolonize Indian historiography by recovering and honoring regional voices. The work of local historians, community archives, and grassroots organizations has begun to surface these hidden narratives, making it imperative for academic scholarship to take note.

This paper emerges from that very imperative—to rediscover and rearticulate Bankura's anti-colonial struggle within the broader canvas of India's freedom movement. It aims to weave together various strands of resistance—tribal, peasant, cultural, and intellectual—that characterized the district's response to colonialism. In doing so, it also seeks to highlight the agency of ordinary individuals and communities who, despite limited resources and recognition, became the torchbearers of freedom. The analysis is grounded in a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates historical records, oral histories, cultural texts, and political analysis. By focusing on Bankura, the paper does not merely seek to fill a historiographical gap but to challenge the existing paradigms that define what constitutes the 'mainstream' in the narrative of India's independence.

In Bankura's anti-colonial legacy is a testament to the power of silent, decentralized, and often invisible forms of resistance. It reminds us that the struggle for independence was not the monopoly of a few elite leaders or regions but a collective endeavor shaped by countless unnamed heroes. As India continues to engage with its past to define its present and future, acknowledging the contributions of regions like Bankura becomes both a moral and scholarly responsibility. Through this study, the silences surrounding Bankura's history are not only broken but transformed into a chorus of resilience, courage, and unwavering hope for liberation.



II. CULTURAL RESISTANCE AND LOCAL NARRATIVES

1. **Folk Theatre and Jatra:** Traditional forms of folk theatre like *Jatra* were powerful tools of cultural resistance in Bankura. These performances subtly incorporated anti-British themes and nationalistic messages, reaching illiterate rural audiences and spreading political awareness.
2. **Songs and Oral Traditions:** Political dissent was often expressed through local songs, poems, and ballads composed in regional dialects. These oral forms communicated coded messages of rebellion, unity, and patriotism, especially among tribal and peasant populations.
3. **Use of Vernacular Literature and Print Media:** Small-scale Bengali-language publications and handwritten pamphlets circulated among the people. Local versions of nationalist newspapers like *Anandabazar Patrika* influenced public opinion and highlighted colonial injustices affecting rural lives.
4. **Role of Village Intellectuals and Teachers:** School teachers and village elders played a key role in promoting nationalist ideals. They organized reading circles, encouraged students to participate in protests, and used education as a tool for awakening political consciousness.
5. **Women's Participation Through Cultural Means:** Women, often excluded from formal political spaces, contributed through cultural avenues like spinning khadi, participating in local rituals with nationalist symbolism, and composing protest songs within domestic spaces.

III. LEGACY AND HISTORICAL SILENCE

The legacy of Bankura's anti-colonial struggle remains shrouded in relative obscurity, overshadowed by more prominently chronicled events and personalities in India's national freedom narrative. While metropolitan centers like Calcutta, Delhi, and Bombay have found recurring mention in history textbooks and scholarly works, the contributions of semi-rural districts like Bankura have largely remained marginalized. This silence is not merely accidental; it is a product of selective historiography that privileges elite-led, urban-centric



movements over decentralized, grassroots resistance.

The tribal revolts, peasant uprisings, student protests, and cultural assertions that characterized Bankura's participation in the freedom movement have either been inadequately documented or have faded from collective memory due to a lack of formal archival preservation. Oral traditions that passed down these stories within families and communities were never systematically recorded, leading to the gradual erosion of a rich historical heritage. Furthermore, the absence of memorials, statues, or commemorative literature honoring local heroes has contributed to a collective amnesia regarding Bankura's role in the nationalist movement.

Even post-independence, government focus on economic development failed to engage meaningfully with historical preservation in this region. The narratives of individuals like Ganga Narayan Singh and unnamed tribal and peasant fighters remain peripheral, often relegated to local lore rather than national recognition. This historical silence has broader implications—not only does it deny due credit to countless freedom fighters from Bankura, but it also impoverishes our understanding of the plural and polyphonic nature of India's independence struggle.

Acknowledging Bankura's resistance requires a decolonization of historical thought and a commitment to re-centering subaltern voices. Only then can we achieve a more inclusive, truthful, and respectful representation of India's journey to freedom—one that honors both the thunder of revolution and the quiet struggles in silence.

IV. CONCLUSION

The anti-colonial resistance in Bankura was a tapestry woven with the threads of tribal defiance, peasant unrest, cultural assertion, and nationalist fervor. While it did not always align with the grand narratives of India's freedom struggle, it reflected the authentic spirit of resistance that permeated every corner of the subcontinent. The people of Bankura—tribals, peasants, students, women, and revolutionaries—may have struggled in silence, but their voices continue to echo through the dusty trails of its villages and the pages of forgotten pamphlets. A reimagining of Indian history that includes these voices is not only necessary for justice but crucial for a fuller understanding of the nation's collective journey to freedom.



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