

Regaining Indigenous Self-Governance: The Pathalgadi Assertion

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Abstract

Pathalgadi movement in Simdega, Jharkhand is a staunch claim of indigenous autonomy and constitutional rights by the Adivasi society. Grounded in centuries old traditions of self-rule and autonomous governance, the movement embraces the utilization of stone plaques or pathalgadis as both a symbolic declaration of tribal independence and independence against state aggression. This paper aims to understand the social political origins of the Pathalgadi movement, how it is interpreted under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, and how it is conflicting with the administrative authorities. Based on an incisive study, the book brings out the manner in which the movement acts out the larger concerns of marginalization, land rights, and indigenous identity in modern India. Pathalgadi is not a separatist effort but a demand to be recognized, to have justice and take back the self-rule as tribals.

Keywords: *Pathalgadi movement, Simdega, Jharkhand, Adivasi rights, indigenous autonomy, self-governance, Fifth Schedule, tribal resistance, constitutional rights, land and identity politics.*

1.Introduction

The symbolic and strategic claim to indigenous identity has been manifested in numerous ways in the dense and frequently fought over vestigial forested areas of Jharkhand. One of the most prominent and controversial of recent years is the Pathalgadi movement the indigenous rebellion that reenvisions ancient practices to create the contemporary dissent. Originating in the tribal belt of Simdega, this movement started to pick up more steam in 2018 when Adivasi populations started building stone plaques bearing constitutional guarantees of their autonomy. These inscribed megaliths with their centuries-old history of being used to mark a boundary or commemorate an ancestor, have become the strident statements of indigenous sovereignty. Pathalgadi in Simdega is not an insurrectionist movement, but a well-established and requested demand to be recognised under the rules of law, after a long period of promised rights being systematically denied. There is a history of dispossession, colonial legacies, extractive state policies, and recurrent marginalization as the actions of the movement are set against the backdrop of access to jal (water), jangal (forest), and jameen (land) which continues to be intertwined with survival and identity(1).

Pathalgadi has been historically portrayed by national media and state governments as being anti-national or even as being Maoist-inspired. Nonetheless, all these stories are used to cover up the true dynamics of the movement and this rests on the constitutional and legislative architecture of India. Pathalgadi in Simdega does not repudiate the state, but rather appeals to it, to what the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 (hereafter simply PESA) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 provided. The laws acknowledge the Gram Sabha (village council), as the key point of power in tribal affairs and enable the communities to take charge of forests and manage and conserve them, fight conflicts, as well as protect civil rituals. These are not texts but tools of survival to the Adivasi village inhabitants. They are literally and literally, on Pathalgadi, carved into the landscape. The stories of the stone slabs are to be seen as a manifestation of legal literacy, political enlightenment, and shared memory. The stakes are particularly high in Simdega where Scheduled Tribes constitute more than 70 per cent of the population and forest cover constitutes almost a third of the district. It is the population that is in intimate contact with the surrounding, in that the forests are used not only as a source of fuel, fodder but these forests are a source of ritual, cultural identity, and social integrity as well. State-initiated afforestation, plantations, and policing of conservation laws often undermine their subsistence economies, with policing in particular careless of customary rights. Here, the Pathalgadi movement is a form of recovering space and voice(2). It exists as the lived experience of being on the outside, of being unable to claim forest rights because of bureaucratic obstacles, of development plans that do not seek consultation with the local people, of administrative power replacing representative government as idealised in the constitution in the decentralization of governance.

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In Simdega, there are a mixture of forms of the resistance which is part strategic, non-violent, and increasingly, armed. It encompasses rituals of assembly at stone installations, filing of lawsuits using the FRA, school campaigns in tribal rights, and talks with forest authorities. Compared with that practised in Khunti, another district where Pathalgadi has achieved fame through more confrontational methods, Simdega version has struck as more muted, legalistic. It does not boycott or deport officials. Nevertheless, it still carries strong oppositional ethos, which has its roots in the anti-colonial tribal resistance, particularly, that led by the tribal freedom fighter Birsa Munda. It gives the people the feeling of legal and moral legitimacy which buoys them up. The village meeting of one activist said: "We are not demanding anything new." All we are doing is to demand what is ours anyway.

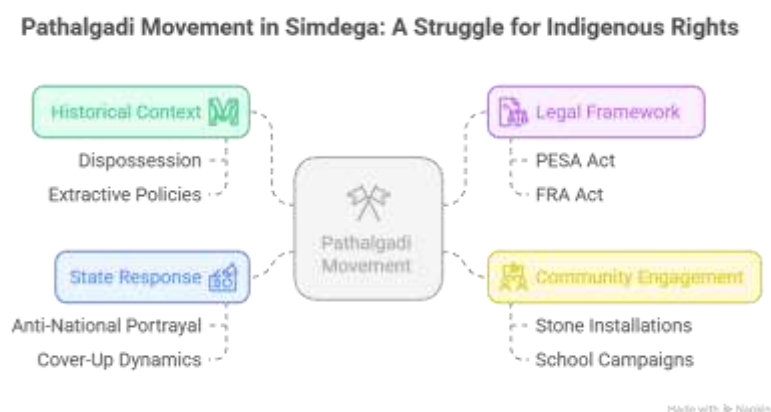


FIGURE 1 Pathalgadi Movement in Simdega: A Struggle for Indigenous Rights

The empirical complexity of the Simdega case makes the bald binaries of the legality/illegality, tradition and modern, resistance and compliance, look simplistic. The Pathalgadi movement is enacting what political theorists refer to as rightful resistance, a set of actions that challenge power by returning the rules of the game to the authority. It makes use of the provisions within the law to question failing implementations, and strategically presents their grievances in a way that the state can easily do nothing about. In this manner, it presents the extent of disjuncture between policy and practice, law and justice(3). There is a change in the sense that the Adivasi communities of Simdega are not only fighting but they are also bringing forward an alternative vision of the State, a more decentralized vision of the State, of the sharing of sovereignty and of justice, the concept of forests as a community heritage and not as an economic resource.

The Gram Sabha, an institution that should be given its powers under PESA, lies in the core of this movement and, should it happen, could become the foundation of the participatory democracy in the tribal areas of India. Such focus based on self-rule, local understanding and traditional activities is not retrogressive but a way of arguing democracy of the streets. This is what is philosophically and politically profound with Pathalgadi movement: it opposes top-down development and demands the validity of tribal ways of knowing, values, and forms of governance. The villagers of Simdega gain a foothold not only in territorial landscape, but also in the moral and political map of the country by inscribing their rights on stone.

This paper is part of a larger body of research on how indigenous people in India are resisting encroachment upon their lands because of this study that examines the rise, evolution and action of the Pathalgadi movement in Simdega, the paper would help to develop a form of the indigenous resistance in India. It places the movement in the historical arc of tribal movements and analyses the implication of the movement on democratic decentralization, forest governance and subaltern agency. With a meticulous field study and a theoretical contextualization, this paper makes the case that Pathalgadi in Simdega is more of a wake-up gesture to the state of India than to rebel against it, because a promise of justice must be kept and that at the outermost fringes of the country, even democracy must flourish.

2.Forest Rights, Indigenous Identity, and Statecraft in India

The forests (and especially the tribal heartland forests) in India are, therefore, both ecological repositories as well as some of the most embroiled socio-political landscapes in which resource rights, identity politics, and sovereignty struggles still rages on. The interplay between forest governance and indigenous rights might be summarized as an extraordinary web of legal indifferences, policy conflicts, and historical resentments. These are

also contested landscapes where people who fall in the category of Scheduled Tribes had been opposing the actions of centralization, commercialization and forced eviction in the name of conservation. The history of the fight of forest rights in India particularly in places such as Jharkhand can be representative of one of the bigger fights which is the decolonization of land and also the reclamation of indigenous world view in governance systems.

India uses the term Scheduled Tribes (STs) (administratively) to define more than 84 million individuals in the considered zones as indigenous people⁽⁴⁾. Although the country does not officially specify with the terms related to indigenous people in its constitutional language. Such communities located on hillsides, jungles, and other places are conceptualized by the state in a rather paternalistic vein as a culturally different yet backward, isolated community deserving development intervention. This kind of framing has allowed policymakers, on the one hand, to be able to implement a two-pronged approach of inclusion and marginalization: as much as emphasizing policy tools aim at achieving the goal of redressing historical wrongs by enacting affirmative action, on the other hand, the tools sweep aside native understandings of land management and self-determination. That is the contradiction centre to tensions in forest governance in tribal areas.

This period post-independence saw the entrenchment of state power of Indians over forests, which built upon the legal acts that were already in place during the colonial period, such as the Indian Forest Act of 1927. Such laws favored the revenue earning, industrial chains of supply and centralization of conservation at the expense of the inherent rights of the people who inhabited the forests. Tribal communities relied on the forests as their source of sustenance, ritual and social bonding but as time progressed the forest department was evolving to be the de facto occupant of that land leaving the locals to exist as encroachers. This legal exclusion became further enhanced in response to the increase in the size of the protected areas as well as the construction of the industrial ventures such as mining activities, dams, and plantations all functioning on a logic of development but causing a massive displacement and fragmenting the ecological systems.

Due to popular opposition by tribal communities and the lobbying of the civil society, corrective legislations were brought in to restore the balance between conservation and community rights. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act or PESA, adopted in 1996, was one of such landmarks. The purpose of the Act was to decentralize governance at the local level by letting Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) in Schedule Areas take control of local resources, protect customs, and have consent to development projects. More theoretically, PESA reinvented tribal control to tribal populaces by creating their customary government into the legal scheme of Indian federalism⁽⁵⁾. It identified that the indigenous people are capable of managing their resources and dictating their development futures best.

In addition to PESA, there was another watershed legislation that the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act or FRA was passed in 2006. The law was envisaged to redress historical wrongs by acknowledging in form protective rights of forest-dependent people to their ancestral lands. It drew both individual forest rights (IFRs) to inhabit and cultivate the forest and community forest rights (CFRs) to manage the resources, carry out religious activities, and use their cultures. FRA therefore provided not just guarantee of tenure but also a participatory model of forest management that fits with indigenous outlook. Notably, it brought an end to the belief that forests belong to the state and replaced it with the vision that they are a commons managed by local communities.

Yet, the execution of FRA is marred by bureaucratic passivity, judicial objections, and bureaucratic objections of forest departments, whatever the progressive agenda of FRA may be. In most states such as Jharkhand forest claims are either delayed or denied or simply done shabbily. The decision-making process often by-passes Gram Sabhas and forest officials are also unwilling to give up control. The lack of a coherent flow between the law and the practice continues to breed insecurity and dissatisfaction amongst those living in the forest. Claiming to have participatory governance, the state has resorted to the centralization of power by issuing parallel legislations and conservation requirements that erode the transformative power of PESA, as well as FRA.

To add this inconsistency of law, is a vacillating policy of compensatory afforestation which is enacted under Forest Conservation Act of 1980. This framework directs that even if any forest area is diverted to non-forest activities, then it has to be substituted by afforestation in other areas. At least on paper, this process aims to fulfil the objective of balancing development and protecting the environment. However, in practice, it enacts forests as commodities that is, it treats them as piece of land that can be substituted by others, as being without social, cultural, ecological identity. Otherwise, it is widespread to force the set up of compensatory plantations in tribal territories without their consent and people are driven out of their ancestral lands in the name of ecological

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restoration. Ironically, afforestation projects which are supposed to preserve forests have alienated the indigenous people further even in the places that they preserved for many generations.

The contradictions are most palpable in Jharkhand, a state with abundant forest cover and whose existence of Adivasi is deep rooted (6). The tribal resistance to resource exploitation and administrative exclusion is a long history in the region as the Santal and the Munda rebellions happened in the 19th century. The colonial regime went down, but the dispossession processes are still in the place. Modern conflicts about forest rights are the products of these unfulfilled conflicts, mediated by the indeterminacy of laws and policy-puzzles. Although such laws as PESA, FRA have provided a formal representation to the indigenous people, the situation in practice is still discriminatory against them due to conflicting laws, overlapping jurisdiction and administrative indifferences. In such a context, even opposing movements, such as Pathalgadi, are not a radical delusion but a logical reaction to the injustice of the structure. The implementation of stone pillars with sections of the constitution written on them is not symbolic: it is a performative act of asserting legality, personhood and the past. In stone carving out their rights, Adivasi communities assert their existence within a law that makes them vanish in a number of cases. The state-led development and its hypocrisy about adorning tribal culture whilst destroying tribal autonomy are also firmed against them. Such a demand to uphold the spirit of PESA and FRA in letter and spirit is specifically made by the Pathalgadi movement in Simdega which asserts the rule of law and wants the existing legislations to protect the power of Adivasis.

In this way, forest governance in India does not represent only an ecology question but a subject within an active zone of political bargaining. It indicates an even bigger question of who is entitled to the land, who speaks on behalf of nature, and whose expertise is taken into account when determining the future. Although the protection of the tribal communities is provided by the Constitution and the laws, it is no more effective than the way it is put into practice. The case of Adivasis of Jharkhand shows that administrative will is the need of the hour in addition to legal recognition. It is in this unconsolidated terrain of hope and disappointment that the fight to establish indigenous sovereignty is crystallizing, one rock at a time.

3.Reframing Subaltern Resistance in the Indian Forested Frontier

The topic of resistance by the marginalized communities in India has been the theme of an immense theoretical sophistication especially in the field of subaltern studies. Borrowed, first, by Antonio Gramsci, and subsequently elaborated independently through South Asian historiography, subalternity is defined by the exclusion of groups beneath the dominant power structure, or, in other words the silencing, marginalization or obliteration of people by mainstreams state, social, and economic discourse(7). The applicability of this notion has lived to see the day in modern day movements such as Pathalgadi, wherein the tribal communities of Jharkhand express their opposition not through other acts of rebellion or insurgency, but rather by using the medium of the state itself. Through it, they also oppose domination, but in a way, they redesign their interaction with power, territory, and the law.

The original group of subaltern studies historians under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, and later enriched by such minds as Gayatri Spivak and Partha Chatterjee, attempted to write history what they called \"below\"- i.e. to give voice to the peasants, tribals, and other inferior groups. According to these scholars, the established history tended to diminish the roles of marginalized groups who were seen to be recipients of change, despite the nuances and not so subtle manners in which they influence their destinies. The many forms of resistance in this framing include outright defiance and subtle resistance, defense of cultural heritage, and legal campaigning. Nevertheless, the subaltern theory has had its critics who have raised the concerns of clarity of analysis and relevance to present times in particular in postcolonial democracy such as India where the nature of power has become more fragmented and decentralised.

The subaltern as a category is profound in the case of Jharkhand. Adivasi tribes in this region have been a subject of land alienation processes, forced displacements, and administrative negligence as long as anyone can remember. Indigenous legal traditions and practices were put aside as the colonial forest laws established state sovereignty over tribal land. Even after independence, the Indian constitution offered protection, in the form of the rights of Scheduled Tribe and laws such as the Fifth Schedule, but nevertheless in practice the governance system did not always reflect the same. Law was turned into a means of oppression and a source of conflict. Lawfare, so-called strategy of deploying the legal tools by both the state and subaltern, may be a critical battleground of the politics,

as contested by legal anthropologist John Comaroff. The Pathalgadi movement is an illustration of this duality: it does not confuse the state with violence, but treats a state that tries to be a protective tablet and a sword (8).

This has been a dynamic, which brings out a paradigm change in terms of how resistance is conceptualized. In previous paradigms, resistance was an opposition by nature an insurgency of the state. Conversely, political movements such as Pathalgadi represent a form of so-called rightful resistance among political theorists. Marginalized individuals in this case resort to such laws and rights that are granted to them by the state to punish them. They do not intend to overthrow the system but force the system to fulfil the guarantees. As witnessed in Simdega, villagers can be found invoking the Constitution, the PESA Act and the Forest Rights Act not only during protests or petitioning but physically written on stone slabs located at village boundaries. Such acts are a discursive construction that not only modifies an indigenous identity, but also reflects a legal awareness.



FIGURE 2 Empowering Marginalized Communities Through Law

The strategy also matters in that it makes the distinction between compliance and defiance non-existent. Communities consider those actions constitutional whereas state officers consider those actions as subversive. The theme of plasticity of the law and the difficulty to establish legitimacy is shown in this dual storyline. This is precisely why, as legal scholar Nandini Sundar has noted, tribal populations in India tend to occupy a grey area where legality is at once ambivalent, i.e., open to interpretation, uneven application, and political expediency. The state can say that they are doing it in the name of tribal welfare, yet, their policies of development often complicate tribal sovereignty and environmental responsibility. Such paradoxical nature of the state (helper and attacker) complicates resistance as well(9).

Modern theory calls upon us to stop thinking of domination and subordination as fixed categories. It is no longer a matter of being a rebel or obedient, but it is a resistance in the form of negotiation, appropriation, and re-signification. The Pathalgadi movement has shown that the tribal communities do not just respond to state policies but reinterpret and reframe them. Not only is their use of law legalistic, but also highly political, cultural and symbolic. An example of this is where they borrow the format of official street signs and write constitutional articles upon rocks in a form of what can be described as the legal aesthetics to counter the visual and spatial dominance. Such writings are turned into a write-to-be-seen-and-read text, an immobile and public rhetoric that serves to remind local people and outsiders about what the community is entitled to and what its history has been. The role of memory and past continuity is also essential in formulation of such acts of resistance. As evidenced by the history of tribal resistance in Jharkhand, the Pathalgadi movement in Simdega has ancestry, which dates back to the Santal Hul to the Munda resistance of Birsa Munda. These previous movements were also marked by rejection of external control and dignity, land and autonomy demand. Although the present situation is now controlled by the democracies and the rule of law, the principle of self-determination might go on being the same. The symbolic application of the stone that is utilized in tribal cultures as a means of marking territory and speaking of ancestors and their sacrifice links past sufferings to the current claims. This continuity is not only a source of legitimacy, but also of collective strength.

Nevertheless, tribal resistance needs to be romanticized, and the romanticization needs to be done with care. Even when the stories of indigeneity are essentialist they can mask such inter-personal relations as hierarchies and gender inequalities and even classes within tribal societies (as anthropologist Alpa Shah is quick to remind us). Besides, these stories may be hijacked by outsiders such as: NGOs, political parties or insurgent insurgents who

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would also like to use the rhetoric of rights to achieve their causes. Regions where the Pathalgadi process take place have different leaderships, strategies, and sustainability, but the language of empowerment is obvious. It has been branded as being manipulated or misinterpreted in certain quarters and has contributed to police crackdowns and public misinterpretation.

Nevertheless, the importance of the movement is that it allows creating new rooms of democratic participation. It vindicates the theory that tribal people are not merely subjects or victims(10). Rather, it is depicting them as law agents and are aware of their rights, that they assert their rights competently and develop contrary images of governance. With the Gram Sabha operating as imagined under PESA, the institution takes on a new form not only as an administrative structure, but it becomes a visible representative of participatory democracy, indigenous knowledge systems.

By repackaging subaltern resistance in the context of Pathalgadi, we can and must reconsider the relationship between power, law and identity in the forested fringes of India. The resistance here is not instantaneous moment of rupture but waves of legality, culture, history whose bonds are actualized through experience of marginalization. It is not based on idealistic dreams or an uprising with weapons but on practical, patient, and politically savvy deployment of rights. The marginal voices not only require being noticed, but they require change, not just to the way of imagining and practicing the governance and keeping it accountable of a real pluralistic democracy.

4.Mapping Resistance Practices in Simdega's Adivasi Heartland

As a district created out of Gumla in 2011, Simdega district of Jharkhand is an interesting place of Adivasi militancy, that is uniquely defined by its history, demography and bond with the forest. Simdega is a predominantly tribal (more than 70 percent) district of more than 1.8 lakh people of the Munda community with one-third of its total land area under forest. The ecological interrelation of indigenous identity and ecological stewardship is a highlight of this district. The economy of the Simdega district is based on subsistence agriculture, the occasional migration, and accessibility of the forest produce unlike the case with more industrialized districts in Jharkhand. Within this socio economic context, the Pathalgadi movement has emerged as less of an uproarious protest but a quiet, managed one that has proceeded in a coordinated way to claim the rights to the forest through self governance by the communities. The section is based on fieldwork in three villages here referred to as Village #1, #2 and #3 in order to comprehend the various types of resistance and how it is formed and manifested in Simdega.

1. Politics of forests control

Simdega forest is not just a backdrop it is the place where power, identity and survival run parallel. The role that transfigures forests into cultural commons with ritual and memory and belonging depends on the Adivasi community, whose community is a forest. This realization collides with the technocratic approach to forest governance that the state uses very often. Practically, interventions of the forest department such as afforestation activities and boundary lines demarcation are considered to intervene with the customary rights. The three villages have demonstrated indirect and direct rebellion to government-led plantations that have been enacted in the areas without the express needs of Gram Sabhas.

The plantation activities in Village #1 are put under more or less the silent observation. The locals have been able to source firewood and grazing their livestock in some regions of the forest although this is not supposed to be the case. This precarious truce is managed by the local man hired as a so-called cattle guard, the forest guard. He has to serve the demands of his local society and act according to the requirements of the state. This is a case of negotiated co-existence where residents tactically conform with the informal pressure to get their traditional rights exercised. Village #2, however, was more aggressive in throwing out state planted trees and re-planting with more useful ones as far as fuel, food and fodder were concerned. Referring to some government-introduced acacia and eucalyptus species, one of women said, these trees are not meant to belong to us. "they do not feed our children or goats."

2. This raising of Authority: Pathalgadi as Performative Protest

Whereas the movement in Khunti has been more Media publicity that is mostly vilified as secessionist or violent- the Simdega version of Pathalgadi is more legalistic and more focused. In this case, the organizational act of installation of a Pathalgadi stone or signboard is an inseparable relation to the petition of the community to exercise rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Such events are normally synchronized with local groups including Jangal Bachao Andolan (JJBA) who helps in writing legal claims, setting up awareness programs, and village meetings. In Simdega, green painted iron boards are frequently used instead of the traditional stone monoliths,

because they are more economic to produce, and when using the boards, the symbolic mass is still equal. They carry the constitutional articles, clauses of PESA and FRA and the claims of the legal rights of the Gram Sabha. In Village #3, the announcement of Pathalgadi came out as a public activity- a colorful mass rally embellished with music, talks, and food. Hundreds of people in the surrounding villages came, transforming what could otherwise be seen as a bureaucratic demand, into an identity and power rite. The traditional costume, the slogans of Birsa Munda, the public reading of the rights stated in law were not only their reclamation of space but also served to fix the place of the village in the system of the Indian law once again- not at the margins. Such actions are not marginal, and separatist. Their aim is to say we are here and we know our rights.

3. Law as an Act of Defiance: A Study of the Symbolic Form to Statutory Action

Another remarkable characteristic of the Pathalgadi movement in Simdega is that they advocate on legalism as a way of protest. In fact, this is not anarchic at all because in this place, villagers employ the use of legal texts and bureaucratic procedures to claim their rights. The FRA assures both Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) and Community Forest Rights (CFRs) and the movement has centered expertise of persuasion on these assurances. Community members use JJBA and its support to apply land titles, fight encroachment by the Forest Department and keep a tab on conservation laws enforcement.

As an example, one can cite the situation in Village #2, where inhabitants were able to stop the Forest Department when it decided to encroach on a 40-hectare plantation by insisting on their pending CFR claims. Said one local elder, in earlier times we had no idea. Now I understand the law which states that, the forest belongs to us. So we said to them: that you will not plant, until so we say.” This transformation which involved being a passive victim to a proactive eight, rights-holder is the best example of what is expressed in literature terms as, by scholars, the variable of rightful resistance, meaning how disempowered groups adopt the terms or the narrative used by powerful institutions to justify themselves in order to hold those in power to a sense of accountability. These villagers are not out to bring down the state they are out to make the state work on their behalf.

4. Reportage and Disinformation: Bargaining with the Government Eye

Nevertheless, the Pathalgadi movement in Simdega has not gone without suspicion despite the fact it has a legal basis. To state officials, especially personnel of the Forest Department and the police, Adivasis may be seen as having been misled into this by outside activists. To the district officers, interviews show a common stereotype among which is that the tribal villagers are too innocent to organize themselves and that the tribal villagers are being manipulated by outside factors. These accounts have been expressed in such a way that they attempt to denigrate the actual grassroots organization. They create the Adivasi as an object in the receipt of rights rather than being agents in the administration.

These assumptions however fail to appreciate the history-consciousness that was inherent in the movement. The discourse has some references to Birsa Munda, traditional megalithic culture, and rebellions of the colonial era. According to the elders, as well as the youth, Pathalgadi is not an imported model, but the development of ancestral customs over to the current legal environment. These societies are not denouncing modernity-they are merging their past into the future of self determination.

5. Conclusion

The case of the Pathalgadi movement in Simdega, Jharkhand, provides an incredible illustration of how the revolt of the indigenous populations can be aggressive and legal at the same time: a path of symbolism and tactical actions. And far from either being a fringe or radical affair, it comes with a constitutional guarantee of rights, law-based provisions such as those laid out in the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and PESA and tribal traditions, hundreds of years old, of independence and land management. The practice of affixing stone plates and signboards with the texts in the statutory language is not actually a refusal of the Indian state by the Adivasi communities but, rather, a stronghold on the state to act in accordance with its vows stated in the constitution. These acts mark a kind of rightful resistance where those historically marginalized groups apply the state made legal instruments to seek their rights including affordability of resources and political agency.

The Pathalgadi movement with a distinctly different tone, strategy, and entirely law-oriented is that of Simdega. It is not a separatist rebellion, it is a democratic re-assertion of authority by the Gram Sabha, couched in both custodial traditions and national traditions of laws. The focus on ritual statements, law, and united action in the movement points to a more expansive plan: to establish not only their right to own forests but also dignity, identity, and self-rule of a pluralist democracy.

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Nevertheless, the movement is not without challenges, including its marginalization by the bureaucratic machinery, negative publicity in the media and local leaders who minimize tribal agency to maneuvering by non tribal powers. These discourses of innocence and instigation lack the intellectual and political independence of the tribal community who are actually taking informed and conscious decisions in regards to their future. Resistance by the villagers of Simdega proves that one does not need to state loud variations in order to be formidable; resistance might come in the form of driving a constant legal challenge, symbolic acts, and an account of territory and tradition.

In summation, the Pathalgadi movement forces us to reinvent how a relationship to democracy operates in the fringe. It points up the distance between what the law promises and what people experience, and the necessity of state agencies to take seriously and carry out rights already provided in the legislation. It is not the movement demanding new privileges; it is a movement demanding that long-promised justice be delivered. Since forests remain sites of contestation between development, conservation and indigenous rights, such quiet but determined assertion of autonomy in Simdega, is at once a critique of state policy as well as a promise of a more accommodating, plural and actually rooted democracy.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare

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