

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional

Indian Response to British Rule

Paper 2 · Unit 7

Tribal risings, peasant revolts and 1857: 100 marks in four years, present in every paper, and the unit where the examiner most wants a named movement with a named leader and a date.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Indian response to British rule: peasant movements and tribal uprisings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the Rangpur Dhing (1783), the Kol Rebellion (1832), the Mopla rebellions in Malabar (1841 to 1920), the Santal Hul (1855), the Indigo Rebellion (1860), the Deccan uprising (1875) and the Munda Ulgulan (1899 to 1900); the Great Revolt of 1857, origin, character, causes of failure, consequences; the peasant movements of the 1920s and 1930s.

Why these risings matter analytically

The 2023 quotation says their significance lies in establishing strong traditions of resistance, and the 2025 question asks how they contributed to nationalism. Both invite the same argument, so build it once and deploy it twice.

- Developed by **Bipan Chandra** and **A. R. Desai**, the nationalist reading treats these movements as the prehistory of the national movement: they created habits of collective action and a memory of resistance that later leaders drew on.
- Against it, the **Subaltern Studies** reading led by **Ranajit Guha** in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), insists on an autonomous domain of subaltern politics with its own logic of negation, inversion, territoriality, rumour and solidarity, not a rehearsal for elite nationalism.
- Guha's specific contribution is to show that these were not spontaneous or pre-political outbursts but consciously organised actions with recognisable structural features, which is the single most citable point in this unit.
- **David Hardiman** on the Devi movement among Gujarat adivasis and **Sumit Sarkar** on the limits of the autonomy claim represent the productive debate inside and around Subaltern Studies.
- An honest synthesis holds that the risings were autonomous in origin and idiom, they were rarely nationalist in intention, and they nonetheless supplied both the organisational memory and the moral authority that Congress later mobilised, particularly under Gandhi after 1917.
- Common structural features across the risings are worth stating explicitly, because they are what make a list into an argument: the target is usually the immediate exploiter rather than the distant state, the idiom is frequently religious or millenarian, leadership is charismatic and local, and the trigger is usually a change in land or forest rights.

KEY TERMS

Subaltern — Gramsci's term for groups subordinate in class, caste, gender or office, adopted by Guha for peasants and tribals as historical agents in their own right.

Millenarian — A movement expecting an imminent transformation of the world, often expressed through a prophet figure; the idiom of the Munda and Birsa risings.

Civil rebellions and the dispossessed elites

Before the tribal and peasant risings comes a wave led by displaced rulers, disbanded soldiers, zamindars and religious mendicants. Candidates skip it and lose easy marks, because it is the first Indian response to British rule and it explains the pattern the later risings follow.

- Running roughly from 1763 to 1800 across Bengal and Bihar, the **Sanyasi and Fakir rebellions**, involved wandering religious mendicants and dispossessed peasants and soldiers responding to restrictions on pilgrimage and to the famine of 1770; **Bankim Chandra's** *Anandamath* draws on them.
- In the Jungle Mahals of Bengal, the **Chuar uprising** from the 1760s to 1799 was led by tribal paiks and zamindars dispossessed by revenue demands, and it recurred over three decades.
- In the Tamil country between 1799 and 1805, the **Poligar rebellions** resisted the extinction of the palayakkarar system, with **Kattabomman** of Panchalankurichi the best known leader and the Marudhu brothers continuing the resistance.
- **Velu Thampi's** revolt in Travancore, 1808 to 1809, was a Dewan's rising against the subsidiary alliance and its financial burden, which makes it a revolt of the state apparatus rather than against it.
- At Khurda in Odisha, the **Paika rebellion of 1817** under **Bakshi Jagabandhu** arose from the dispossession of the paika militia of their rent-free jagir land and from the salt monopoly, and it has recently attracted claims to be an early war of independence.
- **Kittur Chennamma's** resistance in 1824 against the Doctrine of Lapse applied to her adopted heir, and **Sangolli Rayanna's** continuation of it, prefigure the annexation grievances of 1857 by three decades.
- From 1822 to 1829 the **Ramosi risings** in the western Deccan and the **Kutch and Waghera** risings in Gujarat complete the picture of a first generation of resistance led by groups whose military or fiscal function the new state had abolished.
- One pattern is worth naming: these were **restorative** rather than transformative movements, seeking to recover an order the Company had displaced, which is exactly the character 1857 would take on a far larger scale.

KEY TERMS

Poligar — Anglicisation of palayakkarar, a military chieftain holding territory in return for service in the south; the system was dismantled after 1799.

Paika — The hereditary militia of Odisha holding rent-free service land, whose dispossession caused the 1817 rebellion.

Tribal uprisings

The syllabus names specific risings with specific dates, which means UPSC expects them by name. Learn the leader, the region, the grievance and the outcome for each.

- Common to every tribal rising is the intrusion of three outsiders, collectively called **dikus** in Chotanagpur: the moneylender, the trader and the revenue farmer, backed by a state that converted customary tenure into legal property.
- **Forest policy** compounded it. The Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878 and 1927 progressively restricted shifting cultivation, grazing and gathering, criminalising subsistence practices.
- In Chotanagpur the **Kol Rebellion of 1831 to 1832** under **Buddhu Bhagat** responded to the transfer of tribal land to outsiders, and it was suppressed with considerable force.

- Among the largest was the **Santal Hul (1855 to 1856)** in the Rajmahal hills under **Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu**, and it produced the **Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act**, creating a protected non-regulation area, which is the clearest case of a rising winning a legislative concession.
- Under **Birsa Munda**, the **Munda Ulgulan of 1899 to 1900** combined a religious reform movement, Birsaism, with a demand for the restoration of the **khuntkatti** collective tenure, and it led to the **Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908** which recognised khuntkatti rights and restricted land transfer.
- Further west, the **Bhil risings** of 1817 to 1846 in the Deccan, the **Khond risings** of the 1840s and 1850s in Orissa against the suppression of meriah sacrifice and revenue extension, and the **Koya rising** under **Alluri Sitarama Raju** in the Rampa region of 1922 to 1924 complete the standard list.
- Significance attaches to the **Rampa rebellion** because Alluri Sitarama Raju explicitly linked tribal grievance about forest laws to the Non-Cooperation Movement, which is a documented bridge between subaltern and nationalist politics.
- Continuity runs forward through the **Jharkhand** movement and the eventual creation of the state in 2000 provide the long continuity, and the **Fifth Schedule** and the **Forest Rights Act 2006** are the institutional descendants of these grievances.

Rising	Dates	Leaders	Region	Legislative outcome
Kol Rebellion	1831-32	Buddhu Bhagat	Chotanagpur	Suppressed, limited administrative change
Santal Hul	1855-56	Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu	Rajmahal hills	Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act
Munda Ulgulan	1899-1900	Birsa Munda	Chotanagpur	Chotanagpur Tenancy Act 1908
Rampa rebellion	1922-24	Alluri Sitarama Raju	Godavari agency	Suppressed; linked to Non-Cooperation

The named tribal risings. The concession column shows which ones changed the law.

Peasant movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

The Indigo Revolt was asked in 2023 and the Moplah rebellion in 2026, so the named movements are live. Distinguish the ones aimed at planters from those aimed at moneylenders and from those aimed at landlords.

- In northern Bengal the **Rangpur Dhing of 1783** was directed against the revenue farmer Debi Singh, and it is significant as an early rising against the Company's revenue farming rather than against the Company as such.
- In eastern Bengal the **Faraizi movement** under **Haji Shariatullah** and his son **Dudu Mian** from the 1830s combined Islamic reform with an assault on zamindari exactions, and the **Wahabi movement** under Titu Mir at Barasat in 1831 followed a similar pattern.
- Asked about in 2023, the **Indigo Revolt of 1859 to 1860** was a mass refusal to sow indigo in the Nadia district that spread across Bengal, and it succeeded because it used the courts and the press as well as collective refusal.

- Support came from the Bengali intelligentsia, **Harish Chandra Mukherjee's** *Hindoo Patriot*, and **Dinabandhu Mitra's** play **Nil Darpan** (1860); the **Indigo Commission of 1860** followed and the system effectively ended in Bengal.
- In eastern Bengal the **Pabna agrarian leagues of 1873 to 1876** were directed against enhanced rents and illegal cesses, were conducted largely through litigation and rent strikes, and contributed to the **Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885**.
- In Poona and Ahmednagar the **Deccan riots of 1875** targeted Marwari and Gujarati moneylenders, and the participants characteristically seized and burned bonds and account books rather than attacking persons, which is Guha's point about the semiotics of insurgency.
- Legislation followed in the **Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act of 1879**, limiting the moneylenders' access to the civil courts, and it is a second clear case of a rising producing legislation.
- Running from 1836 through the nineteenth century, the **Moplah rebellions in Malabar** and culminating in **1921**, arose from the position of Muslim Mappila tenants under mostly Hindu Nambudiri and Nair janmi landlords, under a tenancy law that gave the tenant almost no security.
- For the 2026 question, the Moplah rising of 1921 was both anti-landlord and anti-foreign: it began within the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation agitation, it targeted landlords and the state, and it also took a communal turn with attacks on Hindu landlords and forced conversions, which Congress leadership then disowned.
- An honest formulation holds that agrarian grievance was primary and the communal expression was real, so answers that reduce it to either pure class struggle or pure communal violence both misread it.

KEY TERMS

Janmi — The hereditary landlord of Malabar, holding janmam right; the Mappila tenants' principal antagonist.

Dhing — A local term for a rising or disturbance, used of the 1783 Rangpur revolt against the revenue farmer.

The Great Revolt of 1857: causes and character

The 2024 question asked why it was confined to North India and how it changed British rule, which is a causation question and a consequence question stapled together. Prepare both halves separately.

- Politically the causes were annexation policy: the **Doctrine of Lapse** applied to Satara, Jhansi and Nagpur, the annexation of **Awadh in 1856** on grounds of misgovernment, and the treatment of the Mughal and Peshwa lines.
- Economically the causes were the revenue settlements, the resumption of rent-free tenures, and the displacement of the taluqdars of Awadh, whose grievance explains why Awadh fought hardest and longest.
- Militarily the causes included the ending of the batta allowance, the General Service Enlistment Act of 1856 requiring overseas service, and the very high proportion of Awadh recruits in the Bengal Army.
- Socially and religiously, causes included fears aroused by the abolition of sati in 1829, the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, missionary activity and the Religious Disabilities Act of 1850.
- Immediate trigger was the **greased cartridge** for the Enfield rifle, and **Mangal Pandey's** action at Barrackpore on 29 March 1857 preceded the outbreak at **Meerut on 10 May 1857**.
- Rebels marched first on Delhi and proclaim **Bahadur Shah Zafar** emperor, which gave the revolt a legitimating centre and is why it is more than a mutiny.

- Leadership and centres: **Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope** at Kanpur, **Begum Hazrat Mahal** at Lucknow, **Rani Lakshmibai** at Jhansi, **Kunwar Singh** in Bihar, **Khan Bahadur Khan** at Bareilly and **Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah** at Faizabad.
- On the confinement question, the answer is that the revolt was strongest where the Bengal Army recruited and where dispossession was recent and severe, and that Bombay and Madras armies had different recruitment and grievances, Punjab was newly conquered with Sikh troops hostile to a Mughal restoration, and Bengal itself had a settled zamindari class with a stake in the regime.
- The historiographical spectrum runs from the British view of a sepoy mutiny, through **Savarkar's** first war of independence, to **S. N. Sen's** measured account, **R. C. Majumdar's** denial that it was national, and **Eric Stokes's** analysis of differentiated agrarian participation.

Why 1857 failed, and what it changed

The failure analysis is standard and the consequences analysis is where marks are lost. Give the consequences at least equal space, since the 2024 question asked about them explicitly.

- Failure came for want of a **unified command and a common programme**: leaders fought in their own regions, Bahadur Shah was a symbol rather than a commander, and there was no coordinated strategy after Delhi.
- Large parts of India stayed out or actively assisted the British, including most princely states, which **Canning** later described as breakwaters in the storm, along with Sikh and Gurkha troops and the Bengal and Bombay commercial classes.
- **Technological and logistical superiority** mattered: the telegraph allowed rapid concentration, the railways moved troops, and British reinforcements arrived by sea including forces diverted from the China expedition.
- Educated middle classes in the presidency towns, the group that would later lead nationalism, largely did not support the revolt, which is a fact worth stating plainly rather than avoiding.
- Constitutionally, the **Government of India Act 1858** ended Company rule, created the Secretary of State for India and the India Council, and **Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1 November 1858** promised religious non-interference and respect for princely treaties.
- Second came the end of annexation. The **Doctrine of Lapse** was abandoned and the princes were guaranteed adoption rights, converting them from targets into props of the regime.
- Third came **army reorganisation** along the Peel Commission's lines: the ratio of European to Indian troops was raised, artillery was reserved to Europeans, recruitment shifted to the so-called martial races of Punjab, Nepal and the north west, and regiments were mixed to prevent combination.
- Fourth came a **policy of divide and a retreat from reform**: the state became cautious about social legislation and increasingly governed through the recognition of religious and caste categories, which shaped the census and eventually separate electorates.
- Fifth and least tangible is the attitudinal shift that strong answers include: the racial distance between rulers and ruled hardened permanently after 1857, and the memory of the revolt shaped both British anxiety and later nationalist iconography.

Peasant movements of the 1920s and 1930s

The syllabus extends this unit into the national movement period, so do not stop at 1900. This is also where the link the 2025 question asks about becomes explicit rather than inferred.

- The **Kisan Sabha movement** in Awadh from 1920 under **Baba Ramchandra**, with **Jawaharlal Nehru** drawn in, addressed taluqdari exactions, nazrana and eviction, and produced the Oudh Rent Amendment Act of 1921.
- The **Eka movement** of 1921 to 1922 in Hardoi and Sitapur, under Madari Pasi, went further than Congress was willing to go and was disowned, which illustrates the tension between peasant militancy and national leadership.
- **Champaran (1917)** was Gandhi's first Indian satyagraha, against the tinkathia obligation on indigo planters, and it produced the Champaran Agrarian Act of 1918.
- **Kheda (1918)** and **Bardoli (1928)** were revenue no-tax campaigns; Bardoli, led by **Vallabhbhai Patel**, won a substantial reduction of the enhancement and earned Patel the title Sardar.
- The **All India Kisan Sabha** was founded in 1936 with **Swami Sahajanand Saraswati** as president and **N. G. Ranga** prominent, and its 1936 manifesto demanded abolition of zamindari, which pushed Congress towards the agrarian programme of the 1937 ministries.
- Two poles of this period are the **Moplah** rising of 1921 and the **Bardoli** satyagraha of 1928 of this period: one uncontrollable and disowned, the other disciplined and celebrated, and comparing them is an excellent way to answer a question on Congress and the peasantry.
- The **Tebhaga movement** in Bengal from 1946, demanding two thirds of the crop for sharecroppers, and the **Telangana** armed struggle from 1946 to 1951 against the Nizam's landlords carry the story into independence and beyond the formal syllabus boundary.
- For the 2025 question the analytical point is that Congress absorbed peasant grievance selectively, supporting movements it could discipline and distancing itself from those it could not, and that selectivity is why zamindari abolition became a post-independence rather than a pre-independence achievement.

Building the answer

Six questions came from this unit in four years and they reward the same structure. Use it.

- Open by naming the interpretive frame, nationalist or subaltern, and say which you will use; that single sentence separates a top-band script from a chronology.
- Give **at least four named risings with leader, date and region**, chosen to span tribal, peasant and religious-reform types, rather than a long undifferentiated list.
- Include **at least two legislative outcomes**, the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act, the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act 1908, the Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act 1879 or the Bengal Tenancy Act 1885, because they prove the risings had effect.
- State the **limits** honestly: these were mostly local, often restorative in aim rather than transformative, frequently defeated, and rarely nationalist in intention.
- Then make the **connection** the examiner is looking for, through concrete bridges such as Alluri Sitarama Raju and Non-Cooperation, Champaran, or the All India Kisan Sabha's effect on Congress policy.

- Close with the historiographical caution: Guha's autonomy thesis and Sarkar's qualification of it are both live, and an answer that acknowledges the debate reads as informed rather than partisan.

Last-mile revision

- Kol 1831-32 Buddhu Bhagat; Santal Hul 1855-56 Sidhu and Kanhu; Munda Ulgulan 1899-1900 Birsa, Chotanagpur Tenancy Act 1908; Rampa 1922-24 Alluri Sitarama Raju.
- Rangpur Dhing 1783; Faraizi Shariatullah and Dudu Mian; Titu Mir 1831; Indigo 1859-60; Pabna 1873-76; Deccan riots 1875 and Relief Act 1879.
- Moplah 1921: agrarian grievance primary, Khilafat context, communal turn real, Congress disowned it.
- 1857 triggers: Doctrine of Lapse, Awadh annexation 1856, General Service Enlistment Act 1856, greased cartridge; Barrackpore 29 March, Meerut 10 May.
- 1857 leaders: Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope Kanpur, Begum Hazrat Mahal Lucknow, Lakshmibai Jhansi, Kunwar Singh Bihar, Maulvi Ahmadullah Faizabad.
- Consequences: Government of India Act 1858, Victoria's Proclamation 1 November 1858, Lapse abandoned, Peel Commission army reorganisation, martial races recruitment.
- Twentieth century: Champaran 1917, Kheda 1918, Awadh Kisan Sabha 1920, Eka 1921-22, Bardoli 1928, All India Kisan Sabha 1936, Tebhaga 1946, Telangana 1946-51.
- Guha 1983 for elementary aspects and autonomy; Sarkar for the qualification; Stokes for differentiated agrarian participation in 1857.

Common errors to avoid

- Listing risings without leaders or dates. This unit is graded on specificity more than any other in Section A.
- Calling 1857 a purely military mutiny or a fully national war. Both are positions in a historiographical debate and neither should be asserted without naming the debate.
- Forgetting that most princely states, Punjab, Bengal and the presidency middle classes did not join in 1857.
- Reducing the Moplah rising to communal violence, or denying the communal dimension entirely. Both readings fail the evidence.
- Treating the risings as straightforward precursors of nationalism. Guha's autonomy argument has to be engaged.
- Omitting the legislative outcomes. The tenancy acts are the hardest evidence that these movements achieved something.
- Stopping the unit at 1900. The syllabus explicitly includes the peasant movements of the 1920s and 1930s.

Mains Practice

Was the Moplah Rebellion in Malabar an expression of anti-landlord and anti-foreign discontent? Discuss.

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

In what ways did the tribal and peasant uprisings of the nineteenth century contribute to the rise and growth of nationalism in India? Examine.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

Why was the Great Revolt of 1857 confined only to North India? How did it change the character of British rule in the subcontinent?

20 marks · 250 words · 2024

The historical significance of tribal and peasant uprisings in India 'lies in that they established strong and valuable traditions of resistance to British rule'. Discuss.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

After 1857, “the peasants emerged as the main force in agrarian movements.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2023

The root of the whole question behind the Indigo Revolt 'is the struggle to make the raiyats grow indigo plants without paying them the price'.

10 marks · 150 words · 2023