

# Crisis of the Old-New Social Movement Dichotomy: The Political Ecology of Tribal Resistance Movements in Odisha

Arghadeep Banerjee

Lecturer in Political Science, Municipal College, Rourkela-769012 &  
Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Rajendra University, Balangir

**Abstract:** *The binary distinction between “old” and “new” social movements has profoundly shaped the global theories on collective action. Rooted in the European industrial and post-industrial experience, this categorization distinguishes between class-based, economically motivated movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (“old”) and identity-oriented, cultural movements of the post-1960s era (“new”). Yet, in the Indian context- especially regarding tribal movements- this classification proves both conceptually and empirically inadequate. This paper explores the theoretical emergence of the old/new distinction in Europe, its adaptation into Indian social movement studies, and its critique by Indian scholars such as K. Suresh Singh, Rajendra Singh, Ghanshyam Shah, and Virginius Xaxa. Through case studies of the tribal movements of Odisha: Gandhamardan Movement, Kalinga Nagar Movement, Niyamgiri movement, and Pathalgadi movement, the paper demonstrates that Indian collective actions integrate economic, cultural, ecological, and political dimensions simultaneously. The paper iterates that Indian movements’ hybridity renders the old/new dichotomy analytically redundant, urging instead a multidimensional, context-sensitive framework. The paper concludes that studies on tribal mobilisations of India demand a decolonial rethinking of social movement theory and construct a paradigm that recognizes the unique synthesis of ecological justice, cultural survival, and ontological resistance.*

**Keywords:** old social movements (OSMs), new social movements (NSMs), post-materialist, integrated resistance, politics of belonging, ecological-civilizational

## 1. Introduction

As a reflection of continuous struggle of the people and communities with power structures, cultural constructions, and collective identity, the study of social movements has long had a prominent position in sociological research. Social movements have long been one of the main platforms used by underprivileged groups in India to express their disapproval for policies, oppose oppression, and discuss progress. Diverse types of collective action have changed India's socio-political landscape, from the early peasant uprisings and anti-colonial movements to the environmental, feminist, and Dalit movements that followed independence. The analytical classification of these movements, which are frequently divided into ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements, is still up for debate in the field of social theory.

The distinction between “classical movements” centred on economic and class-based interests and more recent forms of mobilisation centred on identity, culture, and quality of life was the basis for the classification of social movements as ‘old’ or ‘new’ and was first developed within the European sociological tradition of the late twentieth century, particularly in the works of Alain Touraine, Alberto Melucci, and Jürgen Habermas. (Habermas, 1981) (Melucci, 1980) (Touraine, 1981). The “old” social movements (like the labour and socialist movements) were perceived in Western contexts as mainly focused on resource redistribution, whereas the “new” movements (feminism, environmentalism, and peace activism) were perceived as emphasising autonomy, recognition, and the improvement of daily life. Twenty-first century comparative social movement literature places a strong emphasis on this difference between ‘old’ social movements (OSMs), which are usually class-based,

economically orientated struggles centred on material redistribution, and ‘new’ social movements (NSMs), which are focused on identity, culture, lifestyle, rights, and post-materialist values. The OSM/NSM comparison yielded helpful heuristics for comprehending a number of social movements in North America and Europe, where welfare-state dynamics and post-industrial transitions led the rise of new cultural claims.

However, the application of this binary categorization within non-Western contexts has caused ongoing theoretical and empirical debates. With its complex caste system, agrarian precarity, colonial legacies, and varied ethno-territorial groupings, India offers collective action patterns that defy easy categorisation as either ancient or modern. Tribal (Adivasi) movements in India are especially peculiar in this context, since issues of identity, dignity, traditional governance etc., falling within the domain of the NSMs combine with demands for land, forest, and resource, a feature of OSMs, form unique material and cultural mobilisations. This hybridity has long been highlighted in Indian study, which has called for a theoretical reorientation of the categorizations of OSMs and NSMs and the Indian scholars have been at the forefront of this. Scholars like, Ghanshyam Shah documents the plural and hybrid nature of Indian movements while Rajendra Singh criticises the uncritical conceptual transplantation from Western NSM theory (Shah, 2002) (Singh, 2001). Partha Chatterjee's “political society” concept reframes the arenas in which popular Indian politics operate; and K. Suresh Singh's work conducts an extensive historical and ethnographic work that highlights the long history and unique nature of Adivasi resistance.

This paper questions that whether the OSM/NSM distinction retain analytic value for within India’s tribal movements, and

Volume 15 Issue 2, February 2026

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

[www.ijsr.net](http://www.ijsr.net)

especially for tribal mobilizations with Odisha, or is the binary now redundant? To address this, this paper reviews the theoretical traditions that gave rise to the OSM/NSM contrast. Second, the paper tries to synthesize the major Indian critiques that problematize and question the application of this binary within Indian context. Third, this paper illustrates some of the tribal movements of Odisha to this dichotomy to analyse whether these movements fit into these binary categorizations. Finally, this paper proposes a multidimensional analytical framework to replace the dichotomy and recommend empirical strategies for studying movements in India and other non-European contexts.

## 2. Historical and Theoretical framework of ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements in Europe

The changes that occurred in European industrial and post-industrial society during the nineteenth and late twentieth centuries provide the foundation for the conceptual differentiation between old and new social movements. The shifting social structures, political economy, and ideological currents of contemporary Europe has to be taken into account in order to understand why this dichotomy gained traction. Both the new and the old categories arose as theoretical reactions to different historical stages of collective activity, modernisation, and capitalist growth rather than as permanent empirical types.

### 2.1. Industrial Modernity and the Rise of the “Old” Social Movements

The term “old” social movement (OSM) describes the traditional class-based and labour-based movements that happened around Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Industrialisation, urbanisation, and nation-state consolidation were all major factors in their occurrence. The new working class that was created by these processes and got centred around industrial sub-urbs started to organise for rights, welfare, and pay. During this time, economic redistribution was mediated through mass political organisations, socialist parties, and trade unions and these were the primary model of collective action.

Modern social movements emerged with “the expansion of modern states and capitalism, which simultaneously created the means and the need for collective action.” (Tilly, 2017). Thus, both state creation and capitalist production produced the “old” movements. In order to demand that they be included in the advantages of industrial modernity, their actors- workers, peasants, and occasionally the small bourgeoisie- mobilized. These movements, according to Sidney Tarrow, were based on “repertoires” of disagreement that “developed historically out of the interaction between state structures and popular classes, including marches, strikes, and petitions” (Tarrow, 1998).

This initial wave of social movement studies focused on material grievances and class tensions and was theoretically based on Marxian and structural-functional frameworks. Durkheim viewed social movements as a response to the deteriorating moral order of industrial society, whereas Marx explained it as the result of structural and class-based exploitation (Silver & Karatasli, 2014). Movements were

viewed by early sociologists such as Smelser as transient disequilibrium seeking restoration, or strains within social systems (Smelser, 1962). When taken as a whole, these frameworks saw movements as derived phenomena that reflected institutional and economic forces. However, these class-based conflicts seemed to be declining by the middle of the twentieth century as Western Europe moved towards popular democracy and welfare capitalism. The revolutionary edge of the working-class movement was diminished by the growth of governmental welfare programs and labour incorporation into political and corporate structures. The formation of fundamentally distinct forms of collective action (NSMs) was first theorised by researchers in this setting of “post-class politics” (Offe, 1985).

### 2.2. Post-Industrial Transformation and the Emergence of “New” Social Movements

The women's movement, the student and peace movements, the environmental movement, and other regional and cultural battles emerged in Western Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s. These movements appeared to go beyond conventional class categories and re-distribution of resources. These groups arose in the midst of the 1968 cultural revolution, with the growth of post-materialist ideals, reactions to Fordist capitalism, and the spread of higher education. Theorists like Manuel Castells, Jürgen Habermas, Alberto Melucci, and Alain Touraine viewed these changes as proof of a fundamental shift in the nature of conflict. According to Alain Touraine, the battle for historicity—the control of social meaning and cultural codes—rather than class distinctions was what defined post-industrial society. According to him, “the main conflict of our time is between those who create society and those who try to dictate its course” (Touraine, 1980). Thus, rather than being the results of structural tension, social movements emerged as the primary drivers of historical change. Alberto Melucci expanded on this point by highlighting the communicative and symbolic aspects of group activity. “Networks of small, submerged groups, dispersed but connected by shared cultural codes” is how he defined new social movements (NSMs) (Melucci, 1989, p. 60). These movements prioritised independence, self-expression, and changing one's way of life, in contrast to the labour movement's centralised organisations. Later, Melucci (1996) proposed that NSMs “redefine both public and private spheres, challenging the codes through which society communicates” (Melucci, 1989, p. 33). This viewpoint was in line with more general trends in European society towards identity politics, post-structuralism, and cultural critique.

At the same time, Manuel Castells placed NSMs in the context of the emergence of the “network society” (Castells, 2009). “Identity becomes the main source of meaning and thus the principal axis of social conflict” (Castells, 2009, p. 6) in an age of global flows and digital capitalism, he contended. Castells' theory connected the growth of social movements to changes in globalisation, communication, and technology. These movements went beyond simple material redistribution to advocate for the “reconstruction of meaning”. Similarly, Habermas in *The Theory of Communicative Action* argued that new movements defend the “lifeworld against the colonization by market and state systems”. According to him,

“the new conflicts arise in the sphere of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization, rather than in that of material reproduction” (Habermas, 1987, p. 392). These movements thus sought to protect communicative rationality, democratic participation, and cultural autonomy which differentiated them from the ‘classical’ movements which were primary class based. While scholars from the tradition of contentious politics reframed movement analysis in terms of mechanisms, they argued that these mechanisms- political opportunities, framing, repertoires, and mobilising structures—provide a more empirical account than a typology and operate across various types of social movements (Tilly, 2017) (Tarrow, 1998). The NSM frameworks' authors elucidated the significance of symbolic politics in the digital age as well as the causes of the growth of urban, middle-class movements (Melucci, 1980) (Touraine, 1981) (Habermas, 1981). Both “old” and “new” movements might, in reality, take use of the same mechanism (such as legal opportunities), which points to analytical dimensions rather than binary classifications. Thus, with the introduction of NSM frameworks, social movement theory underwent a paradigm change with scholars moving away from Marxism and structural-functionalism and towards constructivist and cultural perspectives. But as many later researchers noted, these theories were deeply anchored in the post-industrial European state, which was characterised by relative political stability, mass education, and high levels of mass consumption. As Rajendra Singh notes, “The categories of the ‘new’ were born of Western prosperity, not of deprivation; they reflected crises of meaning rather than crises of survival” (Singh, 2001)

### 3. Limits of the OSM/NSM Framework: Case for Tribal Movements in India

Although the scope of social movement studies was broadened by NSM theory, it also included Eurocentric constraints. Its fundamental premise that new demands of culture, identity and post-material values are a product of “post-class” society means which has already solved the problems of survival, livelihood, and redistribution of resources. Furthermore, it frequently overlooked how colonial and postcolonial conditions fostered hybrid forms of resistance where demands for equitable distribution of resources were often intertwined with voices for cultural autonomy and identity politics.

The naïve use of Western categorisations is methodically examined by Rajendra Singh in his book *Social Movements, Old and New: A Post-Modernist Critique* (2001). According to him, “India's modernity is composite- an uneven amalgam of capitalist, feudal, and pre-colonial elements” (Singh, 2001, p. 38) making it impossible to view Indian movements as the straight continuation of the Western trajectories. Singh argues that social movements in India concurrently integrate economic and identity-based claims and are product of various cleavages like caste, community, and class coexisting together. Accordingly, in the Indian context the old and new categories “collapse into each other” (Singh, 2001, p. 39). Singh's methodological intervention advocates for “contextual reconstruction and a paradigm that is based on the hybrid and multiple modernities of India.” (Singh, 2001)

Ghanshyam Shah's *Social Movements and the State* (2002) and *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature* (2004) examines Indian mobilisations since independence, focussing on their multi-class and multi-issue nature. According to Shah, “most Indian movements combine distributive and cultural goals, blending agitational politics with participatory development” (Shah, 2002, p. 25) (Shah G. , 2004). He contends that movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan or Dalit mobilisations are neither “new”, as they continue to address material inequalities, nor “old”, as they redefine identity and democracy. Shah believes that “categorisation obscures more than it reveals” (Shah, 2002, p. 27). His empirical pluralism proposes abandoning typologies in favour of relational frameworks.

K. Suresh Singh's works on tribal anthropology and history of India is unparalleled. In *Tribal Society in India: An Anthro-historical Perspective* (1982), he contends that “the tribal revolt, whether against colonial or postcolonial domination, is a comprehensive struggle for survival-economic, cultural, and ecological at once” (Singh K. S., 1982, p. 141). For Singh, Adivasi resistance- from the Kol and Santhal rebellions to the Jharkhand movement- cannot be subsumed under either economic or identity politics. For him the tribal movements in India are demands for both “demands both land and dignity” (Singh K. S., 1982, p. 147). His approach anticipates later critiques of Eurocentrism in movement theory by demonstrating that indigenous mobilisations embody hybrid logics of resistance. Virginius Xaxa, one of India's most influential sociologists of Adivasi society, has offered a nuanced critique of the Western-derived framework of “old” and “new” social movements when applied to tribal mobilisations in India. Xaxa contends that the categories of “old” and “new” are insufficient for understanding the complex historical and contemporary articulations of tribal resistance that are deeply rooted in India's colonial legacy, developmental state, and multicultural modernity. According to Xaxa, the history of tribal mobilisation in India cannot be reduced to the trajectory of class struggle or identity politics as defined in European sociology. In his book *State, Society, and Tribes* (2008), he writes “The tribal movement has always been about reclaiming control over life-worlds disrupted by state expansion, colonial or postcolonial, and cannot be classified simply as economic or cultural protest” (Xaxa, 2008). Xaxa situates these movements as a continuum of resistance against several levels of dominance, including the colonial extractive economy, postcolonial developmentalism, and capitalist globalisation. Tribal demonstrations in India, from the Santhal insurrection (1855-56) and Birsa Munda's ulgulan (1899-1900) to the Jharkhand movement and the Niyamgiri agitation, represent what Xaxa calls “a long historical narrative of survival and assertion” (Xaxa, 2008). A major insight of Xaxa's work is his insistence that ‘tribal identity is inseparable from material conditions’. He writes: “For tribal communities, questions of culture, territory, and livelihood are intertwined; loss of land is loss of culture”. This holistic view dismantles the dichotomy that underpins the old/new distinction as for the classical OSM/NSM theorists that “old” movements seek economic redistribution, while “new” movements seek cultural recognition. Tribal mobilisations on the other hand, such as those in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, or Odisha, articulate *both* simultaneously. Their demands for

forest rights, self-governance, and cultural recognition are inseparable from struggles over land, resources, and employment.

Therefore, Xaxa argues that tribal movements represent “integrated resistance” combining elements of both the economic and the cultural (Xaxa, 2008). He critiques scholars who classify tribal assertions as “ethnic” or “identity” movements in the post-1980s period, noting that such labelling “depoliticizes the economic and class content of tribal struggles” (Xaxa, 2008). This, he warns, reproduces a colonial anthropological gaze that sees tribes as pre-modern or cultural isolates, rather than political agents of modernity. This analysis reveals another shortcoming of the old/new binary: the notion that “new” social movements are led by self-sufficient civil society actors opposing the state. However, scholars like Partha Chatterjee see tribal movements in India function in a sphere of “negotiated sovereignty”, in which resistance, accommodation, and moral appeal coexist (Chatterjee, 2004). Thus, Xaxa situates tribal politics in ‘political society’ rather than ‘civil society’, where collective action takes place amidst the contradictions of postcolonial governance.

#### 4. Contextualising of Tribal movements of Odisha under the OSM/NSM framework

Odisha, home to one of India's biggest tribal populations, approximately 23% of the overall population and has been a dynamic site of Adivasi revolts, resistances, and negotiations since independence. The state's tribal belts comprises of districts of Koraput, Kalahandi, Rayagada, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, and Malkangiri, has seen various forms of collective action movements in response to land alienation, forest rights, mining relocation, and cultural marginalisation.

Adivasi conflicts in Odisha have a long history, dating back to colonial uprisings like the Rampa rebellion (1879-80) and the Ghumsar insurrection (1830s), as well as post-independence resistances against forest bureaucracy, industrial displacement, and the loss of customary autonomy (Padhy & Mohapatra, 2009). However, the character and shape of these movements developed in response to shifting state policies, developmental ideologies, and global links. Following is an analysis of four tribal movements within Odisha: Gandhamardan movement (1980s), Kalinga Nagar movement, Niyamgiri movement, and Pathalgadi movement within the NSM/OSM framework. All of these movements involve economic struggles for survival, ecological defence, spiritual worldviews, and claims to autonomy. Yet, they cannot be easily classified as either economic redistributive (old) or post-materialist identity-based (new). Instead, they operate within a ‘hybrid moral economy’ that integrates the material and the spiritual, the political and the cultural.

##### 4.1. The Gandhamardan Movement (1980s)

The Gandhamardan movement arose in the Bargarh and Balangir districts of western Odisha when the state government leased the Gandhamardan hills to BALCO (Bharat Aluminium Company) for bauxite mining. The hill range was ecologically rich, home to tribal and peasant

communities, and sacred as the abode of Lord Nrusinghanath (Dash, 2009). The movement's initial tenets, which opposed the loss of livelihood and dislocation brought on by mining, could seem to fit the logic of ‘old’ social movements. Mostly Adivasis and impoverished peasants, the demonstrators opposed an industrial project that threatened their way of life. Land and means of subsistence were the movement's economic foundation. Labelling it as a merely economic “class-based” movement, however, would overlook its cultural, ecological, and religious components. The demonstrators cited ‘sacred geography’ to support their claims that mining would degrade both nature and God and that the hills were divine. Local priests, students, environmentalists, and intellectuals joined forces with the adivasi people at the Nrusinghanath temple, which later served as a focal point of the movement.

While the Gandhamardan struggle clearly displays ecological and identity-oriented characteristics typical of “new social movements”, it also differs from NSMs in important ways. First, it was not post-materialist since protecting livelihood was inextricably linked to protecting the hill. This was a movement for material survival within a sacred environment, as opposed to European NSMs that focused on lifestyle, gender, or civic rights. Secondly, it did not have the urban, middle-class foundation that is assumed by NSM theory. Rural and tribal communities, which are closely linked to the local ecology and economy, provided the leadership and involvement. Third, spiritual ecology, not secular environmentalism, served as the foundation for the Gandhamardan movement. The forest was a living thing, a “deity”, rather than just an environmental resource (Dash, 2009). The anthropocentric presumptions of the OSM and NSM frameworks are substantially called into question by this ontological viewpoint.

Thus, the Gandhamardan movement cannot be classified as either a new (identity-based) or old (economic) social movement. It embodies a “moral-ecological” movement that is at once concerned with cosmic equilibrium, cultural identity, and material survival (Padhi & Sadangi, 2020). Because of its hybridity, Adivasi movements are not ‘transitions’ from one paradigm of collective action to another, but rather alternative paradigms based on indigenous worldviews.

##### 4.2. The Niyamgiri Movement (2005-2013)

The Niyamgiri movement against the Vedanta Resources' bauxite mining project in the Kalahandi and Rayagada districts by the Dongria Kondh tribe, is possibly the most well-known example of indigenous environmental resistance in India. The Dongria Kondh tribe was opposed to mining their sacred mountain Niyamgiri, which they venerate as Niyam Raja, the giver of all life and law for the Kondh communities (Jena, 2018).

At one level, the Niyamgiri movement concerned resource extraction, displacement, and economic marginalization of the Kondh communities, themes familiar to OSMs. Yet, it fundamentally differed in its ideological framing and organizational logic. The primary claim was not for better compensation or alternative employment but for the

protection of a sacred landscape integral to the identity of the Kondh communities. Secondly, the movement was largely decentralized, organized through village-level Gram Sabhas rather than class-based unions or parties (Borde & Bluemling, 2021).

Further, Niyamgiri movement may appear to be the epitome of a “new social movement”; decentralised, identity-based, ecologically concerned, and internationally networked. However, a deeper look reveals significant departures from the NSM paradigm. First off, NSM theorists frequently referred to NSMs as “post-materialist” struggles by middle classes that were comparatively secure material basis. However, the Niyamgiri movement was a material fight for survival that had its roots in the ecological foundation of the Kondh economy. Second, NSMs frequently include environmental concerns into scientific or secular discourses. However, the ecological justification of Niyamgiri's environmentalism was based on sacred cosmology rather than secular ecology, making it spiritual in nature rather than rational. Lastly, although working with international NGOs and advocacy groups (such as Survival International), the movement maintained its roots in regional cosmologies. Its international ties expanded its spiritual grammar into transnational politics without weakening its original identity. Niyamgiri movement is an example of what may be referred to as a “cosmopolitical movement” that opposes extractive modernity by promoting alternative ontologies. It rejects the post-materialist slant of ‘new’ social movements as well as the economic determinism of ‘old’ social movements. Rather, it expresses a third form of politics, the politics of living, in which identity, economy, and ecology are all intertwined.

### 4.3. Kalinga Nagar Movement (2005-2006)

Kalinga Nagar movement started when Adivasis from 12 villages in the Jajpur district rebelled against the purchase of their land for a Tata Steel factory. After 13 tribal protestors were killed by police shooting on January 2, 2006, there was a large-scale resistance movement by the local tribal communities, leading to worldwide indignation (Pattnaik, 2013). According to the OSM framework, the Kalinga Nagar demonstrations were a working-class protest against capitalist industrialisation. Indeed, the problems were economic in nature: loss of land, insufficient compensation, and displacement. However, this approach ignores a number of important aspects.

First, the movement focused on *adhikar* (rights) and *asmita* (identity) of the Adivasis, expressing their opposition in moral rather than economic terms. The place where the protesters were killed by the police firing a memorial was erected and the victims' memorial turned into a hallowed place of resistance. In addition to demanding greater pay or benefits, the demonstrators presented their battle as a defence of their native homeland and sense of community. Unlike the organised, class-organized movements that are characteristic of OSMs, the Kalinga Nagar movement was decentralised and non-party in nature.

Third, the slogans and visual symbols traditional music, black flags, and ceremonial offerings at the memorial brought spiritual and cultural dimensions to the demonstration, fusing

the political and the sacred (Padhi & Sadangi, 2020). Further, while the Kalinga Nagar struggle exhibits identity politics, symbolic action, and rights-based discourse, aligning it superficially with NSMs, it is not concerned with a ‘post-industrial’ or ‘post-materialist’ society. It was rooted in the material deprivation caused by industrial capitalism and state violence.

Thus, the Kalinga Nagar movement is a prime example of a “resistance of belonging” (Padhi & Sadangi, 2020), a conflict in which political sovereignty, cultural dignity, and economic dispossession are all intertwined. Its hybrid nature reflects an indigenous political reasoning that combines self-determination, survival, and sacred space, transcending both OSM and NSM paradigms.

### 4.4. Pathalgadi Movement (2017-2022)

The Pathalgadi movement which started in Jharkhand has its presence in the districts of Sundargarh and Mayurbhanj in the northern regions of Odisha which has significant tribal population (Kujur, 2021). Through the PESA Act of 1996, the Fifth Schedule and Forst Rights Act of 2006, tribal communities have carved stone slabs (*pathals*) bearing constitutional provisions reaffirming their right to self-governance. The hallmarks of ‘old’ social movements, such as class conflict and economic redistribution, are not central to the Pathalgadi movement. Instead of focussing on wage or land reforms, its rhetoric emphasises autonomy and self-rule.

Furthermore, no formal party, union, or peasant organisation is in charge of it. The centralised, materialist logic of OSMs is in opposition to the movement's decentralised, symbolic form, which involves placing stones as declarations of sovereignty (Ekka, 2018).

The movement's constitutional symbolism masks a deeper anti-colonial critique as the movements rejects the postcolonial Indian state's authority over Adivasi lands. This is not an urban rights movement but a grassroots assertion of sovereignty. The stones that are placed are not mere legal symbols; they are ritual objects, sanctified through ceremonies. The act of inscription transforms law into sacred text, merging constitutionalism with spirituality. Pathalgadi represents an indigenous constitutionalism- a movement where law, land, and identity converge (Xaxa, 2019). It cannot be classified as either an economic movement (old) or a lifestyle/recognition movement (new). Instead, it is a sovereignty movement, reinterpreting the Indian Constitution through Adivasi epistemologies.

### 4.5. Synthesizing case studies: Why Odisha's Tribal Movements Transcend the Dichotomy of OSM/NSM Framework

The Odisha cases reveal several reasons why tribal movements do not fit neatly into the NSM/OSM framework. First, ontologically the tribal movements in Odisha like Gandhamardan and Niyamgiri movements are based both on material and cultural concerns. The previous division between material (old) and post-material (new) problems is broken down by this combination of environment, economy, and cosmology. Second, tribal movements of Odisha are based on

demands which are relational and territorial- embedded in particular natural landscapes- in contrast to the “new” movements which emphasise on abstract identity (gender, sexuality, environment). Most importantly, for the Adivasis their cultural universe and economic wealth are centred on land. Furthermore, these groups oppose the exploitation and dispossession of capitalists despite not being structured along Marxian class lines. Their “class” is not economic but civilizational- a resistance to the ontology of capitalist development itself. The movements in Odisha blend protest, ritual, and legal discourse. Ritual sacrifices to Niyam Raja coexisted with global campaigning and litigation organised by NGOs in Niyamgiri, fusing ancient and contemporary modes of resistance (Borde & Bluemling, 2021).

The example of tribal collective action movements in Odisha shows that it is difficult to categorise tribal movements as either “old” or “new”. Rather, they are a continuum where post-material and material concerns co-evolve. Although it is expressed through ecological and cultural expressions, economic exploitation is still at the centre. The development of these movements demonstrates a dialectical synthesis, with the “new” providing the discursive and symbolic articulation and the “old” providing the structural foundation. Hence, scholars like Xaxa criticise the OSM/NSM framework by basing their broader argument about modernity itself. He contends that Indian tribes are not outside ‘modernity’ but represent an “alternative mode of modernity”, one that blends “traditional forms of community with modern democratic claims” (Xaxa, 2021). In this sense, tribal movements are not “pre-modern” survivals or “new” postmodern protests; they are “counter-modernities”, articulating distinct ethical and ecological visions than the existing liberal capitalist paradigms. For Xaxa, the hybridity of tribal modernity of India demonstrates that social movement theory must abandon linear developmental models. He writes: “To understand tribal resistance, one must move beyond the binary of tradition and modernity, or old and new; what we have are simultaneous temporalities, overlapping and interwoven” (Xaxa, 2021).

This conception resonates with postcolonial theorists like Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), who argue that modernity in the Global South is plural and layered (Chatterjee, 2004) (Chakrabarty, 2000). When combined, these observations strengthen the arguments put out by Rajendra Singh and K. Suresh Singh while expanding upon them using a unique Adivasi epistemology of resistance (Singh R. , 2001) (Singh K. S., 1998). Thus, for Xaxa, the old/new classification marginalises indigenous perspectives and “is epistemologically colonial in addition to being analytically redundant.” “We must think from within our histories of resistance, not through borrowed categories, (Xaxa, 2021)” he says in his conclusion.

## 5. Towards Alternative Frameworks

The inadequacy of the OSM/NSM framework in analysing the tribal movements in Odisha points toward the need for alternative conceptual frameworks that emerge from the “lived realities, epistemologies, and cosmologies” of Adivasi societies themselves. The challenge, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues, is to “provincialize” Eurocentric categories of

social analysis like OSM/NSM as mere application of them is insufficient. These western concepts are born out of industrial modernity and are insufficient for postcolonial contexts where economic, cultural, and ontological struggles are inseparable.

Several scholars like Amita Baviskar , Alpa Shah, and Virginius Xaxa are among the academics who have suggested methods to rethink social movements in India’s tribal areas in a way that takes into consideration their many rationalities, spiritual ecologies, and territorial politics (Xaxa, 2008) (Shah A. , 2010) (Baviskar, 1996). Building on these observations, we may outline a number of other frameworks that better depict the dynamics of movements such as Pathalgadi, Gandhamardan, and Niyamgiri.

### 5.1. The “Indigenous Social Movement” Framework

The first alternative is to think of these movements as indigenous social movements rather than “old” or “new”. Xaxa distinguishes tribal uprisings from peasant or class-based mobilisations by citing colonial and postwar deprivation and denial of self-determination. For him, these movements are more than just about getting access to resources or political power but also about maintaining and redefining indigenous ways of existence in the face of capitalist development (Xaxa, 2008, pp. 50-52). The indigenous social movement framework emphasises autonomy, cultural survival, and territorial integrity. It understands Adivasi defence of woods, hills, and rivers as a declaration of a distinct ontology of development—one that values balance, reciprocity, and continuity with nature- rather than resistance to ‘development’ in the synthetic and symbolic sense. The Niyamgiri, Gandhamardan and Pathalgadi movements exemplify this by invoking ‘sacred geography’ and ‘trusteeship of ancestral property’ as legitimate political claims.

### 5.2. The “Ecological–Civilizational” Framework

A second way to reconceptualize the tribal movements of India is through what can be termed an ‘ecological–civilizational framework’. This approach recognizes that the tribal movements in Odisha are not simply over economic disputes on land and minerals but civilizational confrontations between two contrasting worldviews:

- The industrial-capitalist worldview, which treats nature as a resource for extraction, and
- The indigenous cosmological worldview, which treats nature as kin, deity, and life-world.

From this perspective, the resistance of the Dongria Kondhs or the tribals within Gandhamardan range is not a “reaction” to modernity but a counter-cosmology which is much more sustainable civilizational model than the hegemonic liberal capitalist model. As Escobar mentions that such movements represent “epistemic disobedience” (Escobar, 2018), which challenges not only economic exploitation but also the very epistemology of capitalist development that legitimizes it. The ecological–civilizational framework helps explain why these movements employ both ‘spiritual and political repertoires’ including ritual worship, legal petitions, and protest marches which are all expressions of a single

alternative moral economy of life. This synthesis escapes the dichotomy of material versus cultural struggle on which the old/new distinction depends.

### 5.3. The “Politics of Autonomy” Framework

A third interpretive lens is the politics of autonomy a concept derived from the experiences of Latin American indigenous movement, but is highly relevant to Odisha’s tribal movements like Pathalgadi movement. Autonomy here refers to the right of communities to govern themselves according to their customary institutions and local decision-making systems. In Odisha, the Pathalgadi movement’s emphasis on Gram Sabha sovereignty and constitutional provisions like PESA and the Fifth Schedule illustrates this politics of autonomy. Instead of demanding redistribution of resources from the state, its demand is based upon the right to self-rule and control over territory, resources, and knowledge. The nature of these movements reflects what scholars like Alpa Shah calls as the “refusal of incorporation” (Shah A. , 2010), a strategic distancing from the developmental state and a reassertion of indigenous jurisdiction. This framework states tribal movements not as *reactive* resistances but as constructive projects of self-determination, grounded in indigenous governance systems. It recognizes the state as one actor among many and not the ultimate arbiter of legitimacy.

### 5.4. The “Relational Ontology” Framework

Finally, a more radical framework stems from relational ontology framework, a concept advanced by anthropologists like Arturo Escobar (Escobar, 2018). In this view, the Adivasi struggles in Odisha are not only politico-economic or cultural but also ontological as in they defend different ways of being in the world.

The Niyamgiri Hills, for instance, is not simply ‘environment’ or ‘resource’ but part of the Dongria Kondh’s social body. It is their deity, divinity, ancestor, and ultimate sustainer. Mining, therefore, is not merely environmental destruction; it is ‘cosmic violence’. The movements’ insistence on “Niyamgiri is our God” reveals that the very object of politics differs across worlds: for the state, hills are minerals; for the Kondhs, they are divine (Krishnan & Naga, 2017).

Thus, relational ontology approach de-centres modernist understandings of social movements. Rather than viewing them as cosmopolitical negotiations, this framework views tribal movements as efforts to preserve the presence of many worlds inside a single nation-state. Thus, this framework allows us to comprehend the ontological diversity of Indian democracy, which the OSM/NSM paradigm cannot capture.

These alternative frameworks- indigenous social movement, ecological–civilizational, politics of autonomy, and relational ontology- together allow for a multidimensional understanding of tribal movements in Odisha. They foreground ‘autonomy, sacred ecology, self-governance, and plural epistemologies’, and goes beyond the economic–cultural binary of Western theory. Rather than fitting these movements into pre-existing typologies, it is more appropriate to treat them as sites of ‘theoretical innovation’ or what James Scott terms as sites of “infra-politics” (Scott,

1992), where subaltern actors generate their own categories of politics and knowledge. As Xaxa suggests, understanding tribal resistance requires not only “a sociology of movements” but also “a sociology of knowledge” that comprehends to Adivasi worldviews as theory (Xaxa, 2008, p. 105).

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of Odisha's tribal movements, particularly the Gandhamardan, Kalinga Nagar, Niyamgiri, and Pathalgadi movements, shows how inadequate it is to categorise them using the traditional dichotomies like “old” and “new” social movements. The layered, historical, and cultural specificities of tribal assertions in India and particularly in Odisha are not adequately captured by the conceptual frameworks arising from Western sociological theory, which include Marxist class-based mobilisations (old movements) and post-materialist identity or rights-based mobilisations (new movements). Tribal movements in Odisha are complicated and hybrid resistances that have their roots in material dispossession, cultural survival, and cosmological continuity.

Historically, ‘old social movements’ have been defined by collective fights against tangible injustices such as class strife, land alienation, and labour exploitation. The Gandhamardan movement (1985-1990), which challenged BALCO's mining lease, did include substantial components of class and livelihood issues, but reducing it to that category would disregard its deeper moral ecology. The movement's references to Lord Nrusinghanath, Gram Devata (village deities), sacred landscapes, and ancient rights over forest commons place it in an indigenous epistemic universe where ‘nature’, ‘society’ and ‘word-view’ are inseparable from one another. It was simultaneously an environmental, cultural, and spiritual movement- a framework that neither the old nor new paradigms could completely comprehend.

Similarly, the Kalinga Nagar movement despite its emphasis on displacement and industrial land acquisition, cannot be readily labelled as a ‘old social movement’. The shooting of adivasi demonstrators opposing the Tata Steel facility sparked the revolt, but the subsequent mobilisation evolved into a critique of the capitalist development model itself and an interrogation of what “modernity” meant to a population forcefully exiled from its ancestral territory. Thus, while the movement shares the redistributive concerns typical of old movements, it simultaneously articulates the identity-driven and cultural critiques characteristic of new ones.

The Niyamgiri movement is possibly the clearest example of this hybridity. Its opposition to bauxite mining project by the Vedanta International was based on a sacred geography and epistemology in which Niyam Raja- the mountain deity- is central to Dongria Kondh community. The movement was mobilised globally, using transnational advocacy networks and human rights discourses typical of new social movements, but its roots were buried deep in local cosmology that predated the modern state. This is where ecological defence, indigenous spirituality, and constitutional rights intersect. Niyamgiri movement was a defence of traditional livelihood, a statement of identity, and an ethical claim of cohabitation with the natural world, transcending the

materialist-postmaterialist divide. Pathalgadi movement reclaims constitutional provisions for indigenous communities (including PESA and the Fifth Schedule) through symbolic and performative gestures, such as constructing stone slabs inscribed with legal texts declaring village autonomy. This 'performative politics,' which combines traditional symbols with modern legal knowledge, questions both state power and modern citizenship frameworks. It constitutes not just an identity statement, but also a reclaiming of legal and epistemic sovereignty- a 'constitutional indigenism' that disrupts Western social categories entirely.

Across these movements, a 'continuum of struggle' emerges that resists being reduced to economic vs cultural binaries. The Gandhamardan and Kalinga Nagar movements highlight the historical continuity of anti-dispossession politics, which is founded in colonial and postcolonial experiences of exploitation and marginalisation. The Niyamgiri and Pathalgadi movements, although relying on contemporary ideas of rights and recognition, provide a deeper criticism of modernity and state. The common thread between them is a vision of autonomy, ecological justice, and ontological stability in which land, forest, and divinity constitute an inseparable trinity. They are simultaneously backward and forward-looking, entrenched in ancestral traditions while envisioning alternative modernities.

Finally, the tribal movements in Odisha represent a third epistemic space in the sociology of movements where it challenges Western theoretical hegemony and advocates for a decolonialization of social movement theory. They force us to reconsider what constitutes 'progress' and 'resistance'. Their ideals of justice are ecological and spiritual, their practices performative and insurgent, and their politics connect the local and global. By going beyond OSM/NSM framework, these groups promote a politics of 'belonging, being, and becoming'- a bold statement of the right to exist differently within the modern capitalist nation-state.

## References

- [1] Baviskar, A. (1996). *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [2] Borde, R., & Bluemling, B. (2021). Representing Indigenous Sacred Land: The Case of the Niyamgiri Movement in India. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 32(1), 68-87.
- [3] Castells, M. (2009). *The Power of Identity*. doi:https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444318234
- [4] Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press.
- [5] Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Columbia University Press.
- [6] Dash, S. (2009). Gandhamardan movement: A people's struggle against mining. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(35), 21-23.
- [7] Ekka, V. (2018). 'Pathalgadi': Tribal Assertion for Self-Rule. *Legal News and Views*, 7-11.
- [8] Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke Press. doi:https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371816
- [9] Habermas, J. (1981). New Social Movements. *Telos*, 49, 33-37.
- [10] Habermas, J. (1987). Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason. In J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Vol. II). Beacon Press.
- [11] Jena, M. (2018). The Niyamgiri movement and the politics of ecological resistance. *Social Change*, 399-416.
- [12] Krishnan, R., & Naga, R. (2017). 'Ecological Warriors' versus 'Indigenous Performers': Understanding State Responses to Resistance Movements in Jagatsinghpur and Niyamgiri in Odisha. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*.
- [13] Kujur, R. (2021). Tribal Resentment on Land Assertion in Scheduled Areas: Pathalgadi Movement and Adivasis Rights in Sundargarh District of Odisha. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 259-266.
- [14] Melucci, A. (1980). The New Social Movements: A Theoretical Perspectives. *Social Science Information*, 2, 199-226.
- [15] Melucci, A. (1989). *Nomads of the present: Social movements and individual needs in contemporary society*. Hutchinson Radius.
- [16] Offe, C. (1985). New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics. In *Institutionen, Normen, Bürgertugenden* (Vol. III). Springer VS, Wiesbaden. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-22261-1\_12
- [17] Padhi, R., & Sadangi, N. (2020). *Resisting Dispossession: The Odisha Story*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [18] Padhy, S., & Mohapatra, S. (2009). *Social Movements in Orissa (1936-1976)*. Kolkata: R.N. Bhattacharya.
- [19] Pattnaik, B. (2013). Tribal Resistance Movements and the The Politics of Development-Induced Displacement in Orissa. *Social Change*, 41(1).
- [20] Scott, J. (1992). Domination, Acting, and Fantasy. In J. M. Nordstorm, *The Paths to Domination, Resistance, and Terror* (pp. 55-84). University of California Press.
- [21] Shah, A. (2010). *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand*. Duke University Press.
- [22] Shah, G. (2002). *Social Movements and the State*. Sage Publications.
- [23] Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- [24] Silver, B. J., & Karatasli, S. S. (2014). Historical Dynamics of Capitalism and Labour Movements. In D. d. Porta, & M. Diani, *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (pp. 133-145). Oxford University Press. doi:https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199678402.001.0001
- [25] Singh, K. S. (1982). *Tribal Society in India: An Anthro-historical Perspective*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.
- [26] Singh, K. S. (1998). *Antiquity to Modernity in Tribal India: Tribal Movements In India*. New Delhi: Inter-India Publications.
- [27] Singh, R. (2001). *Social movements, old and new: A post-modernist critique*. Sage Publications.
- [28] Singh, R. (2001). *Social movements, old and new: A post-modernist critique*. SAGE Publications.

- [29] Smelser, N. J. (1962). *Theory of Collective Behaviour*. Free Press.
- [30] Tarrow, S. (1998). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- [31] Tilly, C. (2017). From Mobilization to Revolution. In C. Tilly, *Collective Violence, Contentious Politics, and Social Change*. Routledge.
- [32] Touraine, A. (1980). The Voice and the Eye: On the Relationship between Actors and Analysts. *Political Psychology*, 2(1), 3-14.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/3790967>
- [33] Touraine, A. (1981). *The voice and the eye: An analysis of social movements*. Cambridge University Press.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511557828>
- [34] Xaxa, V. (2008). *State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in Post-colonial India*. Pearson Education India.
- [35] Xaxa, V. (2019). Is the Pathalgadi Movement in the Tribal Areas Anti-constitutional. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10-12.
- [36] Xaxa, V. (2021). Tribal Politics in India: From Movement to Institutionalism. In V. Xaxa, & J. Ambagudia, *Handbook of Tribal Politics in India* (pp. 29-42). New Delhi: SAGE Publications.