

Major J. Sutherland's Report on Kol Rebellion of 1831-32 in Chotanagpur¹

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Major J. Sutherland, who was the Private Secretary of Charles J. Metcalfe, Vice-President of Governor General's Council at Calcutta, Bengal Presidency, joined with the East India Company's sepoy at Ramgarh district in Bihar in March 1832. However, the Kol rebellion commenced on 26th January 1831, and gradually spread in every corner of Chotanagpur. Some of the notable leaders were Desai Manki of Kochnag in Tamar (Ranchi district, Jharkhand), Doonda Munda, Samad Manki, Raja Munda, Mathura Munda, Ganga Munda, Suryga Manki, Mohan Manki, Sagar Manki, Nagu Pahan, Kamal Singh Baraik of Turpa (Khunti district, Jharkhand), Mohan Munda of Putrahatuin Banta Hajam (Ranchi district, Jharkhand), Budho Bhagat of Silligaon in Churia (Latehar district, Jharkhand) and Suru Bhagat of Gajnu (Lohardaga district, Jharkhand). From Tori, Bhogta and Ghasi Adivasis also participated in the rebellion, and they took arms and plundered many villages in the Hutap ghat region and Patkum (Saraikela Kharasawan district, Jharkhand). A famous religious leader from Silligaon village, Budho Bhagat showed wonderful leadership in the Churia region.

¹West Bengal State Archives, Judicial Criminal (Beng.), No. 44. Major J. Sutherland, March 1832.

Under Captain Impey, the British troop of cavalry and infantry started their campaign and attacked Silligaon village. Budho Bhagat, his whole family, and his band of followers fought with their traditional weapons against the British troops armed with their modern weapons. Instead of surrendering to the British, Budho took the alternative of dying on the battlefield. When Budho, his brother, and his nephew were killed, many Kol rebels surrendered. Under Lt Marsh, the rebels pushed them when the British troops passed through Palamou (Palamu district, Jharkhand) on 22 February 1832. One Sepoy and two horses were killed, and some of them were injured. From Barrackpore (North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal), Danapur (Patna district, Bihar), Banaras (Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh), Sambalpur (Sambhalpur district, Odisha) and Nagpur (Nagpur district, Maharashtra), the British troops were requisitioned; they started their offensive in February 1832 against the Kols from three points [Tikoo (Giridih district, Jharkhand), Churia (Latehar district, Jharkhand) and Pitoria (Ranchi district, Jharkhand)]. When one troop reached Sonepur (Khunti district, Jharkhand), Kols did not confront the British; instead, they took shelter along with their families and cattle in the Hills. However, the British troops greatly suffered when they tried to remove them. This was a strategy of their resilience. Major Southerland joined with the East India Company's sepoys at Ramgarh district. After an inquiry about the rebellion, he provided the present detailed report about the rebellion. This provides important details about how a colonial official had analysed the causes that disaffected the rebels.

Sutherland' suggestions, the report contains, were accepted by C. J Metcalfe. He assumed that a Hindoo Pater border chief of Singhum encouraged the rebels. Landlords increased their *rajhas* (rent-paying land) and *manjihias* (held directly by the grantee) encroaching the customary tenures like *bhuinhari* land.² As the traders and moneylenders of Sonpur enjoyed *jagirs*³ from the Maharajah of Chotanagpur, they had deprived the customary rights of the Mankis and Mundas from the beginning of the 19th century. After losing their land and livelihood, they had no means of subsistence in the regions of Sonepur where the Kol rebellion commenced. Major Southerland found that the land tax which increased from 4 to 13 rupees in the last fifty years had increased from 15 to 18 rupees in the last three years

²*Bhuinhari* was a type variant of *khunkatti*. They emerged from the descendant of the original founder of a village and enjoyed some portion of land of a village as rent free.

³ A type of tenures assigned to military retainers before colonial rule.

before the commencement of the rebellion in the Govindpur (Dhanbad district, Jharkhand) areas under Kour Kurnath Sayhir, brother of the raja of Chotanagpur.⁴

While enquiring about the Kol rebellion, Major Sutherland described that excise laws were imposed on the Kols of Chotanagpur and *handia* (rice beer) and land taxes, imposed on them by the landlords, were intolerable for the Kols.⁵ Since pre-colonial times, the Adivasis of Chotanagpur customarily produced drinks. Rice beer (*Ili*) was the favourite drink of the Mundas. It was made from boiled rice which was fermented and mixed with certain kinds of vegetable roots (*iliranu*). This liquor was stored in earthen jars and became ready for consumption for about five days (Roy 1912: 207). Hardiman notes, 'The sanction provided by religion made drinking respectable in Adivasi and low-caste culture, and *daru* and toddy were accordingly consumed without any feeling of guilt' (Hardiman 1985: 174). The Mundas offered *ili* to deities in their religious festivals. The *batauli* or *kadleta* sacrificed feast was celebrated at the beginning of *Asharh* (June) just before the commencement of transplantation (*ropa* or *roa*) of paddy seedlings in each village. *Pahan* used to fast since the proceeding day. He sacrificed fowls at the *Jaher-Sarna than* (Sacred Grove) of his village with offerings of rice beer, leaves of *marua* (*Cannabis cannabaceae*) and *Gandhari* (*Gmelina arborea*). He worshipped all the *bongas* of the Mundas. The fowls were cooked and other food (boiled rice, *saag* etc.) was prepared at the *Sarna* where all the Munda people of the village had a sumptuous feast. *Pahan* was taken to the house with honour. Villagers went with the procession up to the *Pahan's* house. They were given rice beer (Roy 1912: 261–8). With the colonial intervention, strict control was imposed on it. Understandably, Adivasis treated this as an obnoxious aggression against their customary practice.

There was yet another reason behind the rebellion. The report reveals how a sensitive colonial official tried to analyse the reason from the colonised's perspective. This resonates with a section of colonial bureaucracy who recognised that India's forests, hill tracts, and 'tribal' people were ecologically distinct from the settled 'civilized' people of cultivated plains (Arnold 2000: 8-9). This idea was reflected in Major Sutherland's report during the Kol rebellion. As he notes:

⁴ West Bengal State Archives (WBSA hereafter), Judicial Criminal (Beng.), No.46. Mr. W. Blunt's Report, 4th April 1832, Last Para; No. 44. Major Sutherland, March 1832, para 29. William Blunt was the third Member of the Governor General's Council at Calcutta who was posted as the Magistrate of Ramgarh in 1805. He had personal experience about the people and the country.

⁵ However, on the recommendation W. Cuthbert (Commissioner of Ramgarh), WBSA, Judicial Criminal (Beng.), No. 44. Major Sutherland, March 1832, para 16.

'It will of course be found here as generally throughout India that the character of the people is governed by the nature of their country when it is flat and open, they are tame and patient or are easily made so when it is hilly and inaccessible, they are impatient of restraint and difficult to be governed according to our usages.'⁶

The colonial rulers adopted different strategies for tribal place-making. One policy was to protect the tribal from the exploitation of non-tribals. Another strategy was to minimise the various uses of forests and establish control over forests (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 90). As a result of the Kol rebellion, in the early phase of the advent of British rule in Chotanagpur, the Company Government decided that a distinct type of government was required for Chotanagpur.⁷ The Report reveals this colonial strategy of governance. Major Sutherland reported that '...they require a peculiar form of government and that which we have latterly introduced into their country seem suitable.'⁸ He also noted that the non-Adivasi people had no sympathy with the Adivasis and that this exploitation would 'endanger the stability of our Indian Empire.'⁹

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⁶WBSA, Judicial Criminal(Beng.), No.44 Major Sutherland, March 1832, para 7.

⁷ Final Report of Survey and settlement of Hazaribagh District, 1908-15, p.22

⁸ WBSA, Judicial Criminal (Beng.), No.44 Major Sutherland, March 1832.

⁹ Ibid., para 17.