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Pages from the Old Records

Lurkas

(Extract from a Private Letter)

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This 'Private Letter' containing the piece on *Lurkas* was initially published in the *Calcutta Government Gazette* of 25 May 1820. It also appeared in *Bengal Hurkaru* in the same year. It is an invaluable account of the first collision between the Ho Adivasis of Kolhan¹ and the British forces led by Major Edward Roughsedge (1774-1822). Major Roughsedge belonged to the 26th Regiment N.I. and was a Commander of the Ramghar Battalion, which covered the present Jharkhand. In 1819, he was appointed the first Political Agent to the Government of the South Western Frontier Agency. His area of operation was Ramgarh Battalion, the districts of Surguja and Raigarh of Chhattisgarh, Sundargarh and Sambalpur of Odisha.

The Hos, popularly referred to as Larka/Lurka Coles/Kols (fighting Kols), had never tasted defeat at the hands of their enemies, and they had never paid any regular taxes to any authority. At first, Roughsedge did not intend to enter the Ho territory and fight with the Ho. In fact, he did not know anything about them before. But when Raja Ghanshyam Singh, the reigning chief of Porahat raj, accepted British military protection in 1820, he put forward three conditions to the British, one of which was that the British would subdue the Hos of the neighbouring Kolhan territory.

When Roughsedge asked for advice on how to deal with the Larka Kols, his local informants fed him fearful stories. This prompted him to write, 'A traveller would soon think of entering into a tiger's den as of traversing any part of Larka Kol.' However, these stories made Roughsedge more eager to learn about the Larka Kols and to suppress them.

In 1820, Roughsedge entered Kolhan at the head of a battalion consisting of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, and he was surprised when he found richly cultivated villages full of mango and tamarind trees. At first he had the impression that the Hos were passive subjects,

¹ The Ho dominated Kolhan approximately cover the present-day region of West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand.

but the subsequent hostilities between the Hos and the British forces soon revealed their legendary bravery and uncompromising love for their land.

The Private Letter vividly depicts the first confrontation between the Hos and British troops. The Letter describes the exemplary courage of the Hos in combat with their traditional bows, arrows, and battle axes against a much superior force possessing deadly weapons. In spite of their heroics, the Hos suffered heavy casualties and had to concede defeat provisionally. However, true to their reputation for never bowing down, the Hos rose again in 1821. The second rise was even more disastrous for the Hos, who had to accept the conditions of a peace agreement that also laid the foundations for a future Ho-British relationship. Even though the agreement was intended to bring peace, it could not keep the Hos in submission for a long time. In 1830, they rose in arms and continued until 1837 when Thomas Wilkinson intervened and extinguished the flames of revolt, and created the Kolhan Government Estate under direct British control as a lasting solution.

Roughsedge had contracted a disease during the Second Kolhan Campaign in 1821, and he died on 13 January 1822 in Sambalpur after a prolonged fever. His biographical sketch, published in *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* in 1822, writes: 'Few men will be more generally or more justly regretted than this distinguished officer...He successively subdued various refractory chiefs, without cruelty or oppression; and on every occasion shewed the utmost desire to avoid hostilities, and spare blood.'² Not many of us would agree with these words, but the fact remains that he paved the way for British control over Kolhan.

A shortcoming of the Private Letter is that it treated the Hos as a group of unnamed warriors without identity. However, a few other British documents mention Mata Ho from Balandia village in South Kolhan, who masterminded the Ho resistance against Roughsedge incursions in 1820 and 1821. This is a generic problem with British documents, which rarely identify the adivasi heroes who fought against them. This omission represents a significant loss for adivasi history, which despite containing a rich tapestry of oral stories and songs, is short of written documents to historicize their legendary fighters and heroes.

Despite this shortcoming, documents such as the present Private Letter partially address this lack. It heavily emphasises British armed superiority over crude indigenous weapons, but it also unintentionally highlights the supreme bravery of the indigenous people, who refused to surrender without putting up fierce, but uneven, fights. These types of British documents, therefore, have a great value because they unfold significant information that the British originally intended to conceal.

² *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, July-December, Vol. XIV, London, 1822, 232.

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LURKAS.

(Extract from a Private Letter.)

It is rather remarkable that at no great distance from Calcutta there should exist a warlike tribe almost unknown beyond their own mountains, until the arrival of Major Roughsedge (commanding Ramghur bat. and Gov.gen's agent on the S. W. frontier) among them. They are called *Lurkas*, and inhabit a part of Singhboon, named after them Lurkacole. About 60 years ago a rajah attempted to subdue the Lurkas, but he was repulsed with great slaughter. This inspired their neighbours with such dread of them, that no native has ever since ventured near them with any authoritative claims; and they are now quite independent of the Rajah and Zemindars, to whom they pay no tribute or mark of submission of any kind.

Major Roughsedge, after settling his business in the civilized part of Singhboon, entered Lurkacole on the 20th of March. The country is described to be very populous and flourishing, and full of large villages. At first it was thought that matters would proceed smoothly, and that our troops would be permitted to pass unmolested through the country; especially as the head men had come in, in a way that promised well. On the 25th, however, an event happened which terminated all amicable relations for the time being, and called loudly for prompt and signal punishment. The inhabitants of a large village near Major Roughsedge's camp wantonly murdered some of his followers, undeterred by any fear of the troops in their close neighbourhood. Other unequivocal indications of hostility appeared also. The major immediately attacked the insurgents, who were in number about 300, all armed with bows and arrows and battleaxes. They made for the hills, but Lieut. Maillard, with a troop of Rohilla horse, pursued, and overtook them. The Lurkas, on seeing the near approach of Lieut. Maillard's party turned round, drew up in line, and received them with a discharge of arrows. Seeing however that no great impression was made by these weapons, they with the utmost impetuosity and blind courage, rushed on the charge of the Searns, battleaxe in hand, seemingly seeking rather to kill the horses than their riders; probably from an idea that by dismounting the latter, they should find them an easy prey. It need only be mentioned, in proof of the violence with which they attacked the horses, that they killed two of them with single blows of battle-axes. At last they were completely routed, leaving half of their number dead on the field; and another party, about 60 in number, who stood over the bodies of the murdered

camp followers, fought with the most desperate obstinacy, till every one of them was sabred.

Major Roughsedge now having got intelligence that a dawk had been cut off, and that attempts were made upon his supplies, ordered a party into the rear against the offending village; the inhabitants of which, re-inforced by their neighbours, were found all drawn up ready for action. This they commenced with repeated discharges of arrows, by which 10 men of Lieut. Maillard's party were wounded, (two of them mortally). At length it became necessary to fire the village, upon which the Lurkas (their arrows being nearly expended) rushed furiously upon their foes armed with battle-axes and large stones, by one of which Lieut. Maillard, who behaved very gallantly on the occasion, was nearly killed. The majority fought most desperately until they fell. Very few deigned to ask for quarter, but such as did received it. One of those who was spared was dispatched to the main body in the mountains, to warn them that an attack would be made upon their position, unless they restored the dawk they had intercepted with the least possible delay. This threat was principally intended to intimidate them from holding out, for Major R. felt unwilling to push matters to further extremities, since enough had been done for example against these ignorant and savage, but brave mountaineers. He was accordingly much pleased to find his warning produced the desired effect, for they returned the dawk packets in the most humble manner. A peace was concluded accordingly between both parties.

The severe lessons they have received, it is to be hoped, will inspire these barbarians with that awe of our name and government, which is so absolutely necessary for the preservation of the lives and properties of those who came in contact with them.—*Hurk. as quoted by Cal. Gov. Gaz. May 25.*

HYDROPHOBIA.

By the last accounts from America we learn that hydrophobia prevailed to a most alarming extent amongst the foxes of that country, who, forgetting their usual dread of the human species, seemed to search for opportunities of attacking people even in their houses. The same dreadful disorder has often raged amongst the jackals in the upper parts of India; and we recollect one melancholy occasion where upwards of an hundred and fifty men, belonging to a small camp of cavalry, were in one night bitten by these dreadful animals, while sleeping on the ground in the rear of their horses. We believe that only two or three survived, the remainder