

Lt. S. R. Tickell: The Pioneer of Colonial Ethnography in Singhbhum¹

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Lt. Samuel Richard Tickell (1811-75),² the first Assistant Political Agent of the Kolhan Government Estate (founded in 1837), was the founder of British administration in the Kolhan region of erstwhile Singhbhum in Bihar. He is also the pioneer of colonial ethnography as the author of *Memoir on Hodesum (improperly called Kolehan)*, published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1840.³ He may also rightly lay claim to be the pioneering linguist of the Ho language through his companion works⁴ named *Vocabulary of the Ho Language and Grammatical Construction of the Ho Language* published in tandem with the Memoir in the above Journal the same year.

In fact, early documentation about the Ho, more famous as the *Larka* (fighting) *Kole*, which had begun in a fragmentary form in the correspondences of E. Roughsedge, the General leading British assault against the Larka Kole in 1819-20⁵ and the like of T. Wilkinson in 1836-37⁶ was given a more elaborate and solid foundation by Tickell. A researcher has therefore to invariably

¹ This is a revised version of my paper, 'Foreword: Lt. S. R. Tickell: The Pioneer of Colonial Ethnography in Singhbhum, Foreword, Memoir on the HODESUM by Lt Tickell, Baskey Publications, Kolkata, 2012.

² For an elaborate study of Tickell and his times, see the seminal and well documented work by P. Streumer, *A Land of Their Own: Samuel Richard Tickell and the Formation of the Autonomous Ho Country in Jharkhand*. Wakkaman: Houten. 2016.

³ Lt. S. R. Tickell, 'Memoir on the Ho desum" (improperly called Kolehan)', *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. XI, part II, 1840. 694-709, 783-808

⁴ Lt. S. R. Tickell, '*Grammatical Construction of the Ho Language* *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. IX, part II, July to December 1840, New Series, Calcutta: 997-1007; *Vocabulary of the Ho language*. Ibid., 1063-90.

⁵ Of these, the most informed is E. Roughsedge to C.T. Metcalfe, 9 May 1820, NO 38, Extract Bengal Political Consultations, 3 June 1820 (Oriental and India Office Collections, London)

⁶ Captain T. Wilkinson to Lt. Tickell, 13 May 1837, para. 23. Governor General's Agent, South West Frontier Political Despatch Register. 13 May to 1 December 1840, vol. 231. Vol. 231 from 13 May 1837 to 1 December 1840 (Bihar State Archives).

begin the study of the history of the Hos and Kolhan through the empirically and marginally archaeologically adduced data provided by the Memoir and the above essays.

Being influenced by the utilitarian ideology, this Bentinck-day administrator's ethnography represents a shift in British Orientalism' initiated by the like of William Jones. This came to draw more on empirical data rather than the 'imaginings' and textual information. Through his letter of 13 May 1837 to Tickell, T. Wilkinson, the Political Agent to Governor-General, had instructed his deputy to found a paternalistic rule by acting as *Ma-Bap* of the people under his charge rather than acting as a stern ruler. Tickell's tenure (May 1837-May 1840, February 1841-April 1842) proved to be an administratively formative period when the first land revenue settlement was conducted; the dual rule of the Assistant Political Agent and Manki-Mundas was laid; colonial courts, governed by Wilkinson's civil and criminal rules; weekly market (haat) and dispensary were established in Chaibasa.

Tickell knew well that the acquisition of knowledge about the land and people was a prerequisite for efficient governance. But unlike early 'Orientalists', empiricism, rather than ancient Hindu texts, constituted his staple. This was largely acquired through his personal contact with the 'Hos' and 'Oraons', knowledgeable Mankis, personal tours, participation in communal hunting and festivals, and lastly, the staff of local administration.

'Memoir' is structured in the standard ethnographic mode. Firstly, it presents a brief historical account that depicts some of the conjunctures from Ho's past. It begins with the story of the immigration of the breakaway Munda groups of Chotanagpur plateau into Singhbhum and their colonisation of a distinct but dreaded 'Kole' territory known as Kolhan. Mingled with this are the portrayals of Ho politico-cultural relations with the Porahat raj as well as pre-Ho settlers in Singhbhum like the Bhuiyans and Saraks and the fructification of the image of the Ho as Larka Kole. These broadly outline the emergence of distinct political identity among the Ho around the territory they called Hodesum.

The copious descriptions of the flora and fauna of Kolhan in the Memoir underline the estates' environmental ambient. Equally significant is the story of the conversion of a sub-ethnic group into a distinct ethnic community, rather the Munda groups becoming Ho in 'appearance', 'manners', 'dialect' and 'dress'. This encapsulates the nuances of their cultural self represented by their rural life, annual hunting, marriage ceremonies, signs and omens, birth and mortuary rites, creation myth, religious ideas, primitive state of agriculture, commercial link with outsiders,

and such of their traits as ‘light-heartedness’, ‘love of truth’, ‘honesty’, ‘obliging willingness’, ‘happy ingenuous disposition’, as also their irascibility and vicious practice of witchcraft.

Besides underlining territorial and cultural specificities, ‘Memoir’ underscores early colonial imaging of tribals/aboriginals as a sanguinary and savage community. It also distances itself from the Sanskritic vilification of this community as ‘Kole’ or pig-eaters and their homeland as Kolhan. Tickell embodies this departure by elaborating on their custom-based rural culture; this ethnic group is Ho rather than ‘Kole’ and their territory is Hodesum and not ‘Kolehan’. But one cannot at the same time remain oblivious to his unqualified digs at the Hindus.

Tickell’s account still remains an unmatched source material about the Ho during the early colonial period. Not only this, his ‘Memoir’ so profoundly influenced later ethnographers like E.T. Dalton, W.W. Hunter, H. H. Risley and L. S. S. O’Malley, that some of them either drew on this account or copiously excerpted from the ‘Memoir’, when they respectively authored *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (1877), *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891) and *Bengal District Gazetteers: Singhbhum, Seraikela and Kharsawan* (1910).

The ethnographer assumes a new avatar through his Vocabulary and Grammatical. These essays reinforce Ho’s claim of emergence as an independent linguistic ethnic group⁷ through seminal studies lay the linguistic foundation of the Ho dialect. This may facilitate the quest of researchers⁸ engaged in the study of Adivasi languages in Jharkhand. Furthermore, my recent unpublished essay⁹ explores the historical content of the Vocabulary and reinforces its claim as a viable historical source.

⁷ A. K. Sen, *The Making of a Village: The Dynamics of Adivasi Rural Life in India*. Routledge: London and New York, 2021, 5.

⁸ To cite two such are Nishant Choksi, ‘Script as Constellation among Munda Speakers: The Case of Santali’, *South Asian History and Culture*, 2017, 1–24. doi:10.1080/19472498.2017.1411064; Anjana Singh ‘Linguistic Politics and Kurukh Language Movement of the Oraons in Jharkhand’, *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies*, Vol. VIII, No.2, August, 2018, 37-50.

⁹ A. K. Sen, *Between Ethnography and History: Lt. S. R. Tickell’s Vocabulary and the rewriting of the History of the Hos*.