

The Adivasi Resistance in Jungle Mahal: A Case Study of Chuar Rebellion¹

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Abstract

The first formidable adivasi-led peasant resistance against the East India Company is popularly known as Chuar Rebellion. The rebellion took place during the period 1765- 1803 A. D. The colonial administration described the rebel tribals of south- west Bengal (1783-1832) was actually borrowed from the Hindus. 'Chuar' in Bengali meant 'wild, ferocious and ill-manned'. Historians mainly concentrated on some leading tribes of Bengal and Bihar; the Munda, the Oraon, the Ho, the Bhumij, the Santhal and the Paharia and the primary interest of the present paper is to explore the origins of their in the tribal societies. The relationship that developed between the chiefs and the Chuars was an altogether novel one. The people's history (Chuars and the adivasis) portrays the ceaseless and uncompromising struggle of the peasant masses of Bengal Presidency for independence of the adivasis which they had enjoyed over the generations for which the Chuars sought the help of the local zamindars like Rani Shiromoni and Raja of Karnagarh. In independent India, two groups of ideology-driven historians, Marxists and Secularists, expounded the Chuar Uprising as an early adivasi led peasant rebellion against the Raj. Narahhari Kaviraj, Suprkash Ray, Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri and Ranajit Guha, specifically, dealt to this subject with Marxist and secularist approach, whereas, A. R. Desai clubbed all the anti- colonial struggles in a Marxist tune.

Introduction

There are colonial discourses which include widely used and highly esteemed accounts of peasant led tribal uprisings² written either as monographs on particular events such as J. C. Price's on the Chuar Rebellion, or as statements included in comprehensive histories like W. W. Hunter's *The Annals of Rural Bengal* and also in the historical chapters of the *District Gazetteers* written long after the event. Besides, Hunter (W. W. Hunter: 2018) has explained the dichotomy of peasant led adivasi resistance on the basis of the records of the Board of Revenue Proceedings that three movements ran in Bengal (broader sense) by the adivasis, peasants and wandering mendicants in the garb of Sannyasis and Fakirs (Bhattacharyya 2013; 2016) long before the beginning of colonial rule. In 1874, it was obviously meant by J. C. Price, Settlement Officer of Midnapore, to serve as a straightforward historical account with no particular administrative end in view. Over a fifth of that half of the book which deals specifically with the events of 1799 is made up of direct quotations from those

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² It is a well-known fact that the adivasis and peasants fought jointly against the colonial regimes since the beginning of colonial rule if any one comes across the primary sources.

records and another large part of barely modified extracts.³ Chuar Rebellion (Price 1874: 1-3) was the outcome of the “evil passions of the infuriated Sardars and Paiks,” which “carried slaughter and flame to very doors of the Magistrate’s cut cherry”.⁴ Only the fear of the beleaguered officials at Midnapore stationed in 1799 turns seventy-five years later into that genocide hatred characteristic of a genre of post-Mutiny British writing. “The disinclination of the authorities, civil or military, to proceed, in person to help to quell the disturbances is most striking”, Price writes sharing his compatriots and then goes on to brag: “In those days of breech-loaders half a dozen Europeans would have been a match for twenty times their number of Chuars. Of course with the imperfect nature of the weapons of that day it could not be expected that Europeans would fruitlessly rush into danger, but I should have expected that the European Officers of the station would have in some instances at least courted and met an attack in person and repulsed their assailants. I wonder that no one European officer, civilian or military, with the exception of perhaps Lieutenant Gill, owned to that sensation of joyous excitement most young men feel now-a-days in field sports, or in any pursuit where there is an element of danger. I think most of us, had we lived in 1799, would have counted it better sport had we bagged a marauding Chuar reeking with blood and spoils, that the largest bear that the Midnapore jungles can produce”. Thus Guha (Guha, 1993 :1-42) had to admit that “insurgent is not a subject of understanding or interpretation but of extermination, and the discourse of history... serves directly to instigate official violence”⁵. There is no shortage of studies of rebellion or resistance in the tri-continental or ‘Third world’. But with the emergence in recent years of what may be broadly categorised as ‘post-colonial histories, they have taken one of two forms (Singh, 2014:182-184; Ghose, 1972:9-14). The first, still identifiable as Subalternist approach, has abandoned studies of events as resistance in favour of studying the identity of the rebel. Its mirror

³The importance of Price’s work led Asok Mitra, Census Commissioner, to gather together and publish in volume of the Census Report of West Bengal 1951 under their names. Mitra writes, ‘These will remain an authoritative storehouse of information on primitive, primary and intermediate industry technology in India. When all the twenty- six volumes of the 1951 were published, Dr. B. C. Roy, Chief Minister of Bengal, opened a small exhibition of these volumes and other invaluable historical records and archival materials connected with Censuses and surveys in Bengal since the middle of the eighteenth century. My [Asok Mitra] constant travels in the districts gave me ideas about giving a new look to the 1951 Census report and extending its domain to usurp that of the gazetteers. ‘ The intensive tours and act of writing the main census report gave me [Asok Mitra] ideas about the publication of J. C. Price (1874) the best place which these reprints could find would be the respective *District Census Handbook, Midnapore, 1951* (Mitra, 1991:79-81).’

⁴More important for us, however, is the evidence we have of the author’s identification of his own sentiments with those of that small group of whites who were reaping in the south-western corner of Bengal.

⁵Guha’s ‘The Prose of Counter Insurgency’ provided the first detailed explanation of how this was to be done. (what is its relevance with Chuar Rebellion) It has been three decades since the publication of the first volume of Subaltern Studies; time enough, perhaps, to write of the Subaltern Collective and its edited volumes as a thing that happened rather than something that is happening. To write a narrative history of Subaltern Studies would require an exposition of how the volumes embodied the hopes and desires of a generation of anti-colonial historians, even though the numbers of those involved in its production were small and they were (almost exclusively) about Colonial India. It would describe how its contributors sought to retrieve a subaltern history that would challenge the received wisdom of colonizing academics and cotemporary ruling elites. It was to be a history of the voiceless; the excluded of those who had been subjectivity under the yoke of centralizing know ledges and fantasies.

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can be found in the pioneering works of Scott, (1977) in which discourses of rebellion in the colony and post-colony subsume any individual actors.

The Paiks, what is commonly known as the Chuar rebellion, was mainly a revolt of the *Paiks*⁶, Chuars, adivasis and the peasants. Dalton (1872: 159) considered them as ‘old Hindu bards’ who ‘are generally vindictively strong in the epithets of abuse they hurl at the aboriginal tribes’. Dalton cited the description of the inhabitants of Chota Nagpur in the celebrated *Fifth Report of the House of Commons (1811)* as ‘a savage race, differing extremely in appearance, religion, language and manners, from the Hindu lowlanders of Hindoostan’ as evidence of how ‘this region has, to a comparatively recent period, been regarded by Hindus as being out of the pale of Hindoostan..’(Chaudhuri, 2014: 47-75). Chaudhuri is in firm conviction that the designation ‘Chuar’ by which the colonial administration described the rebel tribals of south- west Bengal (1783-1832) was actually borrowed from the Hindus. ‘Chuar’ in Bengali meant ‘wild, ferocious and ill-mannered’ (Dalton: 159,163). Chaudhuri mainly concentrated on some leading tribes of Bengal and Bihar; the Munda, the Oraon, the Ho, the Bhumij, the Santhal and the Paharia and his primary interest was to explore the origins of their in the tribal societies. Chaudhuri elsewhere (Chaudhuri, 1989: 503-541) said that ‘the Chuar movements did include a number of tribals who had lost their main occupations as agriculturists [cultivation] long before their beginning.’ Most of the adivasis in those regions used to render their services as paiks on behalf the local rajas and chieftains which has been explained in course of the discussion. He argued that ‘they participated either as recruits of the armies of the local rajahs or other chiefs, or out of motives of gains from plunder and loot, where their means of subsistence were precarious. A phase of the Chuar movement was organised initially by a group called paiks who enjoyed *paikan* lands which were resumed as per instruction of Amini Commission’s Report after the implementation of colonial rule for which they had no other alternative but to revolt. They began to engage themselves in cultivation just after the resumption of their lands for which they often combined cultivation in addition with their normal work for their employers. Quite a number of them had ‘only recently lost their lands, and the movement was aimed at their restoration.’ It was Chaudhuri’s another concern to examine the ‘colonial construct’ viz, ‘tribe’. While discussing about their tribal organisation (Bhumij) (Chaudhuri, 1989: 504-505) Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri had to agree ‘that due to the recurring clashes between the rival tribal chiefs there was a serious drain on the tribal agricultural surplus thus embroiled the Chuars’ (Chaudhuri, 2014: 47-75). The relationship that developed between the chiefs and the Chuars was an altogether novel one. The Chuars, now employed and paid through land grants, were dependent for their continuous possession on the personal wishes and discretion of the chiefs alone. Some anthropologists have argued, in the Indian context, the question whether ‘tribe’ and ‘peasantry’ were distinct structural types, and concluded that they were not. There is a recent debate among historians concerning the idea of ‘tribe’ in colonial India (Das Gupta, 2012: 276-77). However, they have not ever argued that ‘tribe’ was essentially a ‘construct’ of the colonial state. There were other tribal chiefs and societies in the Chuar region, like, naiks and zamindars who suffered most.

⁶ (‘foot-men’, being local, hereditary watchmen and militiamen) had been dismissed in large numbers under British administration, established in 1760, and their land grants (*paikan*) were resumed.

The Adivasis living in the Jungle Mehal (Mahals) were commonly called Chuars since the medieval period as Sri Chaitanya, the Vaishnava apostle of Bengal, passed through the area in 1509. At that time he described these tribal communities as the Paiks ('foot-men' being local, hereditary watchmen and militiamen). They were dismissed in large numbers under the British administration establishment (Kabiraj: 1396 B. S. (rpt.)). A similar perception was found in *Kalketu Upakhyān*, (Tale of Kalketu) as Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakraborty called them Chooars. (Bandypadhyay and Basu: 20; Bhattacharya, 1357 B. S. / 1951 A. D). The District Historians took the Chuar to mean 'outlandish fellow,' 'ill-disciplined' (Basu, 1332 B.S./1926 A. D.: 37-41). Thus the term was applied to the wild tribes in Midnapore that occupied the jungle mehal and the tracts beyond them (O'Malley 1911:22). A similar account may be found in Tarilokyanath Pal (1888:75-78). This identification is also reflected in the writing of Chaudhuri (1989, op. cit) and the name was applied in Midnapore to the wild tribes who inhabited the Jungle Mehal and the tracts beyond them. But a diametrically opposite view coined by Suprakash Roy (1990 (reprint): 55-56) identified it as a peasant led adivasi resistance against the colonial Raj. He holds the view that the history of India written by the British and Indian historians is a history of the upper- class society, viz., the zemindars, talukdars and mahajans – of their own administration, exploitation, education, culture and various oppressive activities. Roy's painstaking research shows that this insurgency, with its extremely mobile guerrilla forces, was highly motivated and organised. Above all, it had clearly defined political objectives: ending colonial exploitations and reversing the relationship of domination and subordination (Shamsul Alam, 2015: 56). In fact the book itself was a source of inspiration in the early 1970s, when militant agrarian struggles reached a peak as Partha Chatterjee writes in the foreword to the rendition (Roy : 1999) of Roy's book. The people's history (Chuars and the adivasis) portrays the ceaseless and uncompromising struggle of the peasant masses of Bengal Presidency for independence (Desai, 1979; Gough, 1976:2-17) Suprakash Roy⁷ echoed the narratives told by J. C. Price, Jogesh Chandra Basu and Trailokyanath Pal. Roy's being the later work had all the advantages of drawing on more recent research. But much of what it has to say about the inauguration and development of the rebellion is taken – in- fact, quoted directly from Price's account. Guha (1999) has rightly said that 'there is little in the description of this particular event which differs significantly between the secondary and the tertiary types of discourse'. In independent India, two groups of ideologically driven historians, Marxists and Secularists⁸ groups of historians like Narahhari Kaviraj, Suprakash Ray, A. R Desai

⁷In spite of its shortcomings ParthaChatterjee in his Foreword version of the English rendition of Roy's book observes, 'Roy's inspiration for writing this book did not emerge from academia, but it came from the works of revolutionary politics'. In fact the book itself was a source of inspiration in the early 1970s, when militant agrarian struggles reached a peak as ParthaChatterjee writes in the foreword to the translation. According to Chatterjee, Roy's importance today lies in the fact that he is an 'example of politically committed scholarship' (Roy 1999:10). Roy was an avowed Marxist historiography and wrote his work from that perspective. Nowadays, Marxist historiography has not only gone out of fashion, it is often looked upon with a patronizing smile. There are methodological and ideological problems with classical Marxist historiography. The greatest criticism one could level against it is its schematic and eschatological view of history.

⁸Marxist and Secularist historians wrote their books long before post-modernist rereading of Marxism had come to the fore.

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and Kathleen Gough, those who care more for imaginary myths than for the truth of history. They expounded the Chuar Uprising as an early peasant rebellion against the Raj. Abhijit Guha's recent research is based on some of the narratives of the Chuar *Bidroho* (rebellion) as found in the various texts ranging from scholarly accounts to pamphlets (Sarkar. et. al, 1998; Bhuniya. et.al 1998) and leaflets of the political parties. Considered that the Chuar Rebellion as an 'armed peasant revolt that gave much trouble to the British colonial administration during the second half of the eighteenth century.'(Guha 2011: 199-216)⁹ The ethnic groups of South-West Bengal were mainly aborigines, tribes and various castes like Kurmi, Santal, Bhumij, Bauri, Kora, Mahli, Goalas, Sadgopes¹⁰(Bhattacharyya and Bhattacharya 2020), Munda and Manki of Choto Nagpur and Sardar Ghatwal formed organized tribal communities and were the main forces among of the rebels of jungle Mehal.¹¹ The people who lived in this area were known as Chuars (comprised various segments of the society) in order to conceal their own identity and rose in rebellion against the East India Company. This view may be substantiated with the works of Narendra Nath Das (Das 1972(rpt))¹² and Binode Sankar Das (Das, 1973)¹³ contain some information about the Chuars. The chuars inhabited the hills and forests of Manbhum,¹⁴ Midnapore and Bankura and generally lived off the jungles and primitive agriculture, 'but were not attached to the soil, being always ready to change the plough for the club at the bidding of their turbulent jungle chiefs or zamindars who could not be coerced into paying revenues' (Sengupta, 2011 : 121).

Different Phases of the Adivasi Resistance

In 1760, the Company acquired from Mir Qasim along with Midnapore, the territories of Jungle Mehal and Dhalbhum. Before 1761, large areas of western Midnapore were dense jungle tracts, largely free of Mughal interference. Areas such as the jungle mahals presented 'an ideal escape for tribal and other groups fleeing from oppression' (Anderson: 31; Mahato and Mahato in Paty, ed.: 36-37) .After the grant of *Diwani*,

⁹Guha's study is based on the methods of social anthropology to reconstruct a descriptive ethnography (Geertz 1973 :3-30), in which the day – to –day happenings around the anniversary of the Chuar rebellion are analysed to shed light both on the political culture of the state and on the interface between anti-colonial pasts and political identities in contemporary India. The main intellectual inspiration behind the selection of the episode comes from the ethnographic studies on political symbolism conducted by Abner Cohen (87-113) and Marc Abeles (391-404).

¹⁰There is a detailed discussion about various castes and tribes in the work of Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya with a Foreword by RajatKanta Ray (2021).

¹¹In Mughal India the Santal and Bhumijtribals practised shifting cultivation, as well as hunter-gathering. They were able to resist incursions into their areas, with some Bhumij communities gaining the reputation of Chuars for their raids into the plains. 'They alternatively protected their political autonomy and forest resources through warfare and withdrawal' (Anderson 2000:32; *West Bengal District Gazetteers, Puruliya* : 3-14 (reprint); Sinha et al., 1964 :7-9; Niyogi1967 : 210-217. Besides, the *District Gazetteers of Bankura, Midnapore, Birbhum, Puruliya*, (O'Malley, 1911) of all the districts adjacent to the areas of Jungle Mehal and the *District Records of Midnapore* for the period (1765-1800) and district records (Firminger, ed. 1914-1915) should be thoroughly consulted in this context. In addition, the archival resources of West Bengal State Archives, particularly, the proceedings of Revenue Department (heretofore refer to RD), Board of Revenue (heretofore refer to BOR), and Judicial (Criminal) (heretofore refer to JCR) should be given equal importance for understanding the main components of Chuar Rebellion.

¹² Two-third portions of the book have covered the different aspects of Chuar Rebellion.

¹³ He has dealt the Chuar Rebellion in detail.

¹⁴ They rose in revolt under the guidance of raja Madhu Singh of Manbhum.

particularly in 1767, Graham, the Resident at Midnapore, dispatched a military force to subjugate the jungle Zaminders to the west of Midnapore by following “the process of assessing the jungle district to revenue.”(Dodwell, ed. 1929: 410; Firminger, 883:238; Ascoli, 2019: 31).¹⁵ Fergusson began by attacking and capturing the fort of the chief of Jhargram.¹⁶ The zamindars of Ramgarh, Samkakulia (Lalgarh), Jambani and Jatbani (Silda) submitted to the British, who then could push on to Balarampurthana and secure submissions from the chiefs of Amainagar (Ambikanagar), Supur, Manbhum, Chhatna, Barabhum, Rajpur and Phulkusma. Adivasis ambushed and harassed British forces in what has been described as ‘a generalised rejection of alien authority’ (Anderson: 34). Historically, Chhatna falls under the broader Manbhum region that witnessed the Chuar rebellion against the British in the early nineteenth century (Majumdar: 82-93; Rana: Mimeograph).

Fergusson was conscious, however, that the tribal chiefs had by no means been thoroughly subdued. Unless a permanent force was established in that area the collection of the revenue was deemed difficult. (Firminger, vol.i, (Letters Issued), no. 139).¹⁷ Despite the resistance from the Chuars there were some zamindars that paid the stipulated revenue to the British authorities. The stronghold of the Chuars lay in Manbhum, and Barabhum, particularly, in the hills between Ghatsila and Barabhum.(Manbhum Settlement Report, 1767, Para, 37(Heretofore refer to MSR(BSA) Bihar State Archives); Coupland, 1911 : 55; Mitra : 1951).¹⁸ They held their lands under a kind of feudal tenure, but were not attached to the soil, being always ready to change the plough for the club, at the bidding of their turbulent jungle chiefs or zamindars who could not be coerced into paying revenue. Several expeditions were sent against them since 1767, but these did not lead to any substantial result. The British Company was bent on establishing peace by suppressing freebooters and enhancing revenue by encouraging cultivation of wastelands. There were restrictions, moreover, on indigenous trade and industry such as salt and textile (Bolts, 1772:176-77). The surrender of Ghatsila in August 1767 had been preceded by the spontaneous coming together of the zamindars of Patkum and Singhum, and of the Chhatna zamindar. All three were anxious to secure British protection against the attack of the neighbours; indeed, the Chhatna zamindar declared that he would rather “quit the country and starve than become a vassal Pacht”.¹⁹

In mid-1768 trouble was renewed in Ghatsila. Towards the end of 1769-1770 the tribal people, especially Bhumijis, living between the pargana of Dhalbhum and

¹⁵ Graham to Fergusson dated 4 February, 7th February, no. 78, 6th March, no. 56 and 5th June, no. 202, 1767. These materials have been collected from Midnapore District Collectorate (henceforth the source will be referred to as MDC).

¹⁶ Fergusson to Graham dated 7 February 1767, No. 120 (MDC).

¹⁷ Fergusson to Graham dated 6 March 1767 & Fergusson to Vansittart 5th June, 1767, no. 205(MDC). Besides the Midnapore Collectorate Records the Compilation done by Firminger contains letters and directives issued by the East India Company authorities with their officials dealing with various aspects of Chuar Rebellion.

¹⁸ Fergusson to Graham dated 29 February 1767, No. 129 and 6th March 1767, No. 139 (MDC) is quite relevant.

¹⁹ Fergusson to Vansittart 5 June 1767, No. 202 (MDC).

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Barabhum, were in turmoil and the Adivasis of Pachet, Patkum also joined the insurgents. They invaded Ghatsila and forced the Company's sepoys to retire to the Narsingharh fort. Subla Singh, the jaigirdar of Koilapal one of the "obstinate" Chuar chiefs, had joined the rebels. He was seized and hanged on the spot to set up an example for his rebellious mind and mentality. (Chaudhuri, 1955:54-56).²⁰ The district records of Manbhum are full of accounts of the Chuar outbreaks in different parts of the country. It appears that the Advasis in their initial attempt were not inclined to surrender the gun and matchlocks which they seized from the Company's forces. They were undaunted and backed by the Sardar of Dhadka, Ghatsila.(Firminger , Vol. IV: No. 70) It was resolved that "unless Jagannath Dhal was subdued the East India Company could never obtain any revenue from the side of Subarnarekha." (ibid. No. 75; Toyenbee 1873: 13; Sahoo: 395-96). It was stated that "Barahabhum and other estates which were first assessed got off very lightly, whereas, Jhalda, Katras, Jharia, Nawagarh and other estates which were taken up later on when the British control had been considerably strengthened, had to submit to a comparatively heavy assessment". (Firminger , 1909, Vol. I, No 65; MSR, para. 37; Price, 1873 : 67-68, 109, 111, 122; O, Malley, 1911, *District Gazetteer, Midnapore*: 38 ff; Hunter, 2018: Nos. 269, 272, 273, 403-404, 504, 514, 537, 588, 594, 614-618, 677-678, 713-715, 724). In 1771 Lt. Goodyear²¹ and in 1772 Capital Carter, Lt. Gall and Lt. Young were operating in these areas. The Company sent Lt. Goodyear even in 1773 to quell the revolt ²² with considerable difficulty the rebellion was suppressed. The British Government being compelled to make peace by restoring the estate of Jagannath, the Raja of Dhalbhum who was the leader of the zamindar. The disturbances in the western jungles were renewed by Subla Singh and many others including Kuilapal jaghirdar, the Sardar of Dhadki. They refused to accept the authority of the Company, to settle revenue and to survey their possessions. The Company mobilised a force of thousand paiks under Sitaram thanadar. The main object was to reduce them to subjection and to bring them to Midnapore for a speedy and favourable settlement. The uprisings took a serious turn when in February 1773 fresh disturbances broke out in the western jungles under the leadership of Jagannath Dhal of Ghatshila. The ryots of Haldypukur joined hand with Jagannath and rose in revolt. The paiks of Dompara headed by Mangovin, the zamindar of Silda, were encouraged to commit depredations. (Price, 1873:67; .Firminger, 1883: CXXIX).²³ In fact however, most of the early depredations of the Chuars took place outside the Midnapore district. At this stage Warren Hastings adopted the astute policy of recruiting all able-bodied adult males of this area into the Company's army, keeping them in the Company's pay while recognizing their interest in *paikan* lands in this territory. These recruits were employed against the Marathas in the First Maratha War. The rents of the jungle zamindars were described as kind of quit-rent collected from their *Paiks* and Chuars who were inhabitants of these zamindaris. In 1780 one RudraBauri with a hundred of Dhalbhum people plundered the inhabitants of

²⁰Vansittart to Lt. Nun, 8 January 1770, Nos. 509 (MDC).

²¹ It appears from the letter of Goodyear dated 29th January, 1771 that "I have made the walls of the trunk of trees for ten to twenty-two inches in circumference and twelve feet long two feet of which is sunk into the earth for pointing a musket. He also wanted to have a parapet of earth about five feet or more for the defendants to stand on and to have small barracks or more for the defendants to stand on and to have small barracks for the sepoys in the rains and to hold grain".(MDC)

²² Capt. J. Forbes from Haldypukur dated 4 January 1773 (MDC).

²³ Letter to Warren Hastings dated 16th March, 1773(MDC).

Bishnupur. In 1782 Major Crawford suppressed disturbances in Jhalda and took charge of the collections. He also recommended that the inhabitants of the area formed by the triangle Jhalda, Pachet and Ramgarh be disarmed. Again in 1783-84, disturbances broke-out in Kuliapal, many of these disturbances being related to increase in taxation. (Hunter,2018 vol. ii, letter nos, 452-53, 1431; Hunter, 1868 :17 ; Chaudhury, 1955 : 65-66). So a scheme of building small thanas in the interior with sixty sepoy each was put into execution as a means of temporary defence. The resistance of the Adivasis became aggressive and formidable since 1794.²⁴

Resistance at its peak (1798-99)

Much of Midnapore district was covered with wide stretches of jungles, its inhabitants being mostly *Paiks* and Chuars, who had the reputation of being careless cultivators but expert in pillage. The hilly and geographical environment of Manbhum helped the insurgents to spread in that region. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Manbhum was still thickly forested with *Sal*. Thus, it was described as “mountainous and over spread with thick woods, which render it in many places utterly impassable (MSR, op. cit; Coupland, op. cit.:56; Price1873:6). In fact, two-thirds of Midnapore in the late eighteenth century was consisted of jungle, the greater part of which was uninhabited and inaccessible. Bogree, Bishnupur, Pachet, Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj, the main strongholds of the Adivasis were surrounded by jungles. The difficulty of realizing revenues from the jungle estates failed very early and it was reported that the Adivasis of the Jungle Mehal areas were “bred up as much for pillaging as for cultivating, and paid a kind of quit-rent from the profits of both occupations” (Chaudhury, 1955 : 67). “If we agree with the opinion of Hunter, it can be said, that the Permanent Settlement tried suddenly to substitute contract for custom” (Hunter, 2018: vol. ii Nos.1374, 1489, 1933-35, 7890-93, 7953). The tribal cultivators and chiefs had always been guided by their own customs. The new system damaged the interest of both the semi-tribal chiefs and ignorant ryots. Rani Shiromani of the Midnapore estate, the Raja of Pachet, the zamindar of Raipur and several others found themselves driven from pillar to post and they had to face unusual humiliations e.g, arrest, mortgage, sale and attachment of property. According to J.C. Price the jungle zamindars were a sort of military chief, “to whom his ryots might look for protection, who might command his *paiks* with effect, and whose title should not be doubtful”.(Price, 1873: 70). Such doubt rose out behind the possession of the Zamindari of Rani Shiromani, which was caused to be confiscated. The logic of the East India Company behind such acquisition was the bad management and arrears of revenue. She was only entitled to a *moshaira*. For a time the rebel Sardars wanted to make the Rani their leader, but, the Rani, though secretly sympathizing with rebels, was not in a position to antagonize the Company’s Government. By 1798 the whole of the Jungle Mehal was practically in a state of insurrection. Even Rani Sumitra Day, widow of the late Raja Damoodah Bunge under the leadership of the Chuars

²⁴ JCR, 14th February, 1794, no.11,17th October, 1794, no. 16; Letter from John Fendall, Magistrate to H. Barlow, Sub- Secretary to Government dated 9th January1794, JCR October 17th 1794, no.16; JCR 7th November, 1794, no. 4.

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made an attack at Dehborah.²⁵ In May 1798, Durjan Singh with a body of 15,000 Chuars, made their appearance at Raipur, set fire to the bazaar and *cutchery* and raided the countryside. They also surrounded the houses of the current zamindar's clerk and the daroga ran away. This success so excited the Adivasis that they again with the help of Durjan Singh rose in arms. The zamindar's *naib*, Kinu Bakhsi, being unable to remain at Raipur for fear of the *Paiks*, fled to Balarampore. The revenues due from zamindar fell into arrears and part of his estate was ordered to be sold. The Adivasis were so defiant that they appeared in the villages with lighted torches (*mashals*) and matches and burnt the houses of the officials of the zamindars so that no one dared to harvest the crops. One *surbarakar* was cut to pieces and another was so beaten that his life was despaired of the *Paiks* then set fire to the village and all the *golahs*. The ryots fled to Anandpore where there was once a police outpost, but that place was also threatened. The *tehsildars* also left their *cutchery* and took refuge in Midnapore. The rebels also made a bonfire at Salbani of the village accounts and took away the property of the deceased Surbarakar Baktaram's house. Amin Ramchandra Chakraborty, who had been deputed to make the *jamabandi* of Salbani and other villages, was surrounded by about 50 men and threatened with death. No one was willing to take charge of the revenue collection at Bahadurpur. He was once captured, after he had attacked, plundered and burnt some 30 villages, but when he was put on trial, he had to be released because no one dared to appear against him. His release from jail raised the spirit of the rebels to commit depredation on a wider scale and this in turn compelled the Government to cancel the sale of Pachet and restore the zamindar to his estate.

In July 1798 about 400 Adivasis under Gobardhan Dhakpati, a Bagdi leader of pargana Bagri, in Midnapore, appeared in Chndrakona thana.²⁶ Gobardhan Dhakpati decamped from Daibiha but his wife and daughter were made prisoners. In September 1798 the Adivasis took possession of six or seven villages of Nyabasan and Barjit, refused to pay their revenues to the state treasury, cut down the crops and plundered *tehsils'* revenue which was ready for dispatch.²⁷ In December the *Paiks* became so audacious as to take possession of 6 or 7 villages, they cut down the crops, and also plundered 15 villages taking away their cattle and other effects.²⁸ The *tehsilder* of Janpore was unable to collect any revenue from the ryots, who refused to pay unless they were protected. It was apprehended that the *Paiks* would take complete possession of the estate. There was trouble also in Basudevapore. The rebels plundered a village and menaced Satpati. A numerous party of *Paiks* plundered and burnt Rajgarh and were daily committing attacks on Salbani. The town of Midnapore itself was also threatened. The Government made a complete climb-down at Pachet. The zamindar was restored to his estates and the sale was cancelled. Meanwhile, many of the erstwhile Digwars, Taraf Sardars, Sardar Ghatwals, Sadiyals, Mankis, and Tabedars, now turned talukdars and pattanidars, had already grouped themselves in two warring factions around the two contending claimants and had embarked upon a course of plundering and pillaging the property of their rivals. The revolutionary spirit

²⁵ Letter from Lt. Gregory to Mr. Mihoff dated the 26th February, 1798; Letter from C. Buller to R. Ireland, February 28th 1798(MDC).

²⁶ Letter from the Collector of Midnapore dated 8th July, 15th July and, 22nd July (MDC).

²⁷ JCR 28th September 1798, no. 45.

²⁸ Letter from the Collector of Midnapore dated 18th December 1798 (MDC).

among the Chuars headed by Bharat Singh and others committed could not be stopped depredations in Barabhum in such a manner that the Magistrate thought it essential to station a guard of sepoy in the district. Thus there were large scale migration of peasantry from the affected villages causing the arrear of revenue and stoppage of cultivation. Advantage was taken by some local bandits and robbers who tried to create terror in the adjoining areas.

In 1799 Rani Shiromoni could not long maintain her neutrality when in the last decade of the eighteenth century the inevitable clash between the *Paiks* and the Government reached its climax.²⁹ Rani Shiromoni was one among other prominent leaders who had participated in the *bidroho* (rebellion).³⁰ At that time, the Midnapore zamindar was a lady, Rani Shiromoni, under whom there were a number of dependent parganas, each of which had its own zamindars. With the help of the soldiers supplied by Rani Shiromoni, the British forces under Ferguson stationed at Balarampur, issued orders to the Jungle zamindars to surrender and to settle revenue with him. Then from Balarampur, he proceeded to coerce each zamindar separately, when all of them refused to obey. As a result of the oppression to the inhabitants, the zamindars of Fulkusma, Jhargram and Jamboni tendered their submission without much opposition. The Ambikanagar and Chatna zamindars fled away to the jungles on the approach of the British troops. Later on Ambikanagar zamindar offered submission. On 26th February 1799 the collector wrote that five villages near Satpati were plundered and burnt and twelve zamindari *amlahs* (officials) were brutally beaten and burnt to death. The ryots, in consequence, fled to the jungles to obtain means of subsistence. The Collector was under the apprehension that the *Paiks* would succeed in robbing the treasury. They were so bold that in open daylight they hanged suspected persons in the town and plundered their properties. They even threatened to burn the town of Midnapore, so that many of its inhabitants left the town. At the same time the zamindar of Simlapal also encouraged the ryots to rise against the Company. Rani Shiromani was very popular with the dispossessed rebels, Paiks and the exploited artisans of Anandapur factory.³¹ Imhoff, the Collector, wrote to the Magistrate on 10 March, 1799, informing him of a report that the Chuars intended to plunder and burn the town of Midnapore 'either to-night or tomorrow'. On 14 March, the Chuars burnt down two villages and on the next day, government property amounting to 2,000 *arras* of paddy was consigned to flames in the very large village of Shiromani which was totally sacked. The Chuars raided the zamindari of one Kishen Charan Chatterjee, and plundered the *maujas* (villages) of Ceamorri, Inaitpur, Ghoshpur, Raghunathpur and Adipur. Madhab Singh, brother of the Raja of Barabhum, at the head of his Chuar followers became so formidable that Company's government had to adopt special measures for his apprehension.

²⁹ Revenue Department Proceedings (heretofore refer to RD) , 15th February, 1799, no.20

³⁰ The year 1799 was given an importance by the leftist government of West Bengal in 2009 on the occasion of two hundred years' celebration of Chuar Rebellion for two reasons i.e., Rani Shiromoni, who was suspected of supporting the *bidrohis* (rebels), was brought to Midnapore under arrest on 6th April 1799; and by the middle of June 1799, the colonial administration began to get the upper hand in suppressing the rebellion, though sporadic attempts at revolt continued up to the first decade of the nineteenth century (AbhijitGuha, op. cit.).

³¹ RD, 25th February, 1799, no. 25.

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There was also much public sentiment behind the Rani, as a victimised widow. Her zamindari was let out and brought under the Government management.³² Support for the cause of the Rani constituted a major factor behind the revolt of 1799. In this phase of insurgency the rebels were supported by the peasants³³ who had so long tilled lands for the *Paiks* without rent but now they were subjected to the new system of taxation. The Adivasis were encouraged by the zamindars to commit plunder and outrages upon the loyal zamindars. Such plundered booty in addition to revenue on some occasions was distributed among the ryots³⁴. The Rani of Karnagarh supported the leaders of the disturbance and the Zamindar of Simlapal encouraged the ryots and other villagers of that area to rise. Raja Jadu Singh was the brain of the insurgents. The powerful servants of the Rani being dispossessed of their lands, they instigated the paiks to open rebellion. The Rani herself and her attendants took up the leadership of the rebellion together with the other chiefs of the Jungle Mehals. The situation was aggravated when they suffered from the enhanced prices of salt which coincided with the disbandment of the Paiks.³⁵ Rani Shiromani also made common cause with Chunilal Khan of Narajol. The situation deteriorated to such a degree that the Government *tehsildars* could not even collect a rupee from the ryots.³⁶ The police *daroga* could not obtain any assistance either from *Paiks* or Digwars, who in fact, threatened death to any of the merchants who should dare to supply the sepoys with provisions, and they declared that they were authorized to do so by the Rani Shiromani and the Raja of Karnagarh and Narajole. The peaceful ryots and the zamindars of that locality also joined them.

The Rani asked all the jungle zamindars to meet and decide upon a common course of action. The *Paiks* spiritedly joined the band of the Adivasis even after the arrest of the Rani and her adherents. The bazaar of Dhalhara was burnt, and a number of cattle carried off. Tribal peasants also were greatly disturbed by the exit of their old chiefs and the entry of new non-tribal zamindars. There was, therefore, much unrest from 1799 to 1800 in all those estates which were auctioned off for revenue arrears. In the case of Pachet and Raipur, Government had to yield. In Bishnupur, the Bhumijis of Barabhum, Manbhum and other jungle Mehals came in thousands to assist the family of the late Raja Chetan Singh to get back its zamindari.³⁷

The unrest began to spread when the Ghatwals began to get aggrieved by the actions of the Government. In 1799 the Midnapore Collector wrote that these people “were contented, industrious, brave, truthful, and confiding, much attached too to their proprietors, but if they were oppressed a whole village would literally in one night ‘up stick’ and go off to some zamindar, whose general character promised them

³² C. R. Blunt, Acting Magistrate, Burdwan to Government 28th February 1799, JCR, nos.16, 45 & 28.

³³ Thus a symbiotic relationship between the peasants and the rebels were established. A theoretical interpretation is reflected in the subaltern and most modernist groups of historians.

³⁴ Letter from the Collector of Midnapore dated 1st March, 1799, Board of Revenue (heretofore refer to BOR) Proceedings, 4th March, 1799, no. 17.

³⁵ JCR, 24th October 1799, no.6. There are heaps of files of Judicial (Criminal), Board of Revenue and Revenue Department Proceedings for the period 1798-1800 in the West Bengal State Archives when the Adivasi led Chuar Rebellion had reached at its climax.

³⁶ RD, 12 November 1799, no. 45.

³⁷ Ibid, 15th December, 1799, no. 25.

better treatment”.³⁸ The Ghatwals, appearing as the leaders of the tribal community, defied their own chiefs. The Permanent Settlement also damaged the interest of the Ghatwals, so that their custom of receiving ‘rewards’ was totally curtailed. Their *ghatwali (paikan)* lands were resumed under the 1793 Regulations. They had thus no alternative but to join with their brethren against the Company’s Government. In the vicinity of the town of Midnapore there were three places where the Paiks assembled in force, viz. Bahadurpore, Salbani and Karnagarh, the last place being the residence of the Rani of Midnapore, which had been brought under *khas* or government management. In these places they started on their various attacks in search of plunder, returning to divide the spoils. The Collector of Midnapore reported: “I am at a loss to point out the situation of a district Midnapore. I cannot remain an idle spectator of the innumerable outrages which are daily committed with impunity. On the night of the 14th two villages in which there was a large quantity of grain, were burning during the whole night and part of the next day... Bahadurpore also is entirely deserted, the grain merchants are unable to come to pargana Midnapore to purchase paddy, all communications being cut off, the inhabitants are flocking to the town for protection... and believe that the paiks have determined to plunder and burn”.³⁹

In consequence the ryots⁴⁰ left their homes and so prevented the collection of revenue.⁴¹ The former Zamindar of Raipur along with the Paiks and Adivasis surrounded the cutchery of the darogha of Gunada and had fought from evening till 10 o’clock of the following morning. They set fire to the bazaar and cutchery and overran the place and blocked it up. They wounded a sepoy and two of the barkandazes and killed two common people. The Paiks had grown so bold that villages not more than one *coss* from Midnapore were plundered and the Collector wrote that a few nights earlier about 200 of them with lighted *marshals* (torches) came to the opposite side of the river Subarnarekha. They ordered Raghunath Pal, a *tehsilder* of the lately resumed *paikan* land, to supply them with a large quantity of rice, *dal* etc. The ryots were daily streaming into Midnapore with their cattle and effects, while others went to other districts to keep themselves aloof. The paddy was not yet cut down, nor did any person dare to cut it down, as they ran the risk of being murdered. When the Collector sent peons, they were generally threatened and manhandled, particularly those whom he sent to demand the balances of *Abkari Mahals* in the month of *Baisakh* 1205 (corresponding to 1798-99). The rebels murdered six persons at Shiromani on 13th September; on the 26th two men were put to death near Anandapur; on the 9th October a party of Chuars attacked a village ten miles from Midnapore; and on the 5th and 30th December 1799 they plundered several villages near the town. The property of Government kept in Anandpore village was burnt and plundered by 2000 *Paiks*. They had cut off the heads of one of the *Sebandi* sepoy and of a *barkandaz* and had hung them up to a tree; the rest made their escape to Midnapore. The Collector was alarmed when the *Paiks* declared their plan to plunder the town of Midnapore.

³⁸ JCR 22nd December, 1799, no.1.

³⁹ Letter from the Magistrate to Col. Dunn, dated 19th December 1799 (MDC).

⁴⁰ It may be argued whether the ryots left the villages out of fear or to meet the insurgents.

⁴¹ Extract of a letter of Magistrate, Midnapore to the Revenue Board dated December 14th, 1799: Hunter, 2018, vol. I : 42.

Trends of Popular Revolt

The rebels did not think it necessary to keep it a secret that their main intension was to burn and plunder the *tehsils* and zamindaris. The *tehsildars* and *serishtadars* of Janpurand other places of Midnapore itself were threatened several times. The situation was so dangerous for the zamindars and European officials that it became quite difficult to travel in day time .The tehsildar of Anandpore also reported that it was impossible to realize the revenues and there was a grave risk to his life. The striking feature of the situation was that the police system proved an utter failure. The police darogahs were prone to take bribes and to exploit the simple tribal people at their will.⁴² Thus, Govind Ram, the police darogah of Chatna and Manbhum, was charged with “having received bribes for releasing persons accused before them”.⁴³ The British Government thought that, the tribals themselves were “in general a very brave and inoffensive people”.⁴⁴There were some police officers who even refused to go and work in the disturbed area on the plea of ‘indisposition’. The darogahs of Raipur, Silda, Satpati and Manbhum were the principal ‘delinquents’.

The Adivasis adopted guerrilla warfare and avoided any direct clash with the troops, but they hit the sepoys from behind jungle and hill. Many of the sepoys also succumbed to the unwholesome air of the jungles. The threat to burn the town with the help of multi-dimensional components was no doubt an indication of anti-colonial resistance. The situation reached such a critical juncture that an Adivasi-led peasant insurgency could not be stopped.

Measures taken by the British

It was suggested that the jungle zamindars outside the area of jungle Mehal should be made responsible for the preservation of public peace in their respective estates. Considering the situation the implementation of a new scheme was deferred till the rebellion had entirely ceased since it was argued that such a concession might create a sense of victory in favour of the Chuars. Written guarantees (*muchalaka*) were obtained from Raja Gopinath Dhal of Supur, Motilal Dubraj, the eldest son of Raja Jagannath Dhal of Ghatshila, Birchand Hakim, *Mukhtar* Gopinath, the minor zamindar of Ambikanagar, Pratap Narain, zamindar of Manbhum, Bansi Maiti, mukhtar of Barabhum, and Lachmi Narain, zamindar of Chhatna that they should not assist the Adivasis in any way. Later on, in 1795 the landholders of the jungle Mehals were vested with the joint charge of police of their respective estates to act in concert with the darogas under Regulation XXII of 1793. Side by side the Board had recommended in September 1799 that for the sake of restoring cultivation, the *Paiks* might be restored to their former lands and a remission of dues might be allowed.

The loyal zamindars were also entrusted to apprehend the insurgents and it was stated that “any zamindar who may be convicted of having connived at the

⁴² JCR 29th August 1799, no. 4. A similar charge was proved against Md. Murad, the police daroga of Chitrapal and several others.

⁴³ Letter from the Collector of Midnapore to Board dated 30th August 1799(MDC)

⁴⁴JCR, 28th December 1799, no. 1.

assemblage or passage of “choars” would be punished. Zamindars would also be held responsible for all the property stolen in their jurisdictions. These zamindars were considered by the British as ‘refractory’ and the inhabitants of the territory ‘rude and ungovernable’. The Magistrate of Midnapore permitted to distribute the Company’s offer of reward for apprehending Lutchmun Singh and others. A reward was offered for the arrest of Gobardhan Dagpati and Kanak Singh, “the dangerous men”. The Magistrate directed to arrest the Rani, and her adherents to capture the fort of Karnagarh, a convenient refuge for the insurgents. Being alarmed, the Company’s Government installed night patrolling in the streets of Midnapore. Even the suspicious persons were told to appear at the bungalow of the District Magistrate within fifteen days from the date of publication of a notification. Under the circumstances it was proposed to frame separate regulations for the jungle zamindars and the ryots in order to realize the revenue. The jungle chiefs or zamindar, however, were deemed a turbulent and independent class, described as follows in 1799: “These zamindars are mere freebooters who plunder their neighbours and one another; and their tenants are banditti, whom they chiefly employ in their outrages. These depredations keep the zamindars and their servants continually in arms”.⁴⁵

In spite of all the measures adopted by the Government, one hundred insurgents in 1800 A. D. attacked the house of Lakshi Charan, Kali Charan Pal, Rup Charan Mahapatra and two *chaukidars* of Anandapore.⁴⁶ Patra, a village of the East Midnapore was set fire to, and Gangaram Mondal who farmed a *hudda* during the period of decennial settlement, was put to death.⁴⁷ Two villages of Silda and Raipur were occupied under a Bagdi leader. They took possession of six or seven villages of Balarampur, Rajgarh, Salbani and Anandapur.

Conclusion

In considering the nature of rebellion, we have to keep in mind that the main targets of attacks were the loyal zamindars, *Tehsildars*, grain dealers and the common people. There were some instances where the peasants had become the victims in the hands of the rebels but in most of the cases the peasants had joined with the rebels as much as possible. A common cause of friendship was established in between the peasantry and the Adivasis if any one comes across the thousands of files of West Bengal State Archives and Midnapore District Collectorate. Without the peasant support it was quite difficult for the rebels to hide out in the dense forests for a long time. Discussing the peasant consciousness, particularly, during their involvement in rebellion or uprising against their master (Raj) they did so, according to Ranajit Guha (Guha, 1993; Guha, 1992), obviously in violation of a series of codes which defined his existence. Guha has admitted the fact that ‘this consciousness seems to have received little notice in the literature’. Guha thinks that ‘they [peasant and adivasis] break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, in fact like epidemics’. Thus Guha’s consideration ‘*praxis of the rebellion*’ goes against the colonial historiography. In other words, when the proverbial clod of earth turns, this

⁴⁵ RD 15th March, 1800, no. 33.

⁴⁶JCR 9th January 1800, no.15.

⁴⁷ Ibid 24th April, 1800, nos. 3-5.

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is a matter to be explained in terms of natural history. Even when this historiography is pushed to the point of producing an explanation in rather more human terms it will do so by assuming an identity of nature and culture, a hallmark presumably, of a very low state of civilisation and exemplified in “those periodical outbursts of crime and lawlessness to which all wild tribes are subject”, as J. C. Price, the pioneering historian put it.

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