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Regimenting the Rebellious: Colonial 'Non-Regulation' Governance against Adivasi Assertion in Eastern India, 1830-1855

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Abstract

The British East India Company encountered significant challenges in the subjugation of the Adivasi hinterlands, where the rugged terrain and closely-knit Adivasi communities mounted formidable resistance. Initially, a major part of Adivasi-inhabited eastern and central India operated as buffer zones under the de facto control of powerful local zamindars. Yet, colonial ambitions in the mid-19th century galvanised a shift towards direct colonial governance and Adivasi resentment. The Company formulated the 'Non-Regulation' Policy, purportedly to grant Adivasi autonomy by exempting these regions from normal legal codes. Rather than an act of benevolence, this policy was a calculated mechanism to consolidate colonial authority. Best exemplified in Santal Parganas and Chotanagpur, the policy, instead of ensuring stability, exacerbated Adivasi unrest. Instituted between 1830 and 1855 in the two Adivasi tracts, this policy laid the groundwork for enduring governance structures that systematically marginalised Adivasi societies. By examining dispossession and marginalisation under the 'Non-Regulation' dispensation, this study explores how Adivasi communities, based on their cultural traditions and worldviews, continuously negotiated and navigated their way under changing circumstances.

Introduction

Change and continuity are intricately interwoven threads that collectively shape history's unfolding tapestry (Burke 1979). Nowhere is this interplay more striking than in the Adivasi experience under British colonial rule. The early 19th century saw sweeping colonial interventions that sought to dismantle Adivasi social life. The Adivasi communities resolutely resisted the imperial encroachment upon their cultural system, the crux of which was individual land tenure ownership under the longstanding Adivasi cultural traditions (Hunter 1868: 257; O'Malley 1910: 58). Such dialectics of disruption and resistance reveal the complex, non-linear patterns of historical change in Adivasi society (Das Gupta 2011). However, an influential section of scholarship distorts Adivasi histories, depicting the passive assimilation of Adivasi cultures into the so-called 'advanced' neighbouring cultures. Encapsulating this, theoretical models like the 'Great Tradition' and 'Sanskritisation' overlook the role of Adivasi agency in shaping their destinies (Orans 1965; Srinivas 1976: 15). A set of social science studies reinforces a unidirectional cultural flow of Adivasi society leading to absorption. Studies ignore recognising how Adivasi culture, under certain situations, influenced non-Adivasi neighbouring societies, even 'tribalising' them (Majumdar 2005; Singh

2007). Adivasi societies most of the time interrogated, negotiated, and subverted incoming forces (Banerjee 2016; Sarkar 2011; Dasgupta 2018: 1-9).

Even when Adivasi societies are shown as fluid and 'permeable,' the proponent of Adivasi cultural assimilation in the Hindu caste system concedes Adivasi cultural component (Béteille 1986: 297-318; Béteille 1991: 76). Yet, overriding this, Adivasi cultural identity and agency are considered amorphous concepts. Dismissing a 'true, essential core identity' within Adivasi resistance relegates their struggle to mere discursive abstraction, erasing the deeply embedded material dimensions of their defiance (Sarkar 2011: 66-67). Likewise, the argument that Adivasi narratives need not always 'express difference and dissonance' dangerously flattens the complexities of power, marginalising struggles against oppression and for self-determination (Dasgupta 2018: 8). While grand historical narratives rightly foreground subaltern resistance, particularly of the working class and peasantry, they often neglect the distinct patterns of Adivasi assertion (Guha 1983: 263; Sarkar 2003: 45). The early period under Company colonial rule, particularly, is framed as a phase of Adivasi cultural dormancy, marked by silence and submission (Jha 1987: 269).

Such narratives emphasise the crushing weight of colonial power, as evidenced by repressive policies and actions, especially the brutal handling of the 'Kol' Revolt (1831-1832) and the Santal *Hul* (1855-1856). However, studies overlook the crucial aspect of Adivasi cultural vigour, responses, and undercurrents in these uprisings. Adivasi histories, far from being stories of passive adaptation, were testimonies to active contestation and enduring self-definition by the Adivasi societies (Pati 2011: 3). Adivasi response was neither silent nor subdued. Rather than mirroring dominant forms of aggression, Adivasis invoked traditional beliefs, rituals, and community structures to mobilise and resist external domination (Correndo 2021: 131-156; Das Gupta 2011: 1-26; Priyadarshi 2010-2011: 696-705; Xaxa 1999: 3589-3595). Departing from the myopic frameworks, the present essay investigates how, since the onset of colonial rule, Adivasi societies continuously navigated through shifting socio-political landscapes, challenging, countering, and subverting hegemonic impositions rather than being left inert. The Adivasi engagement, this paper suggests, was not merely an act of cultural ghettoisation but an inner urge of dynamic resistance to the imposing powers. To argue this, the study takes the case of Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas in east India, two culturally most fermented Adivasi tracts under British colonialism. By juxtaposing colonial perceptions with Adivasi worldviews, the paper recapitulates the regimentation of the Adivasi society by the Company regime and shows how Adivasi cultural prowess worked in response.

A good deal of historical studies demonstrates the dynamics of Adivasi resistance (Andersen, Carrin and Soren 2011: 1-30; Bara 2009: 50-58; Bhukya 2008: 103-109; Padel and Das 2011: xii-34; Pati 2011: 1-27; Stanley 2022: xxi-31). However, scholars focus largely on the evolution of Adivasi social and political consciousness since the mid-19th century, with greater emphasis on the period surrounding independence (Chaudhuri 1994; Mahto 2023; Parmar 2015;. Despite setting the contours of Adivasi governance under colonialism and afterwards, the promulgation of the 'Non-Regulation' legislation since 1833 remains almost underexplored (Correndo 2021: 103; Sen 1984: 3). The 'Non-Regulation' policy was not merely an instrument of imperial arrogance; it emerged as a riposte to organised Adivasi resistance, notably the 'Kol'

Rebellion (1831-1832) and the Santal *Hul* (1855), against advancing colonial domination, where Adivasi cultural features were the substance and mobilising force.

By exempting regions like the Chotanagpur Plateau, Jungle Tarai, and Santal Parganas from the Bengal Presidency's standard legal framework under the 'Non-Regulation' dispensation, the British sought to consolidate control while mitigating unrest. Rather than pacifying the Adivasi communities, the move further catalysed resistance, leaving a lasting imprint on both colonial governance and Adivasi society's claim for cultural space (Sen 1984: 140-145). Historical literature often portrays the 'Non-Regulation' framework as an instrument of imperial power aimed at subduing the restless Adivasis, while some works remain preoccupied with the decisive role of certain individual colonial officials such as Augustus Cleveland in Jungle Tarai and David Scott in Assam in executing this (Barooah 1970; Nath 2017: 33-53; Singha 2000: xvii, 172-212). Furthermore, the endeavours of some other scholars merely scratch the surface of the lasting implications of 'Non-Regulation' (Bara 2009; Sen 1984). The 'Non-Regulation' policy was not merely a tool of colonial governance but also a testament to Adivasis' ardent disapproval of the British superciliousness and their ingenuity as a cultural group. Steadfast defiance of the Santal, Paharia, Oraon, Munda, and Ho Adivasis compelled the British to dither in integrating their tracts outrightly with the neighbouring tracts inhabited by others and extract certain concessions. The policy reflected British preliminary recognition of the cultural exclusiveness of the Adivasi society, paving the way for Adivasi-focused colonial ethnographical projects in the following decades as free-trade imperialism became robust.

Setting the stage: Antecedents and ideological underpinnings

The conceptualisation of special administrative arrangements for Adivasi societies emerged in the late 18th century as the British confronted hostile Adivasis in East India. Following the transfer of the *Diwani* of Bengal, the East India Company showed nominal interest in the peripheral Adivasi areas. Chotanagpur, a hilly, infertile region with limited commercial appeal, was initially governed through remote outposts like Sherghati (near Gaya) and later Chatra. The British relied on traditional *zamindars* to act as proxy rulers (Bradley-Birt 1903: 18; Habib 1995: 358; Sen 1984: 140). Chotanagpur was home to 'self-respecting,' 'sensitive,' 'peace-loving,' and 'autochthonous' Munda, Oraon, Ho, and Kharia Adivasis, and Santal Parganas of the Santals and Paharias (Bradley-Birt 1903: 22-136; Cuthbert 1827: 9; Dalton 1866: 154). In Chotanagpur, colonial surveyor John Reid discerned Adivasis' 'remarkable tenacity' with the land they owned, indicating their deep bond with it. Land to them was not just a resource; it was a sacred site, connecting them with their dead ancestors, whose spirits were believed to reside there (Reid 1912: 10).

Adivasis' special attachment with and centrality of land in the society was rooted in pre-colonial history. The early Adivasi settlers called *khutkattidars* reclaimed land from virgin forests. Their descendants, called later *bhuinhars*, lived in closely-knit villages. In principle, the village community owned the land and individual families used specific tracts for inhabitation and cultivation. As they multiplied, a group of villages formed a confederation, called *patti* or *parha*, for certain administrative and defence needs. Over centuries, the land-centric way of life shaped a distinct Adivasi cultural

identity. Their society was largely egalitarian, with village headmen and confederation leaders serving as *primus inter pares* - first among equals, which has inspired scholars to describe it as a 'specimen of Eastern democracy' (Roy 1968: 236; Mukherjee 1923: 221-223). Unmolested for long, the encroachment of Adivasi lands by the outsiders began in pre-colonial times. The confederation chief was replaced by a *raja* (*maharaja* later), essentially an outsider landlord, who later sublet *zamindari* rights to Brahmins, Rajputs and others for religious and secular services (Dalton 1867: 162). Adivasi chiefs were overall marginalised, though some of them were co-opted as the Raja's coterie. Nominal subscriptions of a voluntary nature to Adivasi chiefs for their services to the community were replaced by regular rents and feudal impositions, including forced labour.

British colonialism not only proliferated landlords, but it also made them more extortionate. Alien and oppressive laws geared to heavy revenue demands were imposed, superseding the Adivasi cultural traditions and institutions[1] (Das Gupta 2011: 5-6; Mahto 2020: 83; Pati 2006: 175-176). *Zamindars* as frontline agents of colonialism became the local power to determine the fate of the Adivasi masses, amounting to what Hoffmann and Emelen deemed, entrusting 'sheep to the guardianship of the wolf' (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. V: 162, 1443). As a feudalistic shade, the *zamindars* and their men controlled the Adivasis' access to British officials. For a simple Adivasi from a remote village, reaching the outlying British camp office was Herculean, no less than gaining access to the 'Delhi Durbar' of the imperial Mughals (Reid 1912: 34). The new situation made the Adivasis squirm and rebel since the late 18th century. The colonial craze for revenue being the central and insatiable object, no remedy came forth from the British authorities. Groaning under incessant suppression, Adivasis resisted serially (Lister 1917: 66).

As a means of knowing and pacifying the rebellious Adivasis, the British relied on local spies, data feeders and secretaries, military and police force and others for information on them (Bayly 1996: 1). Local Indian subordinates and intermediaries, who became the channel of information, often misrepresented the Adivasis. This triggered a 'clash of cultures,' wherein Adivasi worldviews were pitted against colonial epistemologies, contesting both British domination and the sub-human stereotyping funnelled by the pandits of the plains (Fagan 1998: 15-35). The outsiders' domination and sub-human attitude were always disapproved of by the Adivasis. In the pre-colonial phase, the Adivasi social system was dislocated by the *diku* elements and the Adivasi populace was demonised in myriad ways by Brahminical construction (Grignard 1909: 7; Bara 2002: 14). Against inundation by *dikus* and cultural onslaughts, the Adivasis struggled to preserve themselves within their cultural enclaves. As part of their struggle, they resented by associating the *dikus* with 'greedy vultures,' 'ravenous crows,' 'ominous owls' and people of 'low birth' in their folk songs (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. VII: 515; Roy 1912: 93).

British colonialism harboured the Brahminical construction of Adivasis and fused Western racism into it. In the beginning, early British observers, labelled them as the

[1] Joseph Bara, *Modern Education and the Rise of Self-Identity Among the Mundas and Oraons of Chotanagpur, 1839-1947* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of Education, University of Delhi, 2002).

quintessential 'Indian tribe' (Bara 2002: 14). The Adivasi self-perception of Adivasi as a respectable man called 'horo' or its corruption, 'kol,' was, under colonial effect, linked to the Sanskrit word 'kola' meaning 'dirty pig' to malign the Adivasis (Bradley-Birt 1903: 6; Dalton 1867:154; Grierson 1906: 7; Chatterji 1923: 455; Dalton 1867: 154; Roy 1968: 207). Under the early Orientalist literature, Ramayanic descriptions of Adivasis thrived (Dalton 1866: 193). Supposedly new, the information set was replete with the informants' prejudices on the Adivasis, inherited from the age-old Indian imageries of Adivasi as *nisada*, *dasyu*, *daitya* and so on (Bara 2002: 13; Thapar 1978: 152-192). W.W. Hunter, for instance, observed the Adivasis labelled as 'black-skinned' 'giants' and 'raw-eaters' in Birbhum (Hunter 1868: 67). Likewise, in neighbouring Jungle Tarai region, James Browne's Report, 1774-1779 drew essence from popular *Bhavisyat Purana* and described them as 'black,' sub-human, and immoral' (Sinha 1996: A-7,15).

To the local imagery, the element of Western racism was added. The Adivasis were contrasted with the 'modern English gentleman,' described as the 'highest type of ape,' they were considered deficient human beings (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. IV: 1117). To British civil servant F.B. Bradley-Birt, the restless Adivasis were 'ill-armed, impetuous savages' before the disciplined Company forces during the Adivasi uprisings (Bradley-Birt 1903: 90; Stanley 2022: 3). In 1827, S.T. Cuthbert, the political surveyor of Chotanagpur called the Adivasis 'lawless savages,' scarcely distinct from 'the lowest kind of Hindus' (Cuthbert 1827: 14). Against Adivasi resistances, the colonial epistemology treated the Adivasis as *chuars* and *dakaits* for the Adivasis, inclined to 'plunder and rapine' (Haldar 1880: 82). The Hos of Singhbhum in the southern part, known for challenging British advances forthrightly, were described as 'dread savages' (Roughsedge to Metcalfe, 9 May 1820: Paragraphs 15, 17, 33).

While dealing with the racially inferior Adivasi backwards, the British also noticed streaks of their cultural exclusiveness. In 1811, Francis Buchanan in his survey of the district of Bhagalpur noted the Paharias outside the Hindu caste system (Oldham 1930: 99). In another account of 1820 on the district and neighbouring part, Walter Hamilton found the Santal population inhabiting forest parts and distinct in terms of physical appearance and social behaviour; though surrounded by Hindu caste groups, they were not swamped by them (Hamilton 1820: 148, 249). Similar Adivasi distinctiveness was noticed in Chotanagpur a decade after the aforesaid Cuthbert Report by John Davidson, the Assistant to the Governor General's Agent of the South-West Frontier Agency (as Chotanagpur was then called). Davidson discerned the remnants of the original *parha* system, with each *parha* having its own 'distinguishing flag or ensign,' besides the general cultural practices (Roy 1912: 108). Corroborating this, Hamilton noted that amidst 'impervious jungles' there were 'many strange tribes' who had 'not become converts to Brahminical doctrines' (Hamilton 1820: 288). Another avid Western observer of the period, Bishop Reginald Heber, saw the Adivasis occupying the mountains between Bhagalpur and Burdwan and despised them as 'abominable' for not submitting to Hinduism (Laird 1971). For the same reason, the Mundas and Oraons were contemptibly called 'still impure and probably unconverted Mlechchas' (Hamilton 1820: 288).

Beyond Brahminical prejudices, Adivasis possessed certain special social features and human qualities. Most of them were, as Santals were found, impoverished, 'apparently

in the lowest stage of misery,' though some were good cultivators (ibid.: 148). Yet invariably, Adivasis were found meritorious and virtuous too. To Hamilton, Santals were 'mild, sober, industrious' and 'remarkable for sincerity and good faith' (ibid.). The 'Cole' Adivasis of Chotangpur were generously appreciated by Davidson:

> The Coles are by no means the extremely simple and easily imposed upon people, that you appear to have been led to suppose. On the contrary, they are in all that concerns their own small transactions, I should say are an intelligent people, as much, if not more so than labouring class of any part of India, which I have visited (Davidson 1839: 243).

As they were deprived materially and repressed by dual racism, the Adivasis were able to retain the essence of their cultural edifice. Colonial milieu rather aroused awareness of their cultural traditions and underlying values. This fuelled and sustained the cycle of Adivasi opposition to colonial injustice since the inception of British rule. One of the first Adivasi groups to rebel was the Paharias of Rajmahal Hills (1770-1778). Under Mughal rule, they had a symbiotic relationship with local landlords, but British incursions disrupted this balance. When Paharias sought to reassert their independence, the landlords betrayed them, massacring several of their headmen (Nath 2017: 36). In retaliation, Paharias raided the plains continuously from their forest base, bolstered by the Bengal Famine situation of 1770 (Sherwill 1852: 545). Later, the local British authorities acknowledged that these raids were essentially 'revenge' for 'excesses committed' by the 'Bengalees'.[2]

As a way of self-defence, the Paharias lured Company forces into the jungle, where their rifles did not match the poisoned bows and arrows of the former (Sherwill 1852: 545-546). Captain Brooke, Commandant of the Light Infantry, was compelled to employ a dual strategy: military expeditions and lenient treatment of rebel prisoners to gain their trust. He also convinced them to protect postal communications along the Farrukhabad road, earning the title of 'pioneer of civilisation' in the Rajmahal Hills (Kaye 1853: 461). Captain James Browne (1774-1778) continued his policy, co-opting *sardars*, *naibs*, and *majhis* into governance to maintain order (O'Malley 1910: 36). The government ultimately adopted a conciliatory approach, acceding to the restoration of Paharias' customary rights in the Rajmahal Hills.

To execute the policy, Augustus Cleveland, Collector and Judge of Bhagalpur, Munger, and Rajmahal, was made responsible in 1779. Cleveland sought to reform the 'predatory' habits of the Paharias and secure their allegiance to the British authority as a way of 'civilisation' (Buckland 1905: 85). Drawing upon strategies of Captains Brooke and Browne, he planned administrative reforms, education, and military recruitment among the Paharias (O'Malley 1910: 35-41; Sherwill 1852: 546). His paternalistic approach earned praise from Warren Hastings, and it led to Paharias' 'complete subjugation,' lauded later as his great feat of 'taming those Rob Roys' of

[2] 'No. 46 From E.F. Lantour, offg. Collector of Bhagalpur, Collector office dt. 10 July, 1854 to S.F. Brown, the Commissioner of Revenue, Bhagalpur.' Chapter - VI, 'Letter Copy Book - II, Collector's office, Bhagalpur (From March 1853 - June 1857) in S. P. Sinha, *Papers Relating to Santal Hul (Insurrection) (1855-56)*, Patna: Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute for the Government of Bihar, Welfare Department. 1991.

Rajmahal (O'Malley 1910: 41; Sinha 1996: 85; Anonymous 1869: 110). Thereafter, Cleveland established the Bhagalpur Hill Rangers, which remained active until the Revolt of 1857 (Davidson 1839: 243; Ricketts 1855: 36; Hewitt 1893: 237-300). The arrangements worked uneasily for a few years. Shortly later, 1790 onwards, the British encouraged the Santals to settle the area, marginalising the Paharias further (O'Malley 1910: 42-44).

The Cleveland experiment became a colonial model for 'special' administrative treatment of the Adivasis. After the annexation of the Sagar and Narmada regions in 1818, it was applied among the Gonds (Campbell 1893: 168). Later, James Outram replicated it among the Bhils of Khandesh, on the outskirts of the Central Provinces. The British viewed the area as entangled in 'anarchy and lawless oppression' due to marauding Bhil groups (Graham 1843: 5). Initial efforts to assert British control through military expeditions and the lure of financial allowance failed, prompting a harsher strategy to forcibly 'civilise' the Bhils and establish 'peace and good order' (Graham 1843: 5). Outram's paternalistic policies (1825-1829) sought to integrate the Bhils by establishing agricultural colonies, the Bhil Corps, and schools (Trotter 1903: 24; Graham 1843: 13). However, unlike the Paharias, the Bhil experiment lacked a standing administrative framework, as their struggles stemmed more from regional instability than direct anti-British resistance.

Theatrics, salience and M etaphors: 'Non-Regulation' in Chotanagpur

Against the setting of special dispensation for the Paharias and Bhils, the 'Non-Regulation' doctrine was formalised in Chotanagpur. The Third Anglo-Maratha War (1817-1818) assured British political supremacy, encouraging colonial expansion and consolidation. As a preparatory measure, in Chotanagpur, recalcitrant landlords were subdued (Hallet 1917: 183-213; Das Gupta 2011: 27). A geological survey by Henry Wesley Voysey in 1823 discovered rich deposits of iron ore, gold, diamonds, and coal (Bradley-Birt 1903: 6; Cuthbert Report 1827: 14-15; King 1891: 4). The colonial officials' thrusted cultivation of commercial crops like poppy upon the infertile field for the burgeoning Chinese market (Cuthbert 1827: 15; Thapar & Siddiqui 1979: 137). By 1827, Magistrate-Collector S.T. Cuthbert's political survey underscored the strategic significance of the region, thereby advocating for even greater colonial intervention (Ibid.: 14). Collectively, these developments reconfigured Chotanagpur as a vital imperial frontier, exemplifying the dynamics between colonial policies and market-driven ambitions.

The agrarian landscape of Chotanagpur underwent a profound transformation with the implementation of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, showing brisk rhythms of colonial modernity (Bradley-Birt 1903; Das Gupta 2011). Land was commodified, shifting from a communal asset to a marketable resource, while agriculture transitioned to commercial cultivation (Mallick 2012: 749). Traditional *zamindars* were displaced by migrant *thikadars* (revenue farmers), initially Muslim, Sikh, and other horse dealers and traders of shawls and brocades who supplied this merchandise to the Nagabansi Maharaja's court[3] With only temporary stakes in leased villages, they imposed exorbitant rents, *aswabs*, and *salamis* on the Adivasi cultivators (ibid.). The Maharaja's

[3] Paper Relating to Chotanagpur Agrarian Disputes, Vol. I, 1880, 87.

leasing model was soon replicated by other landlords. In 1827, Cuthbert recognised the centrality of the *bhuinhari* system, but widespread land encroachments on *bhuinhari* land (Cuthbert 1827: 6). Besides enhanced rent and feudal demands, *bethbegari* (forced labour) demands kept increasing (Reid 1912: 78-105). Consequently, there prevailed a widespread 'smouldering discontent' among the Adivasis, expressed in an uprising in 1820 (Lister 1917: 66). Ignoring this, the authorities remained interested in extending their colonial interests.

The tide of Adivasi angst paved the way for the 'Kol' rebellion of 1831-1832. As revealed by the post-rebellion enquiry conducted by Joint Commissioners, Dent and Thomas Wilkinson, the immediate provocation was the recent new ways of deprivation and exploitation of the Adivasis by the 'obnoxious' *thikadars*, especially in the Munda regions of Sonepur and Tamar, the centres of rebellion (Reid 1912: 34). To this was added the incidence of imposition of poppy cultivation. The rebels stated that not only the Maharaja was indifferent to their grievances, but even British authorities were deaf to their case, leaving them with no option but to rebel. Notably, while resorting to rebellion, the Mundas invoked their traditional Adivasi bonds as one people to repel their enemies. They resolved that since 'our lives were considered of no value and being of one caste and brethren … [it was] agreed upon that we should commence to cut, plunder, murder and loot' (ibid.). The rebellion spread across the regions of Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamau, and Manbhum. The Ho brethren of the Mundas in Singbhum, renowned for their 'unyielding tenacity,' fiercely defended their land and autonomy against the local rajas or *zamindars*, and their British patrons (Bradley-Birt 1903: 82; Das Gupta 2011: 102).

The kernel of Adivasi deprivation was traditional land ownership. Adivasis based their claim of land rights on the inherited tradition for generations. As evidence, they pointed to the village *sasandiris* or burial sites, where they said the bones of their ancestors lay, which were bound to be trashed by the rigid record-based land ownership system of the British (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. VIII: 2385-2391). Accordingly, the Dent-Wilkinson inquiry acknowledged rampant dispossession and exploitation of the Adivasis. Yet, when it came to the causes of the revolt, the enquiry saw an innate role of Adivasi 'savagery:' 'considering the semi-barbarous state in which the Nagpur Koles remain, we do not deem it unnatural … that they should take part in the insurrection' (Reid 1912: 92).

Administrative neglect was perceived as the 'chief reason' for the rebellion. This prompted direct governance with a permanent headquarters at Kishenpur (moved to Lohardaga within a decade) (Bradley-Birt 1903: 20). Thomas Wilkinson, a young officer with considerable experience, was designated as Political Agent to the Governor-General to steer the administration of the South-West Frontiers Agency by the 'Non-Regulation' provision. Wilkinson was assisted by John Davidson as Special Assistant of the district of Lohardaga. The Kolhan tract of Singhbhum, predominantly inhabited by the Hos, was integrated into the SWFA. S.R. Tickell, appointed as Assistant to the Political Agent, was entrusted with its administration, with Chaibasa as its local headquarters (ibid.). A zealous authority, Wilkinson quickly learnt the Mundari language and established cordial rapport with the Mundas. Accordingly, the pair became the first trusted friends of the Adivasis, who shared their experiences of dissonance with them. Wilkinson and his associates typically practised British

benevolence to placate the Adivasis and win their confidence. Wilkinson was particularly earnest. For his amicable ways, he was fondly remembered as 'Alkisun Saheb' among the Adivasis (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. IV: 1441). Somewhat akin to Cleveland's approach in Rajmahal Hills in the 1780s, mutual trust between British officials and Adivasis was built, thanks to Wilkinson-led British 'special care' of the latter (Tickell 1840: 807).

British conciliatory approach entailed 'Non-Regulation' administration. The authorities reinstated the *mankis* and *mundas* on reduced rentals in the most affected Sonepur Pargana, compelled the *thikadars* to moderate their claims and abolished forced poppy cultivation. To curb perceived 'lawless tendencies' among the Adivasis, particularly the Hos, the British introduced the 'courts of justice' (Tickell 1840: 806). The Assistants (later Principal Assistants) were authorised to adjudicate criminal cases, subject to review by the Agent, while two *munsifs* oversaw civil disputes, with appeals directed to the Principal Assistants (Lister 1917: 67). Wilkinson devised a straightforward legal code, which, despite lacking formal government sanction, remained in practice for two decades. He further prohibited the *vakils* from representing clients in court, allowing only *mukhtars* or authorised agents to conduct cases (ibid.). To address Adivasi land alienation, Wilkinson mandated that 'no sale, mortgage, or transfer of landed property' could occur without his explicit approval (ibid.). Additionally, a *thana* (police post) was established at Lohardaga, with *zamindari thanas* instituted at select locations, including Palkot, where the Raja resided (Hallet 1917: 38.). In 1837, the Company administration promulgated 31 regulations governing civil justice in Kolhan (Das Gupta 2011: 116). The Hos were straightjacketed into the novel unfamiliar judicial structures that formed an integral part of the colonial administrative machinery in the Kolhan tract (Sen 2012).

To address the issue of Adivasi savagery, the authorities outlined a 'civilisation' programme through the agency of Western education and Christian missionaries (Bara 2002: 51). The steadfast British belief arising from Utilitarian philosophy was that Western education in Chotanagpur would 'tame' Adivasi 'barbarism' (Adam 1838: 222; Sharp 1965: 112). In the case of the Hos of Kolhan, their backwardness was attributed to 'witchcraft' and other superstitions and 'ignorance' could be dispelled through a civilisational programme.[4] In tandem, *haats* (weekly markets) were introduced and seen as focal points for Adivasi interaction with the non-Adivasi populace.[5]

The post-'Kol' Revolt 'Non-Regulation' policy worked unsatisfactorily, failing to address the core Adivasi issue of checking the landlords (Reid 1912: 26). The landlords rehabilitated themselves and acted with vengeance to suppress the Adivasis. They resisted the Adivasis who had fled their villages during the revolt to escape British reprisals and later returned to reclaim their lands. Unlike some sections of Bengal landlords, they were most feudal-minded with the least concern for the Adivasi

[4] Extract from the Chotanagpur Division. Vol. No. 27. *Political Dispatch*. 'Regarding G.G. Agent's Office Letters Addressed to Secretary of the Government.' April 20, 1820, to June 7, 1821. Para 40.

[5] Extract from the Chotanagpur Division. Vol. No. 231. 'Regarding G.G. Agent's Office Letters Addressed to Assistant of the Political Agent, SWFA (Singhbhum).' May 13, 1837, to December 1, 1840. Para 10-12.

cultivators when they handled the police responsibility (Hallet 1917: 38). At Wilkinson's initiative, *pattas* (land entitlement documents) were issued to *mundas* and *mankis*. The landlords soon contested the first document-based Adivasi claims and usurped the rights. Adivasi masses were displaced widely, compelling many to seek livelihoods beyond Chotanagpur. Even while migrating, the Adivasis were not spared of harassment and exploitation by *arkatis* (man-sellers) (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. I: 154). Henry Ricketts, Member of the Board of Revenue summed up the situation quoting Chotanagpur Commissioner Hannygton in 1855 that *bhuinhari* lands, present in every village, were 'exposed to the rapacity of the middlemen, aliens who are hated by the people, and who, to obtain these lands, spare no species of force or fraud' (Ricketts 1855: 108). Ricketts warned that the day was 'not far distant' when the Adivasis, 'goaded beyond endurance,' might resort to extra-legal resistance (Hallet 1917: 39).

The agenda of reform and 'civilisation' was also futile. Seeing them as another mechanism of exploitation, Adivasis were apathetic to the agencies of Christian mission and Western education (Bara 2005). Only after a decade of assessment, they gradually responded to them. The tool of literacy afforded by schools was realised being valuable since it enabled a literate to decipher official documents, often tampered with by the *dikus* to deceive the ignorant Adivasis. Similarly, the missionaries were also recognised as potential means of protection since they gestured to help the Adivasis to pursue their land-related disputes in the newly established judicial system and in gaining access to the British authorities.[6]

Despite volatile situation, the Company authorities upheld the 'Non-Regulation' scheme as the normative framework for Adivasi governance, perpetuating exploitation and cycles of dispossession and resistance. The ascendancy of Orientalist literature simultaneously abetted the stereotyping of Adivasis as barbarian and savage (Said 1978: 204). Nurturing these, in 1854, the government replaced the nomenclature of the SWFA with the Commissionership of Chotanagpur under Act XX.

Instead, the colonial state viewed the Adivasis of Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas as ideal recruits for a loyal British army, 'vouch[ing] for their fidelity, honesty and many other qualities' (Roy Chaudhury 1958: 39).[7] Their supposed virtues gained recognition during the 1857 Mutiny, when Europeans desperately sought allies, yet such endorsements failed to prompt substantive policies for Adivasi protection.

Witnessing no tangible improvements under British rule, many disillusioned Adivasi groups turned to Christianity, while some Santals selectively adopted Hindu practices Historian B.B. Chaudhuri argued that this strategic embrace of Hindu cultural elements was 'a conscious strategy of the [Adivasi] rebels to be better equipped to cope with their adversaries' (Chaudhuri 1994: 125-156). These cultural adaptations highlighted Adivasi resilience and their tactical engagement with colonial and socio-religious pressures.

[6] B. Mathers, Anglican-Lutheran Relations in Chotanagpur 1800-1917 with Special Reference to 1914-19: Their Historical Context and Theological Bearing (Unpublished M.Litt. thesis, University of Durham, 1984).

[7] Indo-European Correspondence, 1890, 77.

A rebellion's rhythms: Santals and the 'Non-Regulation' doctrine

By 1855, the 'Non-Regulation' concept was a well-worn tool in the British administrative arsenal for subjugating the turbulent Adivasi tracts. As an apt instrument, it was extended among the Santals in 1855 by the Government of Bengal Act XXXVII. The new district of Santal Parganas mainly encompassed the *Damin-i-Koh*, literally connoting the 'skirts of the hills,' bringing under its aegis the Santal-inhabited parts of Bhagalpur. Far from any concern of special care to the Adivasi subject, the colonial manoeuvre came as a response to the incendiary Santal *Hul* (Great Rebellion) (1855-56) that erupted against widespread exploitation by landlords, moneylenders, police, and government officials (Man 1867: 110). Amid the escalating chain of deprivation, the colonial government maintained a disconcerting silence, as testified by the rebel leaders, Sidhu, Peetoo Pergunnait, Manick Sonthal, and Dullas Maanjee. They 'repeatedly complained to the local Administrator, James Pontet, about the oppression of the mahajans,' but he could offer no redress, prompting them to appeal to A.C. Bidwell, the Special Commissioner for the Suppression of the *Hul*. (Sinha 1991: 97). Lack of action stemmed, in part, from profound ignorance of Santal cultural system, especially their way of life with deep emotional ties to the land they owned (Culshaw and Archer 1945: 218).

The Santals, unlike the established Mundas and Oraons, were recent migrants, encouraged by the British to maintain order in the area and make the idle tract productive in the wake of internecine disturbance owing to Paharia-landlord conflict. Pontet was assigned the responsibility. Amid 1790 and 1810, the turdy Santals cleared virgin forests to develop cultivable land 'in a most masterly style,' having 'the good taste to spare all the useful and ornamental trees … [for] a parklike appearance' (Anonymous 1856: 238). The special feature of Santal settlement was the importation of cultural traditions from their adjacent homelands (Bodding 1939: 428; Chatterji 1923: 459; O'Malley 1910: 45). How a prototype cultural system was transplanted in the new land was described by W.S. Sherwill, a few years before the *Hul*:

> 'In every village there is a small thatched roof … giv[ing] cover to a small earthen platform raised a foot above the ground: this spot is termed the 'Mangi,' at which is buried the memory of some former 'Mangi' or village-governor, who for his good conduct, abilities, or other good quality, has been with the unanimous consent of the villages, canonized: and the spot named after him. At these spots, the headmen of the meet, talk over the affairs of the village, threaten the unruly, punish the guilty, collect rents, and make small votive offerings to the defunct Mangi …the *Pergunnait* has charge perhaps 12 villages … the Manghi has immediate charge of his own village' (Anonymous 1856: 235-236).

As Santals were set to peaceful and contended living, the British, much satisfied with the Santal industriousness to convert barren *Damin-i-Koh* into a lucrative belt, went on increasing revenue demand (O'Malley 1910).

Santals' singular attachment to their land was tested when Bengali merchants and moneylenders encroached upon and dispossessed them through deceitful means (Hunter 1868: 403; Sinha 1991: 102). Neither familiar with the cash economy nor with

the complex colonial system of judicial administration, the simple-minded Santals emerged as perpetual losers. As they fell into the net of moneylender's debt and sought legal redressal, a Santal's only evidence could be a 'knotted string,' each knot denoting a rupee and each interval a year (Man 1867: 25; O'Malley 1910: 46). The *mahajans* (usurers) on their part paraded meticulously maintained ledgers and 'forged' bonds (Ibid.). Instances of forced seizures of the agricultural produce of Santal cultivators and cattle also ran rampant (Hunter 1868: 373). This multifaceted exploitation was compounded by Permanent Settlement (1793) that brought a predatory nexus of *zamindari* police, moneylenders, and other intermediaries, collectively called '*dekos*' by the Santals (Culshaw and Archer 1945: 218; Hunter 1868: 257).

Santals, akin to their Adivasi counterparts elsewhere, bore the brunt of Indian and Western racism. W.W. Hunter, a benevolent British officer quite sympathetic to the Adivasis, notes how the Aryan 'superiority' bred contemptuous idea of Adivasis as 'lower animals' (Hunter 1868: 78). As men of 'beastly' nature, the Santals were seen as 'blood-thirsty savages,' ever prepared for 'sudden ebullitions' on slight premises and provocations (Anonymous 1856: 226, 259). Actions of the Santals against the atrocious excesses meted out by the syndicate of *zamindar* and his subordinates, the *mahajans*, revenue officials and court *amlas*, festered and unaddressed by authorities, were dismissed as mere mischief by a 'less civilised' people (Ibid.: 226, 240).

Spearheaded by the Sido and Kanhu brothers, who claimed a divine mandate from the supreme deity, Suba Thakur, echoing later similar messianic mobilisation by Birsa Munda under *Ulgulan* in Chotanagpur, the movement was meticulously premeditated. They innovatively invoked their vibrant cultural ethos by circulating 'Sal tree branches' bearing three leaves as a symbolic reference to the number of days the rebels were required to assemble at the designated protest site of Bhognadih (in the present-day Sahebganj district). As one adolescent witness, Chotrae Desmanjhi, recalled how Sido and Kanhu campaigned before the rebellion, circulating 'leaf plates containing sun-dried rice, oil, and vermilion' in every village to overthrow the *deko* oppressors, establishing self-rule, and punishing dissent (Culshaw and Archer 1945: 220). As meticulous preparation to evade government action and sustain the rebellion, colonial strategies of repression, the military locations were tracked and monitored (Sinha 1991: 93).

Armed, solely, with bows and arrows but determined to resist, when the authorities heard about the incident at Bhognadih and deployed Paharia Hill Rangers with modern artillery, the rebels routed the latter. Since then, the revolt then spread rapidly, engulfing 'Colgong in the west to Rajmahal in the east,' and extending southward to Raniganj and beyond. As it progressed, the spirit was somewhat dampened. Durga Tudu, a *Hul* Rebel, testified that rampant sexual violence by rebel leaders alienated many, fracturing the uprising and hastening its collapse (Andersen, Carrin and Soren 2011: 181-187). Nevertheless, the *Hul*'s prime causes remained intact and alive. As a recent study appraises, the *Hul* remains British India's 'largest armed rebellion … indeed a war,' besides the 1857 mutiny-rebellion (Stanley 2022: 286). The Santals made the best use of the jungle topography in an organised manner, becoming a tangible challenge to the government forces to quell the rebellion. By July 1855, the troops suppressed the Santals at Maheshpur, inflicting approximately 200 casualties, and a little later, Burhait, the 'capital town of the hills' and another Santal stronghold, was captured. Sido was

treacherously made to surrender, and with this, the uprising dissipated. Several Santal rebels retreated into the jungle.

In the aftermath of the *Hul*, a public discussion raged in Calcutta as to how to deal with the Santal culprits. Shocked by the ferocity of violence, a general feeling was that any 'parallel' in the annals of India or 'any other equally civilised nations' was not easy to find (Hunter 1868: 25). Yet, the orgy was not found surprising since it came from 'an ignorant and undisciplined' Santals (Anonymous 1856: 227, 253). Taking them as incorrigible 'blood-thirsty savages,' some suggested the therapy of 'striking terror' to teach them a lesson; others wanted punishment of 'the severest kind,' since 'half-civilised' race like Santals did not qualify for any legal dealing (Ibid: 259-260; Hunter 1868: 397). Setting aside such sentiments, hardcore colonialists treated the incidence of *Hul* as an understandable result of the sudden intercourse of the 'wild barbarian' Santals with the superior people (Anonymous 1856: 228). The colonialists believed that like taming a tiger cub, the Santal 'savage' nature could be softened (Ibid.). Taking certain precautions, for instance, prohibiting the Santals from venturing beyond their designated settlements without a license, particularly across the Grand Trunk Road, the authorities were for special treatment (Hunter 1868: 398). The British attitude was conciliatory. As done to Paharias earlier, the *Hul* convicts were employed in road construction in the Bhagalpur district instead of punishment and appointed as railway guards (Ibid.).

Beyond the general British 'reform' and 'civilisation' of the Indian subject of this phase, the authorities were aware of 'a far more difficult and more tedious process' of civilising the Santal Adivasi (Anonymous 1856: 231). While pursuing this agenda, the authorities adopted the 'Non-Regulation' mode. While considering and executing the proposition, the Santal cultural traditions were kept in mind (Ibid.). The newly constituted district was subdivided into four administrative units: Dumka, Deoghar, Godda, and Rajmahal, each overseen by an Assistant Commissioner (O'Malley 1910: 54). The district was spared of general rules and regulations of British India. The judicial authority was centralised by the Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioners (ibid.). To prevent a recurrence of past administrative failures, the British dismantled the regular police force, a major source of Santal ire during the *Hul* (Ibid.). In its place, a decentralised policing system was introduced, entrusting village *majhis* (headmen) with maintaining order and apprehending offenders (Ibid.). Additionally, to enhance direct communication between the administration and the Santals, colonial authorities eliminated intermediaries such as *amlas* (scribes of complaints), allowing illiterate Adivasis to present grievances verbally before the Assistant Commissioner (Ibid.). Likewise, in criminal cases, Santals were permitted to approach the court with witnesses, circumventing the reliance on *vakils* (pleaders) (Ibid.).

Commissioner, George Yule, along with Deputy Commissioner Ashley Eden, played the Wilkinsonian role, embodying paternalistic and benevolent Adivasi administration (Man 1867: 128). The British approach showed instant results (O'Malley 1910: 54). In the wake of the Mutiny of 1857 when authorities were anxious about the potential involvement of the Santals, they were greatly relieved. Instead of joining the insurgent ranks, the Santals enlisted for police work. This fleeting success, however, was not to endure (ibid: 57). Within a decade, the non-regulation system, popularly referred to as

the 'Yule Instrument,' began to collapse (Carstairs, 1912: 297). Intermediaries once eliminated to ensure direct contact between the Santals and British officials, re-emerged. The structural injustices that had initially incited the *Hul* were quietly restored. A blow came from a ruling by the Advocate General, which sanctioned the *zamindars* to escalate rents and forcibly evict the *majhis*, replacing them with alien rack-renters (O'Malley 1910: 56). This legal endorsement dismantled the delicate balance achieved under the non-regulation system, exacerbating exploitation (Ibid.). To further compound the decline, *vakils* (pleaders), previously barred to simplify court access for the Santals, were readmitted into legal proceedings (Ibid.: 57).

These developments echoed the post-Wilkinsonian crumbling of the system in Chotanagpur. The situation catalysed the emergence of Christian missionaries such as Dane Hans Börresen (1825-1901) and Lars Olsen Skrefsrud (1840-1910), whom the colonial administration endorsed as agents of 'progress' and 'civilisation' (Andersen, Carrin and Soren 2011: 17; Hunter 1868: 402). Numerous Santals embraced Christianity with the hope of liberation from the exploitative quagmire. Simultaneously, some others appropriated Hindu cultural elements selectively to recharge their spirit of resistance (Chaudhuri 2022: 34).

Conclusion: reflections and insights

Emanating from the colonial project of 'scheduling' the 'tribes,' 'Non-Regulation,' originally envisioned as a special dispensation for Adivasi governance under the British regime, served as a precursor for subsequent colonial interventions. It involved the promulgation of the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, official cognisance of the 'backward tracts,' and the governmental demarcation of 'partially' and 'fully excluded' tracts. Collectively, these measures laid the groundwork for the post-independence articulation of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules within the Indian Constitution. The 'Non-Regulation' policy, apart from being an exclusive paternalistic veneer of the colonial state, was the reflection of virile Adivasi cultural traditions. The policy, rooted in sub-Orientalist epistemologies, perpetuated dual racism and structural inequalities, facilitating suppression of the Adivasis. The superficial concessions under the 'Non-Regulation' administration merely masked the continued exploitation and subjugation of Adivasi communities. Ironically, British policy towards the 'savage' Adivasis oscillated between two contradictory approaches: 'gradual assimilation' through the imposition of the 'rule of law' and market integration, and exclusion framed as a means of 'protection' (Das Gupta 2011: 115). The 'Non-Regulation' schema, particularly in its Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas variants, proved structurally flawed, and its inherent weaknesses led to its eventual collapse.

In response, Adivasi communities concertedly organised resistance, appropriating colonial legal frameworks, missionary education, and Hindu practices to assert their identity and autonomy (Pati 2011: 237; Bara 2005: 617-637; Macdougall 1985; Das Gupta 2011: 6). As Peter Stanley observes, the 'Kol' Rebellions and the Santal *Hul* share remarkable similarities in both intensity and strategy, underscoring sustained indigenous resistance to colonial modernity (Stanley 2022: 64). In all these, Adivasi cultural verve was in the background. The enduring Adivasi defiance was sustained by the resilience of the indigenous agency. The lyrical modes of protest during the *Hul*,

with roots in early nineteenth-century literature around the 'Kol' Rebellions, evolved into the corpus of *lagre* songs of rebellion (special dance and song of the Santals) by the mid-19th century. Flowing from Adivasi cultural continuities against hostile situations, these verses, are immortalised in the collective memory of Adivasi agony and protest. The Adivasis consistently articulated their opposition to the successive colonial policies by 'dialogic' interrogation (Irschick 1994: 153). How the vibrant Adivasi psyche worked is depicted by the following Santal *lagre* song:

> Head has crashed
> Fortress is razed
> Soldiers of fortress
> Were left haywire
> Like that sister, we are too
> Left shattered when parents are gone.
>
> O Madu! To that lofty land
> Do not take me there
> (Because taking me there)
> You will leave me a widow forever (Sinha 1991: iv).

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