

## BRITISH FOREST POLICY & BHUMIJ REVOLT IN JUNGAL MAHALS

PIYASHI BANERJEE\*

**Abstract:** *Indian societies had been changed by colonial rule. The agrarian societies changed by the commercialisation of agriculture on one, and the forest communities was changed by the British forest policies, on other. The Bhumij community of Jungle Mahals in the pre-British past had been dependent both on forest and on cultivation, which had ensured them a minimum livelihood. They enjoyed Paikan land for their subsistence. The local chief of Bhumij Community enjoyed Ghatwal grant. They enjoyed this land and grant on hereditary basis. But the land use had been changed by the commercial dement of British government. Their socio-economic organizations and political institutions deeply affected by the paternalistic rule of the agents of British government. In my paper I will try to examine how Bhumij community was affected by the colonial rule and how the revolt was formed in Jungle Mahals.*

**KeyWords:** *Bhumij community, Colonial rule, British forest policies, Paikan, Ghatwal.*

**The British conquest had a pronounced and profound economic impact on India. There was hardly any aspect of the Indian economy that was not changed for better or for worse during the entire period of British rule down to 1947.**

**Bipan Chandra, History of Modern India, 181**

**Introduction:** The British economic policy transformed the Indian economy into a colonial economy. Indian forest also exploited and the social structure of the forest community also changed. Colonialism and capitalism became the forest as a centre for conflict of power. Forest became an important site for the interplay of various forces like racism, colonialism, nationalism & struggle for equality during British period. British forest policy can be divided into three stages. At first stage, British claimed exceeding land revenue, and to reach this object they encouraged cultivation through clearing the forest. At second stage, forest used for commercial purpose. And at the third stage, the government wanted to

---

\* State Aided College Teacher(SACT)-I, Department: History, Sree Chaitanya Mahavidyalaya  
Mail Id: banerjeepiyashi03@gmail.com

create 'scientific forestry' by the help of different forest laws. The colonial power through the three stages not only changed the ecology of forest but also changed the social and cultural life of forest community.

### **Research Methodology:**

The present study is historical descriptive and analytical one. The study is mainly based on the Primary sources, like district gazetteer. The secondary sources are also used. The Secondary sources have been collected from various books and journals.

### **Concept of Bhumij:**

Dalton says the Bhumij are the original inhabitants of Dhalbhum, Barahbhum, Paktum, Bagmundi and they are mainly located in the country between the Kasai and Subarnarekha rivers. They are the original inhabitants, because the bhumij possess yet describe the independent traditions of migrations. Dalton observe that they had large settlements to the north of the former rivers, but they were dislodged by Aryans, who as Hindu of the Kurmi caste, now occupy their old village sites.

The Bhumij 'the children of the soil'<sup>1</sup> has a connection with the Mundas. They are mainly on linguistic grounds, as *Kolarian*. In 1850 Hodgson published a short vocabulary prepared by captain Haughton (then in political charge of Singbhum) most of the words in this appear to be merely 'HO'. Herr Nottrott of Gossner's Mission, says that the Bhumij resemble the Mundas most closely in speech and manners, but gives no specimens of their language, and does not say whether it differs sufficiently from Mundari to be regarded as a separate dialect. However, Risley believed that "the Bhumij are nothing more than a branch of the Mundas".<sup>2</sup> The bhumij of western Manbhum are no doubt pure Mundas. They inhabit the tract of the country which lies on both sides of the Subarnarekha river, bounded on the west by the edge of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, on the east by the hill range and Ajodhya is the crowning peak, on the south by the Singhbhum hills, and on the north by the hills forming the boundary between Lohardaga, Hazaribagh, and Manbhum district. In this region an enormous number of Mundari graveyards are found. The inhabitants use the Mundari language and call themselves 'Mundas', or as the name is usually pronounced in Manbhum, 'Muras'. In Dhalbhum the Bhumij call themselves 'Matkum'. (The singbhum Kols called the Bhumij as same name.)

### **The Bhumij of the Jungle Mahals:**

The Bhumij of Jungle Mahals were under the nick-name 'Chuar' (robbers), for their aggressive raids into the plains. Their livelihood depended on the swidden cultivation and hunting-gathering forest products. Over the ages, their pattern of livelihood,

combining cultivation with dependence on forests, had developed in Jungle Mahals. This interdependence was central to the socio-economic life of the Bhumij. Wild fruits, roots, herbs, and the nutritious flowers and fruit-pulp of the Muhua tree provided much of the diet, and making them less dependent on agriculture and also making them highly mobile. Tribal villages were also actively engaged in trade in firewood; silk; resin, deer and buffalo horns; wax; honey; bark fabrics; lac; medicines and charcoal.<sup>3</sup> Their hunting skills and knowledge about jungle made them an effective guerrilla force. The forest-dwelling communities of the Jungle Mahals, as their dependency on forest, could resist raid into their areas. Hamilton, says that “when the forest dwellers encountered the ‘least oppression’ from rulers or locally powerful groups, they fled.”<sup>4</sup> The indigenous ruling classes preferred to leave them alone and not attempt to take taxes. They enjoy their political autonomy and open access to forest. They also enjoy tax-free land for their service as *Paiks* (militiamen). J.C. Price notes that, “The aborigines of the jungle lands had been granted *paikan lands* (free or non-kar jots) by their Rajas for their subsistence, and they have been enjoying these lands on hereditary basis for long periods in lieu of their services of police duties to the jungle-Raja.”<sup>5</sup> Beside this *ghatwal* grants also made to local chiefs to protect Chuar raids. They guard to mountain passes. Baden-Powel noted that, “The chief (ghatwal) was allowed to take the revenue of a hill or frontier tract on the condition of maintaining a police or military force (paiks) to keep the peace and prevent raids of robbers on to the plain country below.”<sup>6</sup>

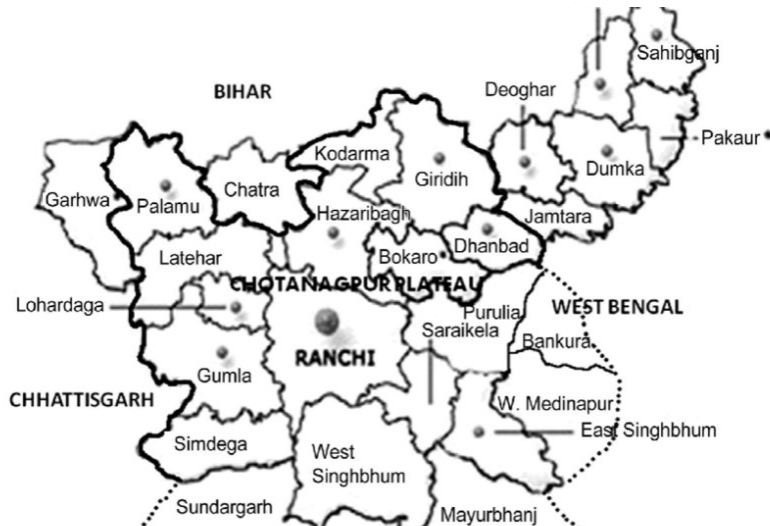
### **Bhumij Revolt at Jungle Mahals:**

The environment of Jungle Mahals had been changed by the introducing of British rule. The changes associated with the colonial period was to demand revenue and expansion of settle cultivation. Midnapure was one of the first districts in India which came under British control in 1760. This areas were covered with tracts of forest. The jungle Mahal had observed a continuous British military expeditions during the late eighteenth century. The purposes behind the military expeditions were to collect land revenue and extend their authority into the jungle Mahals. According to Richard Becher (an officer of the East-India Company) writing in 1769, “When the English received the grant of the Dewani, their first consideration seems to have been the raising of as large sums from the country as could be collected to answer the pressing demands from home and to defray the large expenses here”.<sup>7</sup> The Jungle Mahals witnesses a series of armed revolts which was organized against the taxation system of British rule. This revolt is familiar as Chuar Rebellions (1767-1800). This revolt turned into Bhumij Revolt in 1830 which was mentioned by the British officers as *Ganga Narain's Rebellion (Hungama)*.

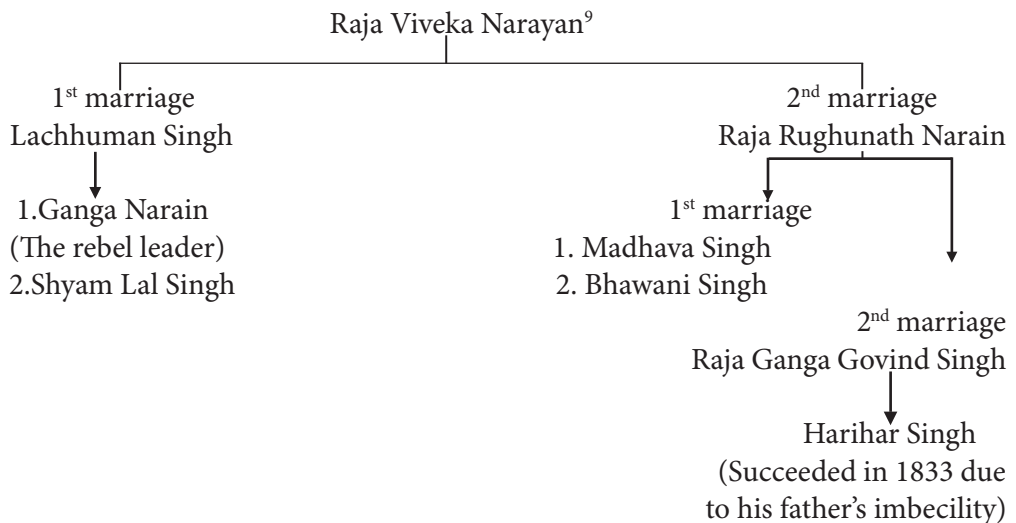
In Barabhum, there was a disputed succession. The courts decided that the eldest son

of Raja Vivika Narain, though the son of second wife, should succeed in preference to the son of the first wife, the Pat Rani. The Bhumij did not approve of the decision, because as per forest-custom the son of the first wife (the Pat Rani) will be considered as successor. But this custom is violated by the British court. Lakhman, the son of the Pat Rani was arrested for his revolt and died in jail leaving a son, **Ganga Narain**.

On the death of Raja Raghunath Singh, recurrence of previous events occurs. Raja



Raghunath Singh also died leaving two son, Madhab Singh & Ganga Gavinda. The court declared the name of the Ganga Govinda as heir in opposition to a claim again set up by Madhab Singh, the younger son, but the son of Pat Rani. Madhab Singh appointed as Diwan by failing in his suit. But he made himself unpopular, by becoming an usurious money-lender. Ganga Narain soon secured a majority of the ghatwal followers in his side. In 1832, April, he at the head of a large force of ghatwals made an attack on Madhab Singh and slew him. Ganga Narayan, first delivered a blow to Madhab Singh and each sarder ghatwal was compelled to discharge an arrow at him. A system of plundering was then commenced, which soon drew to his standard all the 'Chuars', that is all the Bhumij of Barahbhum and adjoining estates. Dultan says, " he attacked Barahbazar where the Raja lived, burned the Munsiff's (Native Civil Judge) Cutcherry and the police station from which the police had fled, but three unfortunate Peons (runners) of the Munsiff's Court were caught and killed.<sup>8</sup> For an account of certain internal reasons Ganga Narain was defeated and murdered. After the death of Ganga Narain, the disturbance in this district came to an end.



### Effect of the Bhumij Revolt:

By the effect of this Bhumij revolt and the Kol revolt in the nearest areas the Regulation XIII was formed in 1833. By this regulation the district of Jungle Mahals was broken up and a new district called Manbhum was formed. The headquarters of this district was Manbazar. In 1838 the headquarters was removed to Purulia, described then as lying “in the centre of the jungles”.<sup>10</sup>

The East-India Company adopted different policies for strengthening its control over forest during late nineteenth century. With the help of The Permanent Settlement Act zamindari estates had been established in Jungle Mahals by 1866. The tribal community and low caste groups (Jana & Jati) are forced to clear forest lands and convert it to agricultural lands. As result they had lost the *Paikan* lands to the Zaminders and Company and they became as tenant farmers. By the 1860s the forest became as a commercial space for the commercial demand of timber. As the forest was became so profitable to colonial power, the traditional rights of tribe on forest had been restricted. Bradely-Birt notes for Chotanagpur that, “new Zamindars also demanded tribals to pay taxes on muhua flowers and sometime cut down the trees and sold them for timber if they failed to pay”.<sup>11</sup> Mark Poffenberger says, “As customary assess to the forest was restricted, friction between tribal and low-caste communities and local-zamindars grew”.<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion:

Colonialism and capitalism became the forest as a centre for conflict of power, as well as it became an important site for the interplay of various forces like racism, colonialism, nationalism and struggle for equality during British period. The case of Jungle Mahal is the perfect example in this field. A family feud was transferred into a struggle against

colonialism. Rughunath was became as a powerful person with the help of British forced. If the Ganga Narain's revolt will be viewed from the tribal interest, it will be seen that he was successful to have the support of the Bhumij because he showed tribal interest in his revolt. The colonial penetration was not only exploitative but also devastative for the existence of the tribes and also maintaining their sanctity of the forest-custom, culture and also their livelihood pattern.

**NOTES:**

1. E .T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872, P-173.
2. H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I. Calcutta, 1892, P-117.
3. For more information about their dependency on forest, see L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer, Bankura*, Calcutta, 1911, P-124 & W. W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal*: Vol. III, London, 1876, P-18.
4. W. Hamilton, *East India Gazetteer*, Vol- 2 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London 1828, P-229.
5. J. C. Price, *Notes on History of Midnapore*, Vol- I, 1876, P-1.
6. B. H. Baden-Powell, *Land Systems of British India*, Vol- I, Oxford, 1892, P- 393.
7. Cited in A.K. Sur, *History and Culture of Bengal*, 1963, P- 176-7.
8. E .T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872, P-175
9. J .C. Jha, *The Bhumij Revolt (1832-33)*, 1967,, P-117.
10. H. Coupland, *Bengal District Gazetteers, Manbhum*, Calcutta, 1911, P-65.
11. F. B. Bradely-Birt, *ChotaNagpore: A Little-Known Province of the Empire*, London, 1910 P-4.
12. Mark Poffenberger, *The Resurgence of Community Forest Management in the Jungle Mahals of west Bengal*, in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, ed. David Arnold & Ramachandra Guha, Oxford, 1996. P-346.