

## Adivasi resistance in the Jungle Mahals 1767-1799

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### Abstract

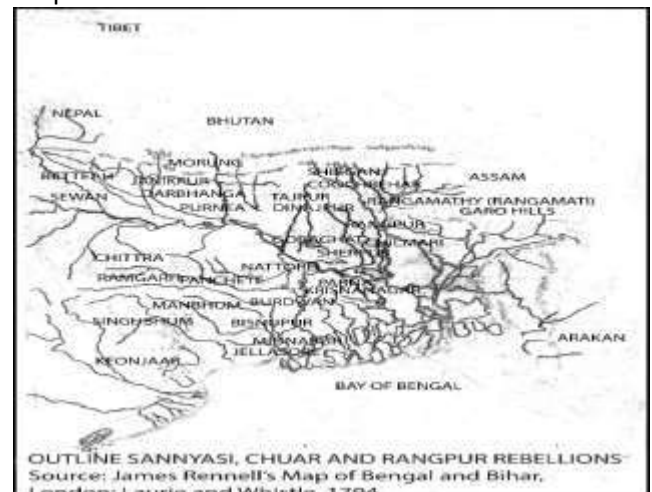
This article traces the history of *chuar* rebellion in the Jungle Mahal area (1766-1799). This article focuses on the people known as the *chuars*, their land and organization, the economic backdrop of the rebellion, their reasons for rebellion, the leaders and the aftermath. The role of local knowledge, environment and terrain in prolonging the rebellion has been dealt separately in a subsection. The role of spies known as the *harkaras* as a counter-insurgency method has been dealt in the article as well. I have thus dealt with the economic as well as the ecological aspect of the *chuar* disturbances. There was a gap in knowledge in this area.

**Key words** – Chuars, Jungle Mahals, Rani Shiromani, Midnapore, Terrain, Bhumij, *Paikan*, *Chakran*, East India Company

### Introduction

Scholars of social sciences had for decades debated upon the definition of tribe and peasant and whether the term 'tribe' was a colonial construct. They have not only discussed the origin of the word tribe itself but also whether it can be applied to the indigenous people of specific areas as we saw in the introduction. This article is on the rebellion of the *chuar* people which took place in mid to late eighteenth century Bengal, considering various issues such as the targets of the rebels, whether an alliance existed between the jungle zamindars and the *chuars*. However, the latter did not require any prompting for causing havoc in the area. I shall also attempt to demonstrate that the rebellion, which occurred in different phases, cannot be deemed as a popular rebellion, as *chuars* targeted the ordinary inhabitants living in the Company's territories. I shall be using the word *adivasi* in this context.

Map.1.1



The land of the Jungle Mahals

Map.1.2



Before examining the causes, course and results of the chuar Rebellion, it is essential to focus on the area known as the Jungle Mahals. Alpin observes,

In the eighteenth century, a considerable portion of the area under enquiry appears to have formed part of an indefinite administrative unit called the Jungle-Mahals lying between the Chota Nagpur and plains of Bengal. This was subsequently defined as being composed of certain parganas in Birbhum, Bankura and Midnapore; but on account of the disturbances of the bhumijes, it was split amongst the neighbouring districts in 1833. But the name of the Jungle Mahals however still survives in a portion of Moureswar thana, in Birbhum and the whole of the Western area of Midnapore. The fact that there was once an administrative unit, roughly corresponding to this area, and the fact that this area contains the largest population of Sonthals outside the Sonthal Parganas and outside Chota Nagpur are not accidents( Alpin 1981:4).<sup>i</sup>

The area from Rohtasgarh to Sambhalpur can be described as “thirty coss traverse forests which are dangerous because the thieves (chuars), attacked them (the travellers and merchants) sometimes for the purpose of murdering them”( Bhattacharyya 2012:69-79).<sup>ii</sup> The topography of the area would prove to be a crucial point in the chuar disturbances. The Santhals inhabited the jungles stretching from Rajmahal hills to the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, Midnapur and Cuttack.( Man 1983:2)<sup>iii</sup> The tracts that lay along the western and northwestern frontiers were known as the Jungle Mahals( Man 1983:2).<sup>iv</sup> They were still covered with remains of forests. It was the home of the nomadic tribes, their descendants being the Lodhas, Majhis, Bhars, Bhumijes, Kols, Nats, Bauris, Bediyas, Bagdis, Layeks, Khairas, etc. Jungle Mahals comprised of the areas of Garbheta, Binpur, Gopiballavpur (Gopiballahpur), Salbani and Jhargram. This tract was divided into various zamindaris including the Midnapur zamindari, Garbheta, Salboni, parts of Silda, the Ramgarh and Lalgargh on the west of Kasai river, the zamindari of Raja of Jhargram and Raipur and that of Nayagram and Khedargram.

### **People: who were the chuars?**

It is evident from the earliest Company records that as early as 1771, a group of people, known as the chuars to the officials, made inroads in the district. These men had carried off cattle, grain etc.<sup>v</sup> The definition of chuar was highly flexible. According to J.C. Jha, the chuars were the Bhumij tribals belonging originally to the Mundari main stock. After moving away from the Chotanagpur plateau, they settled in large numbers in Midnapur, Bankura and Purulia districts of Bengal( Jha 1967:1-25).<sup>vi</sup> However, the earliest explanation can be found in Grant’s Analysis of Finances of Bengal, 1767. It had described the inhabitants of Bishnupur as robbers, who lived in a state of “pristine innocence”, offering human sacrifices to goddess Bhavani and Kali( O’ Malley 1908:37).<sup>vii</sup> According to the official records, the Jungle Mahals were inhabited by paiks and chuars, who were supposed to be ‘careless cultivators but an expert in pillage’( O’Malley, 1911).<sup>viii</sup> However, the most ‘persistent disturbers of peace’ for the administration were the chuars. This term signifies in Bengali ‘an outlandish fellow’ and was applied in Midnapur to the ‘wild tribes’ who inhabited the Jungle Mahals (O’Malley 1911:47-48).<sup>ix</sup>

### **Chuar Rebellion: Causes and Contours**

First of all, it must be clarified that Chuar rebellion was not one single event. It was a series of events, consisting of different phases, all different in terms of causes, leaders, participants, motives and outcomes. Ananda Bhattacharyya divided the movement in four phases. The first phase began in 1767 that ‘witnessed the outbreak of the revolt of the Bhumij masses laid by their chiefs whose traditional rights, privileges, and independence were being violated by the company’ followed by the second phase when the Chuars broke out in rebellion in January 1771. The third phase began in 1783 and the last in 1798-99(Bhattacharyya 2012:70-72).<sup>x</sup> I have also divided the rebellion in four phases- the Chuar rebellion of 1767 led by the jungle zamindars, the Chuar rebellion of 1799 led by the paiks, the Naik movement of 1805-1816, and the Bhumij movement( Sengupta 2016:28-38).<sup>xi</sup>

In order to understand the economic factor stimulating the Chuar rebellion we have to form an understanding of the nature and structure of Chuar economy as it had developed since the advent of the breakaway groups of the Mundas in the southern part of western Bengal. The migrant Mundas acquired forest lands and carved out their village settlements. Since then they came to call themselves the Bhumij i.e. the sons of the soil or indigenous. We do not however have solid information about their village organization and nature of their socio-polity. On the basis of available evidences, we learn that from the 16th century, a section of them began to enjoy Ghatwali and Bhuinhari tenures. During the rule of Akbar, the Mughal emperor, his minister Todarmal conducted the land revenue settlement. Lands were divided by Todarmal settlement (1570–1580) into Bangar, Parauti and Charchar, based on the fertility and capacity to pay revenue. Tribal peoples in general tilled the lowest type of Charchar lands, which were mostly small in size. Naturally, they did not have the capacity to pay rents. The Bhumijis were ruled by semi-independent zamindars, who styled themselves as 'native' Rajas. Since the time of the Mughal rule, they had been accustomed to their independence and only paid a nominal tribute to the Mughal emperor. These jungle zamindars used to hire paiks (village police) from the Chuar community to serve as village police. The head paiks were known as the sardars. In lieu of salary, zamindars allotted rent free chakran lands (land of the employees, also known as the paikan lands) to these paiks. The paiks considered this ownership to be their 'ancient right'. Instead of cultivating the lands, they mostly hired landless Chuars to till their lands. They therefore acquired the status of paiks' tenants. These tenants were different from non-tribal peasants who lived in the nearby villages. Even though the Chuars did cultivate these paikan lands, there was no marked solidarity between them and the non-Chuar peasants of the villages. It becomes clear therefore that land and earning from land formed the very basis of Chuar economy affecting different such elements as

zamindars, paiks and ordinary tenants. This economic base came under serious threat under the company state's rule. Between 1766–67 they pursued the policy of bringing the Chuar region under their revenue network (Amrita 2016:28-38).<sup>xii</sup> In 1776, the board of revenue ordered the then Chief of Burdwan to fix revenue known as the Moccurrey with all the jungle zamindars. It was not merely an 'aggrandisement of revenue but settlement of rent as an acknowledgment of the company's sovereignty'.<sup>xiii</sup>

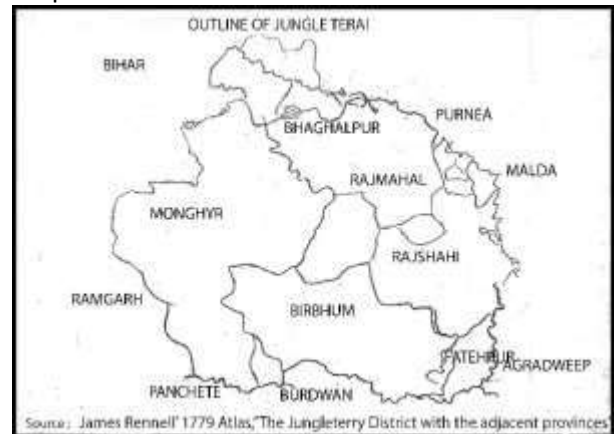
But the jungle zamindars viewed this as interference in their economic life. They believed that payment of regular revenue and the enhancement of its quantum would be adverse for them. The periodic settlements and the implementation of the Permanent Settlement in 1793 made their condition more precarious and challenging. First of all, the Company state made the settlement directly with the zamindars for ten years but with the provision of selling the land of the defaulter. This caused distrust of their zamindaris, which passed to non-tribal zamindars. Secondly, it brought about the police regulations in the rural Bengal. This rendered the system of hiring 'native' paiks obsolete as they came to be replaced by professional police. Thirdly, the government adopted the policy of resuming the rent free paikan lands. This created two problems. It left the paiks without a means of subsistence. The ordinary Chuars, who used to till these lands, lost their source of earning. Thus, the first Chuar rebellion broke out in 1767 as a reaction to the enhancement of the revenue of the jungle zamindars. Their principal objection lay in the fact that it was a Jungle territory and it was extremely difficult to yield even small amount revenue from it and pay it at Midnapur. Additionally in the year 1767, John Graham, the resident of Midnapur, was instructed to demolish their mud forts other than those required for the protection of the country. This policy was also not taken well by the zamindars. The local administration used a stick and carrot policy in dealing with them. Such zamindars, who readily submitted and made regular payment of their revenues, were allowed to retain their estates. On the

other hand, those who did not were deprived of their land-holdings. The paiks who were affected by these changes, responded by allying with the tribal rajas. It must, however, be mentioned that these paiks were not the pawns in the hands of these tribal rajas. They rebelled independently without any prompting from their respective landlords. The next two rebellions were the results of subsequent policies. The government systematically rolled out their plans to resume all rent free lands including the charity lands and the chakran lands. Thus, the bazameendaftar (keeper of records of rent free lands) was created in 1788 to keep records of all such lands. This adversely affected all zamindars and paiks. The provisions of the Settlement left many zamindars disgruntled. The sunset law, an important provision of the settlement, suddenly gave the Company state the right to dislodge a defaulter and replace him with a new one. Side by side, they implemented the police regulations that made paiks irrelevant in Bengal police system. The Company also resumed the paikan lands to turn these cultivable rent free lands into revenue generating cultivable lands. Disgruntled paiks and ordinary Chuars joined hands with the jungle zamindars that caused the second Chuar rebellion. The government used brutal force to suppress the Chuar rebels of 1799. But they knew they would need the paiks to maintain peace and order in the Jungle Mahals. So they made a settlement with the sardars of the paiks, but hanged most of the ordinary Chuars. But the disturbances in the Jungle Mahals did not end there. Soon the Naiks, the sardars of the paiks, rose up again. The Company state again crushed them. Finally, with the Bhumij revolt of Ganga Narain and establishment of a separate pargana in 1833, the disturbances came to an end. The nature and character of each phase was different, as was the composition and the result. But the economic grievance turned out to be the common factor(Sengupta 2016:28-38).<sup>xiv</sup>

Map.1.3



Map.1.4



The role of Unknown' , Local Knowledge, Environment and Harakaras during the Chuar Disturbances: Factors that prolonged the Chuar rebellion

Map.1.5



During the period under review, I have mentioned that the Company state had difficulties negotiating with the 'unknown'

world of Bengal. Terrain played a considerable role during the turbulent times of the chuar disturbances. In the first phase, as well as the second phase environment and unfamiliar terrain, played a very crucial role in prolonging the skirmishes. As a result, the Company state had to hire harkaras and guides as a countermeasure.

**Insufficient force:** While the Company state was better equipped in terms of weaponry and the rebels had to make do with traditional arms and ammunition; the Company state had 'insufficient' number of troops to deal with rebellions of this intensity. They repeatedly suffered from a lack of discipline and lack of permanency and from having inadequate numbers to quash the rebellions. For instance, they never had more than 5-20 sepoy at a time at a place. The chuars, on the other hand, used to travel in bands of at least 500, going up to 2000.(Jha 1967:1-71, 176).<sup>xv</sup> The commanding officers always had to ask for reinforcements.<sup>xvi</sup> We have seen similar problems for the Company during the sannyasi-fakir rebellion as well. Some of the sannyasi-fakir 'raids' occurred in Midnapur as well. We may thus infer that these sepoy were inadequate to oppose the chuars who had numerical superiority.

**Role of environment and terrain:** Even in 1800, 2/3 of Midnapur consisted of jungles, a greater part of which was inaccessible and unpopulated. The Manbhum area was "Mountainous and overspread with thick woods which renders it many places utterly impassable"(Jha 1967:14-15).<sup>xvii</sup> When the Mayurbhanj Raja rebelled against the Company state, the government sent forces to apprehend him at Amardagarh. However, the sepoy faced a number of problems. The area was in the centre of a large jungle. The roads were narrow. It was extremely difficult to access. Also, the rebels tended to flee into the jungles where it was "beyond the power of human exertion to root them".<sup>xviii</sup> The Mayurbhanj Raja was able to elude the forces for three years before he was apprehended and expelled from Beleachora.<sup>xix</sup> During the first phase of the chuar disturbances, the

rebels would take refuge 20 cosses from the fort of Ghatsila zamindari. They would carry off cattle into the jungles, hide in the flooded rivers to harass and defy the Company troops and blockaded their ways to prevent them from getting provisions, food and ammunition. Capt. Morgan who was stationed in the Jungle Mahals at that time as one of the commanding officers wished for this affair with the jungle zamindars and their paiks to be over as "my poor sepoy fall sick continually. I have now above sixty men ill of fever". He felt sending military expeditions into this strange area were akin to sending them 'to the devil'. He also felt that if the sardars allied with the zamindars and the paiks, it would be challenging to bring them in, in that 'difficult' country. They had to ignore the monsoons, the river floods, the jungles, the difficulties to acquire provisions in order to stop the disturbances in the area and drive the rebels into the hills( Firminger 1915, Jha 1967:7-8).<sup>xx</sup>

**The government's lack of local knowledge and countermeasures:** The Company officials were aware that the zamindars might oppose them. Even though they were confident that they could subdue the zamindars, but the officials acknowledged that they ran the risk of being caught by surprise and being continuously surrounded with thick woods. It was treacherous. This made them cautious about their choice of the encampment. As a result, the Company state had to hire runners, spies and guides to help them negotiate with the unfamiliar region. The spy network grew out of their need to negotiate with this perilous area. Aside from the aid of the local guides and harkaras, the Company government also received help from the 'black troops', employed in the service of the zamindars of Darinda and Karnagarh. These men scoured the edges of the roads to prevent the Company's troops from "ambush or alarm"( Bhattacharyya 2017).<sup>xxi</sup> Officer Morgan also had trouble negotiating with the Subarnarekha river, which had swollen due to the monsoons, and he was unable to find boats to navigate the river. He could not persuade the Ghatsila zamindar to surrender( Firminger 1915:84).<sup>xxii</sup> The harkaras and guides, therefore, acted as

major instruments in the Company state's countermeasures.

Thus, two important features stand out. First, these zamindars would build forts. From 1767 onwards the Company began to view any construction of forts as an act of rebellion. Every effort and endeavour was made to demolish and subjugate them.<sup>xxiii</sup> The resident of Midnapur was also thus instructed to reduce these zamindars to the west and demolish their forts. The second feature was the role indigenous intelligence played in rural areas. The Company often required reports regarding the nature and extent of violence in the countryside.<sup>xxiv</sup> These raids were relentless, and the Company troops often required reinforcements to deal with them.<sup>xxv</sup> The government was hell-bent upon collecting the enhanced revenue, so they sent several military expeditions in this period. They did it despite some of their earlier failures when the rebels instead of relenting fled further in the dense forests. The forts, the weather and the jungles thus played a significant role in the history of resistance in this period. In the next article, I shall attempt to show how the zamindars' local knowledge of the land and people of the Jungle Mahals eventually prompted the Company officials to reframe their policies toward the Jungle Mahals and quickly negotiated terms with them, despite their involvement in the resistance. It must be noted that even during the second chuar disturbances, the rebels would flee into the jungles. The Company troops would have difficulties negotiating with the land and rivers. It may be assumed that even decades after establishing itself in Bengal, the Company state was still unable to comprehend the whimsical character of Bengal's nature. During the second phase, these factors played a similar role.

### **Concluding remarks**

It may be said that chuar disturbances occurred in phases, with its own characteristics, leaders and epicentre. The nature and character of each phase were different, as was the composition and the result. It was diverse; both in terms of the participants and the reasons that brought

them together. Despite that, they allied to fight a common enemy. We may further conclude that the 'Chuar disturbances' is primarily a tribal rebellion. However, it must be noted that not all the players were tillers of the soil, but they all drew the means of subsistence from the soil. All the rebels were tied to the land: zamindars, paiks, and chuars. It might be argued that the insurgents had so far been living in an agrarian society, in a closed community. Suddenly the colonial intrusion into their lands exposed them to a situation and forces for which they were not prepared. Neither were they prepared to accept the outsiders amongst their midst. The question of diku (Sengupta, Nirmal 1980:664-671).<sup>xxvi</sup> also played a very important factor in formulating their consciousness. It should have been an extremely easy task for the government to subdue the chuars. However it appears that it took them more than sixty years to do so.

From the Company records, it appears that the environment as an unfamiliar factor initially handicapped the Company forces. The East India Company's administration eventually managed to unravel the mystery of the terrain by deploying the harkaras after the rebels. It is, therefore, safe to assume that if the Company state administrators had an intimate knowledge of the terrain, the vagaries of the long and treacherous monsoons and unpredictable Bengal riverine system, they would have suppressed the rebellions much earlier. They probably would not have needed the assistance of the local guides and the harkaras. Sivaramakrishnan believed that local knowledge was provided by the guards who had kinship and familial ties with the chuars. Their vigilance in the area was essential. Eventually, the 'frontiers of both state and society became the heartland of vital information transaction' (Sivaramakrishnan 1999:1-65).<sup>xxvii</sup> C.A. Bayly argued that during 1785-1815, the Company state had utilised the Mughal system of information gathering. British intelligence, then, resulted from Indian knowledge and Indian networks of daks, harkaras and munshis. The intelligence had even enabled them to conquer North India. C.A. Bayly, however, maintains, that in the

later years, the government's control over the information provided by different sections of people was limited. The officials sometimes remained unprepared for upheavals like the revolt of 1857 (Bayly 1995:xiv, 412).<sup>xxviii</sup> We see that the entire chuar disturbances eventually led to a further attack on the woodlands of Bengal. The struggles only intensified the Company state's zeal to control

and reclaim the woodland. One of the direct outcomes of the chuar disturbances was the assault on the tribal communities of the west and a desire to 'tame' them into obedience (Ghosh 2007:21-22).<sup>xxix</sup> The chuar rebellion thus has been explored from several vantage points in this article. There is always scope for more.

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