

The Role of Terrain and Environment in the Resistance Movements of the Sannyasis, Fakirs, and the Adivasis Against the Company State (1770-1833)

Dr Amrita Sengupta

Researcher

E-mail: amritasengupta85@gmail.com

Abstract

The word terrain originated from the Latin word terra meaning earth. In this article, the researcher would focus on the resistance movements of disgruntled people such as the sannyasis, fakirs and the adivasis during the period 1770-1833. My main focus would remain on the role played by the terrain and environment in these movements against the nascent company state. The English East India Company gained administrative and revenue collecting powers in 1765 following the grant of Diwani. It slowly transformed into an administrative apparatus from a purely mercantile company. The company officials were not well acquainted with the customs of the people, the land and their environment. This would later play a role in the rebels' uprisings against the company state. These factors would eventually enable the rebels to elude the company troops and in prolonging their wars against the government. The administration eventually needed the assistance of the local harkaras to capture them. That would be the focus of this article.

Keywords- Terrain, environment, *sannyasis, fakirs, adivasis, skirmishes, wars, harkaras.*

Introduction

There seems to be multiple institutions that the company state inherited from the Mughal regime. But they also made several changes, especially in the manner in which revenue was collected. These changes were not widely accepted by several groups of India and rural Bengal. These disgruntled groups varied in composition. They came from the *adivasi* stocks, peasantry and the religious mendicants. They religious ascetics were armed. The *adivasis* used indigenous weapons. The peasants were not generally a militant mass but all of them used weapons during their uprisings.

The company troops were also pretty well-armed. Yet the rebels managed to elude the troops for a very long time. They avoided being captured, and thus eluded certain death. The question is how was it possible for the rebels to do so against the company troops? This issue will be addressed in this article.

The researcher had mentioned earlier that the officials were not well acquainted with the lands and the people of India. This proved to be an important aspect of the skirmishes between the rebels and the troops. The unknown environment, terrain, and ecology would prove to be an important factor in prolonging the wars between the two groups. The factors that hindered the company troops in chasing the rebels would facilitate the rebels in eluding them. The latter, unlike the company troops were either natives of the soil or had acquired a thorough knowledge of the same. Thus they managed to prolong the wars by several decades. In the next few sections I would discuss these factors in prolonging the *sannyasi-fakirs* and *adivasi* wars. I shall also address why the peasants had a different experience than the former three. I shall also discuss how the troops eventually managed to capture the rebels.

Existing Historiography

The role of the environment during the resistance movements had scarcely been addressed. They did so in passing if at all. J.Cha was the first one to point it out. His focus had been on the *Bhumij* Revolt.ⁱ Recently Aparajita Bhattacharya focused on the environmental aspects of the *Chuar* revolt. She called the rebellion 'a class of civilizations'.ⁱⁱ The present author penned two articles / papers on the role of

terrain in *Chuar* rebellion.ⁱⁱⁱ Most recent work has been authored by James Lees whose work though not on the exact subject, did mention the company officials' inability to comprehend the complex nature of the Indian lands and her people.^{iv} In this article I shall attempt to demonstrate that these factors not only prolonged the wars between the *adivasis*, and the company troops but also between the religious mendicants and the company state. The researcher demonstrates how their troops required additional reinforcements from other areas and still needed the assistance of the *harkaras* to search for the rebels.

Methodology

For this paper, the researcher has used official archival documents stored at West Bengal State archives, Kolkata as well as the books that dealt with this topic.

Economic Situations under the Mughal Regime

The coming of the English East India Company marked a great change in the Indian subcontinent, changing the lives of many, including the *sannyasis*, *fakirs*, the *adivasis* as well as the peasants. The *sannyasis* use to receive *sanads* from the Governor of Bengal. The *sanads* granted to the *sannyasis* permitted them to the travel freely, bear banners, standards, flags, poles, staffs, bands etc. and confiscate any unclaimed heirless land in Bengal. They were permitted to confiscate any rent-free tenures. They were assured that they would be provided with alms or provisions by the people. No cess or contribution will be levied on them.^v As long as the Mughal authority was recognised in Bengal, the *sannyasis* could challenge any opposition to their *sanads* as these came directly from the Mughal emperor. Secondly, the *sanads* exempted the *sannyasis* and the *fakirs* from paying any contribution to political authority.^{vi} The *sannyasis* and *fakirs* used to enjoy rent-free lands tenures as religious grants in the districts of Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Malda, and Rangpur. The *sannaysis* and *fakirs* used to acquire rent-free lands. None interfered with the *bairagis* and *sannyasis* who lived off these charity lands and led a reclusive life.^{vii} The *adivasis* of the Jungle Mahals (Southern Bengal) on the other hand were autonomous, paying only a nominal revenue to the emperor.^{viii}

The Backdrop of the Changes

When the Mughal emperor conferred the Diwani rights or the revenue collecting rights on the English East India Company, these began to change. First of all the administrators began to resume all kinds of previously unresumed lands. So that these lands could be taxed and more revenue could be collected. The officials justified it by saying that there had been a sharp drop in the revenues. By 1790s, they had already resumed *digwari* and *nahzeram* lands.^{ix} Slowly they began to focus on the lands owned by the *sannyasis*, *fakirs*, and the *adivasis* of the Jungle Mahals during the period under review.

The ***Sannyais and Fakirs***: I had already mentioned in the previous sections that Previously, under the Mughal regime, the religious mendicants use to enjoy certain privileges. They received *sanads* from the Mughal emperor. By virtue of these *sanads*, they enjoyed rent-free lands in Bengal. These were basically charity lands, granted for religious purposes. In addition they were permitted to bear arms during their visits to the pilgrimage sites such as Gangasagar and Mahasthangarh. They also use to accept alms from the locals en route to these sites. The emperor also permitted them to engage in trade and usury. The government was unwilling to allow this. This culminated in the Regulations of 1788. According to Khondkar Fazli Rabi in *Hakikat- Mussalman-i-Bangala, madat-i-mash, aima, nazoomatfakiran, nazr-i-dargah, nazr-i-hazrat, piran, brahmattor, mehtam, debattor*,^x and *sibattor*^{xi} had been explicitly granted to Muslims and Hindu mendicants for religious purposes. The Amini Commission estimated the lands amounted to Rs.43 lakhs. If the revenues of Bihar were added, the revenue could go up to a crore.^{xii} Under John Shore's direction in May 1782, a plan was devised to create a *bazezameendaftar*. However, the actual resumption started under Cornwallis in 1788. The *sannyasis* and the *fakirs* thoroughly resented it. One of their primary sources of subsistence was at stake. The *sanads* granted to them were being threatened as the Company government had started the process of resuming the rent-free estates of 1759 and 1764 near Sherpur and in Mymensingh.^{xiii} The Company state also started to intrude in their

space, their religious identity, customs, rights, and privileges; features common to both the *sannyasis* and *fakir* was the annual round of pilgrimage to their respective sacred places, bathing fests in Bengal, *mahasnan* on Karatoya River in Bogra, Chilmari(Rangpur), Singjani, and Byganbari(Mymensingh), Nangalbandh(Dhaka) on Brahmaputra and Agarduris(possibly Agradweep) and Sagar Island at the mouth of the Ganges. The *fakirs* who believed in *Sufi* ideology^{xiv} made pilgrimages to the *dargahs*, shrines, of *pirs*, in the districts of North Bengal, *dargahs* of Bogra- Shah Sultan at Mahasthan and Baba Aadam^{xv} at Aadamdighi, the celebrated Adina Mosque, Bari *dargah* of Saint Mukdan Shah Jalal at Pandua, Pir Badarud din *dargah* near Hemtabad and *dargah* of Mullah Alauddin near Damdama in Dinajpur.^{xvi} The Mughal *sanad* of Prince Shah Shuja had permitted them to undertake such pilgrimages, accompanied by *jalus*, enjoy provisions from *ryots*, as well as *zamindars*. They were exempted from paying taxes on their contributions.^{xvii} The government wanted to control these pilgrimages and put a stop to their practice of carrying arms and levying 'contributions'. The *sannyasis* and *fakirs* did not respond to this kind of intrusion kindly. They resisted with all their might.

The Adivasis(The Chuars or the Bhumijes): I had mentioned earlier that the English East India Company for the first time obtained the right of revenue administration from the Mughal Emperor through the Grant of the *Diwani* of 1765. The first official document which recognised their right over Bengal was the deed of government agreement made by Mir Qasim on 27th September 1760. It ceded the *chaklas* of Midnapur, Burdwan, and Chittagong to them, including the right to extract revenue from these areas.^{xviii} At that time, "Brahmanbhum Baroda", "Chandracona",^{xix} "Chitua", "Jahanabad", "Mandalghat", "Kharija", "Bhursat", also "Bagree", fell under the purview of the district of Burdwan. The *chaklas* of Midnapur now consisted of 54 *Parganas*. The English East India Company by default also obtained the right over the *chaklas* of Hijli as well as over the three provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.^{xx} The *chakla* of Hijli was then formed of 32 *Parganas*. The *chaklas* of Hijli were included in the Midnapur district in 1836. The *Parganas* of Bagri was included in the Midnapur districts in 1801.^{xxi} The Company state's priority was to strengthen the southern frontier.^{xxii} According to Gouripada Chatterjee, the Company state after establishing their stronghold in the *chakla* of Midnapur, eventually diverted their attention to the west. There were large tracts of lands that were not explored. The reason was that it was a frontier province and was susceptible to the invasions by the Marathas. Supposedly 'predatory tribes inhabited the western tracts'. The Raipur Raja had been a cause of concern for them for a long time. The *sannyasis* and *fakirs*, as well as the *chuars*, had kept them at bay.^{xxiii} They did not stay away for long though. The Company state had already acquired the land revenue rights of mainland Bengal, but it was not enough for the new Company state to exert authority there. They saw fresh opportunities of bringing the fringes within the purview of their administration. They could easily extract more revenue from the previously unexplored Jungle Mahals, as well as get direct access to their forests, rich in natural resources. In the early years of the Company rule, their assault into the woodland Bengal had also been limited mostly by their fear of tigers. However, they were dazzled by the fantasy of expensive resources. Thus, their travelling to the unknown started.^{xxiv}

Earlier the Company state had pursued the expansion of the revenue base through the subjugation of these jungle *zamindars*. They intended to cover the losses faced by them during floods and droughts. However, this endeavour was a failure. While the revenue from Bengal amounted to Rs.116925 in the years 1767-1770, the jungles provided only 2.5% of it. They continued to enhance revenue sharply. However, they remained sceptical about the ability to pay. The area continued to be sparsely populated and poorly tilled, regarding which George Vansittart, the first Resident of Midnapur wrote, "the whole western part of this district is overrun with jungles in which there are scattered some trifling villages interspersed with few cultivated fields".^{xxv} The collector used a geographical and ecological argument for the intransigence of the region. They had a peculiar nature of subsistence. They reap the harvest and then retire to their forest enveloped forts with their grain and cattle to evade the eyes of the sepoys. They did not, of course, see themselves as fugitives, as the Company state did. Some of the *zamindars* called their country -jungles and their rents as kind of quit rents, which they collected from the *chuars*

and the *paiks*. Thus, by saying this, they suggested the country was incapable of yielding more.^{xxvi} The Company state however wanted to exert a more rigorous control over woodland Bengal. According to Sivaramakrishnan, two things went hand in hand; one was the establishment of political control and other was the maintenance of law and order.

When the Company state took over the reins of Bengal, they transferred the *zamindari*s of Jambani, Ramgarh, Ghatsila and Jalbuni Sarup to the committee of Calcutta without consulting with the respective *zamindars* and without their consent. It displeased the independent-minded jungle *zamindars*. The Company, however, did not separate these *zamindari*s from Midnapur. However, they did enhance revenue.^{xxvii} According to B.S. Das, during the years 1586 and 1776, revenue was systematically increased in Bisnupur: 1586-107,000 (*Ain-i-Akbari*), 1715 - 129,803, 1769 - 250,501, 1771 - 479,66 (appx), 1776 - 522,817 (appx).^{xxviii} Moreover, as expected, the *zamindars* that had for so long been accustomed to a semi-independent life, were averse to the idea of change. Some were reluctant to pay the revenue at the new increased rate. They refused to accept the Company's *diktat* and adapt to its rules. Their principal objection lay in the fact that it was a jungle territory, and it was extremely difficult to yield even a small amount of revenue from it and pay it at Midnapur. They also feared the *zamindars* with better resources would plunder and render it impossible for them to collect anything at all. These may be cited as causes of their resentment leading to the first *chuar* rebellion in the 1760s.^{xxix} But their resistance did not end there. The administration provided them further ammunition for resistance in the 1790s.

It should be noted that the Mughal and the *nawabi* system of police control rested on the twin pillars of the *faujdar*i and the *zamindari* establishments. The relation between the two was not dichotomous. It was complementary. They were duty bound to assist the other whenever such assistance was needed. Bengal was a *nasaq*^{xxx} land. The number of *faujdar*s was comparatively small. The *zamindars* held powers of police administration. The *zamindar* belonged to the lowest level of administration. For his subordinates, he was the symbol of power, authority, dispenser of justice, preserver of peace in the area. However, he was not merely a reference point in the *jamabandi*.^{xxxi} Outside the urban area, maintenance of law and order was indeed his responsibility. However, with time, this arrangement became unworkable. This necessitated a new arrangement.^{xxxii} When Cornwallis came to power, he noticed the problems affecting the entire system of criminal administration in Bengal. However, he was reluctant to take any drastic step. He chose to make his move with caution.^{xxxiii} Eventually, in 1790, the magistrates were requested to submit reports on rural police. They, in their replies, emphasised upon the supposed wickedness of the *zamindars* and the *thanadars*. The magistrates of Dhaka and Sylhet claimed that no dacoits made raids without prior knowledge and support of *zamindars* and their men. Finally, on 7 December 1792, a regulation was promulgated. The police of the country were placed entirely under the charge of the magistrates. The landholders were ordered to disband their police establishments and subsequently were prohibited from reforming them in future. They were also relieved of responsibility for the maintenance of peace and police duties in their respective *zamindari*s. Thus, Regulation XXII of 1793, entrusted to the magistrates the task of appointing the *darogas* instead of the *zamindars*.^{xxxiv} With the establishment of the new police system, the *paiks* and former village *thanadars* soon found themselves out of work. The magistrates even split up the *zillas* including the rent-free lands, which also included the lands enjoyed by the *paiks* for their police duties.^{xxxv} So, the *zamindars* found common grounds with the *paiks*, who not only found themselves out of work but also stripped of their meagre landholdings.^{xxxvi} The *zamindars* had another reason to join in with the *paiks*. According to Binod Shankar Das, the years preceding the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the government indirectly recognised the *zamindars*' rights, but it was marked by overassessment. They were not even allowed to remit on the plea of loss by natural calamity. He could not impose *abwab*^{xxxvii} on the ryots either.^{xxxviii} Eventually, in 1793, the Company state introduced the Permanent Settlement and the Sunset Law that enabled the East India Company to put a defaulting *zamindari* up for auction. In

1795 they put the Panchet *zamindari* up for sale as he was unable to pay his arrears but had refused to give up his property.^{xxix} The government believed that the Panchet *zamindari* could yield the estimated revenue. The mismanagement of the estate was the cause of the arrears.^{xl} The *zamindar* of Panchet had prayed to the government for the cancellation of the sale, but his requests were not granted. Eventually, it was sold to one Nilambar Mitra. These changes in the *thanadari* system and disbandment of the village police had far-reaching consequences. It led to the impoverishment of the village *paiks* who lost their jobs. Also, the resumption of the *paikan* lands, which they enjoyed rent-free, led to their dispossession. The ordinary *chuars* who sometimes worked as tenant peasants also lost their means of livelihood. These changes gave the *paiks* and the *chuars* a legitimate cause to rebel against the Company state. These *paiks* were mainly of Bhunj, Kurnali, Kora, Mundari, Kurni, Bagdi, Maghi, Lodha tribal community. It became apparent when the second *chuar* rebellion or *paikan* rebellion broke out that the Panchet *zamindar* joined in the rebellion with the *paiks*. Many other dispossessed jungle *zamindars* also allied themselves with the *paiks*. The arbitrary sale of *zamindari*s can be cited as the cause that prompted them to ally themselves with their former employees readily.^{xli} The administrators were able to crush this rebellion. They made certain arrangements with the *zamindars* and the *sardar paiks*. They knew they would not be able to govern the area of the Jungle Mahal without the cooperation of the *zamindars* and the *sardar paiks*. The administrators came up with certain guidelines for them. They believed that would be sufficient to peacefully administer these districts.^{xlii}

But the inception of the Naik (Layek) rebellion is a clear indication that all was not well in the Jungle Mahals. The officials had not managed to pacify everyone. Some of the former rebels remained deprived and took the first opportunity to rebel yet again. During the years 1806-1816, the Naiks and their *chuars* once again commenced to 'raid' the Bagri *pargana*,^{xliii} initiated by Chatra Singh, to avenge his insult by the Company state.^{xliiv} Even in 1806, the Company state was unable to subdue the *chuars* completely, and they eventually 'relapsed'. It appeared to the government there was a conflagration in the Bagri *pargana* in 1806, under the leadership of Anchal Singh. He took an active role in 'ravaging' the whole of the northern portion of the district. This revolt came to be known as the Naik revolt.^{xliiv} Additionally, it appears that the government did not keep the promise to restore the *paikan* lands to the *paik sardars*. They rebelled as a result.^{xlii}

The officials perhaps reckoned that peace would be restored after the Naik rebellion. They had made a few more changes. However, grievances piled up, leading to Bhumij people of Manbhum-Dalbhum to protest yet again. The Jungle Mahals never saw any real peace since the first *chuar* rebellion.^{xlii} The last phase of the *chuar* disturbances was the Bhumij rebellion. The Bhumij rebellion started with the murder of Madhav Singh by Ganga Narain. The Company officials wanted to pass it off as a family feud. At this stage, the Bhumijes broke out into rebellion against the Company state's indifference towards them.^{xliii} The uprisings in the Jungle Mahals and Dhalbhum can be attributed to many factors. It lay in both the personal grievances of the gifted leader Ganga Narain, in the feuds of petty rajas as well as the general discontent of the people. They had felt oppressed under the Company rule. According to J.C. Jha, negligence on the part of the Company officials and Hinduization of their chiefs made them rebellious.^{xliii} According to J.C. Jha, "the extraordinary ignorance and the indifference of some of the local rajas to the various causes of discontent" on the one hand and "the utter lack of contact between the tribal people and the district authorities" on the other were the reasons why the unrest so soon got out of hand.^l

The factors influencing the skirmishes between the rebels and the administration.

We have dealt with the background of the rebellions, focussing on the causes that prompted them to rebel. In the following section, divided subsections, we shall discuss the factors that influenced the skirmishes between the rebels and the administration. We shall see how the rebels managed to prolong these wars. We shall also discuss eventually how the administrators managed to end them.

The Fear of the Unknown, Insufficient Troops and Rebels' Numerical Superiority: It appears that during this time, the Company forces met with many setbacks. First of all, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* wandered in bands. The bands had a large number of members. The armed *sannyasis* and *fakirs* travelled on horsebacks and camels and foot. Sometimes they dared to reappear at the very place from whence they had been expelled once. Purnea was one such place.ⁱⁱ They kept themselves mobile, moving from a place to another very swiftly. They moved from Golla to Morung, from Govindnagar to Dinajpur. It provided them with a strategic advantage against the Company sepoy. Their mobilisation had a dual effect. On the one hand it lulled the government with a false sense of security. It gave them false hopes that the marauding *sannyasis* had quit the place. Sometimes it encouraged them to remove some of the troops and its commanding officers like Edmonstone from the disturbed areas.ⁱⁱⁱ Besides these years were particularly difficult for the nascent Company state as they not only had to deal with the *sannyasi* and *fakir* 'raiders' but the threats from the *chuars* as well as the challenges thrown by the Arakanese. They could not remove all their sepoy from the areas known to be hotspots of such disturbances as it undoubtedly would have hampered revenue collections. Forts and hills became important strategic sites for both the rebels and the government. They believed that in case of disturbances at Betteah orchestrated by the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* and others, the forts would become important in the hands of the 'enemy' as they were situated toward the borders of the East India Company's possessions.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ According to B. S. Das, the lines were not always clear as to where the Company's possessions ended, and the jungles started.^{lv} Besides the rebels knew the land, terrain, environment of Bengal which they used to their advantage. They used guerrilla techniques to challenge the Company troops and fled into the hills and thick jungles to evade arrests or crossed the treacherous rivers in boats. The Company troops had difficulties negotiating with the natural climate and terrain and its whims. Additionally, the forces were insufficient to be effective. The Company sepoy often ran out of ammunition. Moreover, there were not enough troops to deter *sannyasis* and *fakirs* from causing depredations in the countryside. Numerically also, they had an advantage as they often arrived in bands of 700-1500 men though not all of them bore arms. Their sheer numbers were enough to drive the peasants out of their habitats.^{lv} The rebels outnumbered the sepoy. It appears the number of sepoy who were usually deployed to neutralise the rebels did not exceed a 100 at a time.^{lvi}

On the other hand, these factors played a similar role during the *adivasi* insurgencies as well. 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.^{lvii} The commanding officers always had to ask for reinforcements.^{lviii} We may thus infer that these sepoy were inadequate to oppose the *chuars* who had numerical superiority. In addition, 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".^{lix} When the Mayurbhanj Raja rebelled against the Company state, the government sent forces to apprehend him at Amardagarh (Amurdaghur). 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".^{lx} The Mayurbhanj Raja was able to elude the forces for three years before he was apprehended and expelled from Beleachora.^{lxi} 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.^{lxii}

During the later parts of the rebellion, especially the *paikan* and *bhumij* revolts, these factors played a part. It is to be noted that the administration had an army that was capable of winning wars and indeed were better equipped with weaponry. For instance, the Company forces used cartridges, muskets and other arms and ammunition.^{lxiii} Moreover, even though they did not always have a sufficient number of sepoys in their troops, they did have artillery.^{lxiv} The rebels of the period still used swords, spears, matchlocks, rockets, and swivels.^{lxv} The archival records suggest that the Company forces had 'insufficient' numbers of sepoys. The commanding officers always had to ask for reinforcements from other areas every time the situation became turbulent due to some disturbance or other. Besides these troops were neither disciplined nor employed permanently. It was not until the 1790's that the Company state considered having a permanent disciplined force stationed in different areas of Bengal.^{lxvi} During the Bhumij insurgency, there were no troops stationed at Bankura that could be utilised to suppress the Bhumij rebels. The police and the local jail guards were quite unable to travel 45 miles to crush the rebels as it involved trekking through hilly areas and climbing hills. The hills of Choukerghatta and Poncha lay in the way from Bankura to Barabazar. The troops here too were few in number, ill-trained to perform these duties, not well armed, and the local *ghatwals* were sometimes sympathetic toward the rebels. If this were not enough, the monsoon season slowed the British troops down.

J. C. Jha wrote that many rivers and nullahs became difficult to ford, the heat and humidity would make any march of the regular troops from the cantonment at Barrackpore, a hundred miles away very trying and malaria would be deadly to the European officers.^{lxvii} An officer of the 50th N.I.(Native Infantry) who had arrived at Barabazar wrote,

This is the commencement of a new war and how single wing, short of ammunition and supplies and completely worn out by incessant fatigue endured in a march now going on for five months will be able to accomplish this task assigned to them, in subduing the Bhoomijes of Burrabhoom entrenched in the midst of jungles with the rains threatening the troops every minute....^{lxviii}

A writer in the *Bengal Hurkaru* criticized the decision to transfer the duties of the police to the regular battalions as he believed "that in expeditions of this dismal nature there is nothing to cheer and animate the soldier – no fighting, no glory, no triumph, no foe, that will stand for a minute before him nothing to be encountered but death in its worst form with its most horrible accompaniments, fever and delirium"^{lxix} Sometimes they fell sick while venturing into the jungles. The rebels were in an advantageous position. They not only had the proper knowledge of the peculiarities of the region but also knew how to negotiate with the hills and jungles. The jungles of Bengal were so thick that if the rebels fled in the thick foliage, "they could not with propriety be pursued by the sepoys".^{lxx} Officer John Jendall mentioned, "the immense jungle on those hills through which none but the *chuars* can penetrate made me apprehensive for the safety of the detachment".^{lxxi}

We may infer that Bengal terrain was still unfamiliar to the British commanding officers. It was interspersed with numerous rivers that were not quite navigable.^{lxxii} The monsoons lasted for months. The jungles of Bengal except for Sundarbans (tropical-deciduous) were thick and impenetrable. The rivers of Bengal could destroy whole villages.^{lxxiii} These rivers became impossible to navigate and caused inundations, especially during the monsoons. In some cases, the Company had to provide remissions of revenue to the *zamindars* to the amount of Rs. 50,000 because of natural calamities such as inundations.^{lxxiv} This indicates that the Company officials were out of their elements in this part of the

world. Sometimes troops were recruited from outside Bengal. They lacked local knowledge of Bengal's terrain and climate. As a result, they found it difficult to negotiate with these jungles. Moreover, the monsoon season in Bengal lasted for months, and it was so treacherous that the government also wanted to withdraw their detachments during these seasons.^{lxxv}

It took the British troops months to suppress Ganga Narain Hangama. During the Bhumij insurgency, when Capt. Martin's forces approached the rebels; they used the guerilla techniques to thwart the troops' efforts. The rebels from the jungles and hills used their bows and arrows on the troops and injured 19 of them. Because of the thickness of the jungles, the counter efforts had minimal effects on them.^{lxxvi} The troops became extremely worn out by the heat and rain. The hills and the jungles were impassable. Martin's troops had to withdraw once the rains set in.^{lxxvii}

Two strongholds of Ganga Narain were Balrampur and Amchuri. However, when Lieut. Young marched toward Barabhum and Dhalbhum, "both advances were accompanied by systematic destruction by skirmishes and raids".^{lxxviii} The troops were unable to succeed. The rebels used 'guerilla' tactics. They could run fast. They used their dexterity to defy, deter their opponents and thwart the latter's efforts. "It was very difficult to overtake or overwhelm them, and the Bhumijes born and bred in the jungles and hills seemed to know no need of rest".^{lxxix} The Bengal terrain, hills and jungles became an obstacle for the East India Company state troops during the *chuar* disturbances. The physical environment, including the hills, jungles, and rivers was as much an 'enemy' of the Company state as the rebels they were combating.

Role of Harkara spies: The Company state needed leverage against them. Fortunately for them, they found some in the form of the *harkaras*, the indigenous intelligence agents, the spies who provided them with information about the whereabouts of the *sannyasis* and the *fakirs*. The Company sepoy would have found it extremely difficult to pursue the rebels otherwise. Sometimes they disappeared in the hills and jungles. Sometimes they crossed the large rivers in boats. Moreover, there was very little prospect of the Company sepoy overtaking them in these unknown terrains intersected by so many rivers and other water-bodies.^{lxxx} They needed the assistance of the *harkaras* so that the rebels had 'little or no chances to elude pursuit'.^{lxxxi} The intelligence reports provided by the *harkaras* enabled the government to secure victories against them. It enabled them to deploy troops quickly in their pursuit. Every expedition thus sent was meant to expel, defeat and capture these mendicants.^{lxxxii} Thus the *harkaras'* information about the whereabouts of the 'raiders' was a necessity for the Company state. For instance, on one occasion, *subedar* Asharam, who was in pursuit of the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* at Silberis found himself surrounded by them at a place near Mirzapur.^{lxxxiii} The *harkaras* informed the government that he required assistance.^{lxxxiv} Also, the government decided which battalion they needed to replace with a bigger one, based on the reports of the *harkaras*. This was the case in Poorsa.^{lxxxv} The Company state needed the information on these armed bands of men to deal with them adequately, and they hoped permanently. The fact that the sepoy themselves feared for their lives and apprehended an attack after running out of ammunition made it imperative to have proper knowledge of their foes.^{lxxxvi} It is also evident from the sources that the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were displeased by the Company state's use of 'native' intelligence to capture them.^{lxxxvii} C.A. Bayly^{lxxxviii} had demonstrated that hiring and creating a network of native intelligence was part and parcel of the Company state's empire-building process. Thus, the role the indigenous intelligence played in the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion cannot be denied. It is interesting to note that on occasions the *ryots* were unwilling to aid the Company sepoy but had warned the *sannyasis* and *fakirs*.^{lxxxix} However, the data is insufficient to call it as a peasant-rebel alliance. Interestingly though, the villagers who were terrorised by this kind of violence and rampage too deserted their lands and hid in the jungles. For some reason, the wilderness represented safety for them. According to Gerald Bryant, the government was able to capture the itinerant bandits, but they had a difficult time in subduing the religious mendicants. The infantry found it difficult to negotiate with

Bengal's terrain and climate. Eventually, the government had to deploy cavalry after the religious mendicants. The cavalry had a force of over 4000 men.^{xc}

Similarly, the government took countermeasures against the *adivasis* as well. The Company officials were aware that the Jungle *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".^{xc} 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.^{xcii} The *harkaras* and guides, therefore, acted as major instruments in the Company state's countermeasures.

The Company state had to set up a contingency fund to pay for clearing the areas and for guides. They set aside a sum of money to employ forty-five *bildars* and *cooliharies* to clear the hills, valleys of trees, jungle, stone and other 'impediments'.^{xciii} They hired the *harkara* and *digwars* such as Kesari to take "unfrequented routes" over hills, to and from places like Midnapur to obtain intelligence reports on rebels like Fateh Singh, the former *zamindar* of Raipur. Various impediments often blocked these paths.^{xciv} This was a necessity as Fateh Singh and his brother and his adherents used to flee into the jungles of 'Cooleapaul'.^{xcv} Officer Jendall stated "apprehension of Fatteh Singh is very improbable while a large force continues out against him as he will only retreat further into the jungles where it will be impossible for sepoy to follow him or into the Maratha country"^{xcvi} These hills and the jungles became a habitation for 'banditti' of every kind. They used to retire to these.^{xcvii} The jungle was thus a safe abode for the rebels and every enemy of the state. From the *chuars*, thieves, to the *fakir* leaders like Kurram Shah, they all used to hide in the jungles and conceal themselves there.^{xcviii} The *harkaras* were thus hired to provide the government with intelligence about the rebels and guide the troops into the 'unknown' world of the jungles and hills.

Conclusion

It is clear from the primary and archival sources, that there were several rebellions that occurred during the period under review. The *sannyasi-fakir* rebellions, the *adivasi* insurgencies as well as the peasant *dhing* of 1783, were few of them. Two important features of these rebellions 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.^{xcix} The resident of Midnapur for instance was also thus instructed to reduce these *zamindars* to the west and demolish their forts.

Additionally it appears that the administration was unable to capture and punish the rebels at first. The rebels successfully eluded the troops for decades, except the peasants whose rebellion came to an end after a few months. The troops had to venture into the unknown world of the subcontinent to chase and defeat the rebels. The hills, rivers, terrain, the company's lack of proper and disciplined troops; all factored into prolonging the wars. 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.^c These raids were relentless, and the Company troops often required reinforcements to deal with them.^{ci} In addition to the reinforcements, the administration also needed the *harkaras*.

The rebels would have continued to elude the troops if not for the assistance provided by the local guides and runners known as the *harkaras*. They were well acquainted with the environment of Bengal and its adjacent areas and eventually helped the troops in subjugating the fleeing rebels. It must be noted that since Rangpur and Dinajpur where the peasant dthng of 1783 occurred, had flat lands, without any huge elevations and jungles, the peasants could not use guerilla techniques against the troops. The rebellion was crushed within a year. Therefore the peasants had a different experience than the *adivasis*, the *sannyasis* and the *fakirs*. Thus ecology played a massive role in these rebellions. The same factors which hindered the troops in chasing the rebels, helped the latter in eluding the troops.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ⁱ Jagdish Chandra Jha, *The Bhumi Revolt, 1832-1833, (GangaNarain's hangama or turmoil)*, Delhi: Munshiram Monoharlal, 1967.
- ⁱⁱ Aparajita Bhattacharya, "The Chuar Rebellion of 1799: An ecological Approach", Chitrabrata Palit, and Mahua Sarkar, (eds.), *Indian Vistas of Environment*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2007.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Amrita Sengupta, "The Role of 'Unknown' Terrain, Rivers, Hills and Jungles and the Chuar Disturbances (1767–1833)", *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies (JAIS)* Vol.IV, No.2, (August 2016). Amrita Sengupta, "Chuar Disturbances and the Role of 'Unknown' in Prolonging the Skirmishes: Terrain, Rivers, Hills and Jungles, Mahua Sarkar, ed., *A Collage of Environmental History*, Kolkata: Alphabet, 2016.
- ^{iv} James Lees, *Bureaucratic Culture in Early Colonial India, District Officials, Armed Forces, and Personal Interest under the East India Company 1760-1830*, London and New York : Routledge, 2020.
- ^v Atis Dasgupta, *The Fakir And Sannyasi Uprising*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1992. pp.10-23.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} West Bengal State Achives(Kolkata), Raja Shitab Roy's observation, 3rd August-30th August 1771, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue, Vol.2.
- ^{viii} Amrita Sengupta, *Sannyasi-Fakir, Chuar, Rangpur Rebellions in Late Eighteenth to Early Nineteenth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Kunal Books, 2021.
- ^{ix} Ibid., p.20.
- ^x *Debattor*- religious grants made to God.
- ^{xi} *Shibattor*-religious grants made to Lord Shiva.
- ^{xii} Atis Dasgupta, *Fakir And Sannyasi Uprising*, pp.10-23.
- ^{xiii} Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir, Raiders in Bengal*, Kolkata: Punthi Pusthak, 2010,p.159.
- ^{xiv} J.A. Subhan, *Sufism, its Saints and Shrines*, Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House , 1938.
- ^{xv} He was a great Muslim saint or dervish, known as Baba Aadam.
- ^{xvi} Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, pp.25-28.
- ^{xvii} Maulavi Abdul Wali, 'Note on the Fakirs of Baliya Dighi in Dinajpur', *The Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol.72, Part 3, No.1 and 2, 1903, pp. 61-65.
- ^{xviii} Gouripada Chatterjee, *History of Bagree-Rajya(Garhbeta)*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987.p.80.
- ^{xix} Chandrakona or Chanderkona.
- ^{xx} Gouripada Chatterjee, *History of Bagree*.
- ^{xxi} Ibid., p.81.
- ^{xxii} Narendranath Das, *History of Midnapore, 1760-1942*, Vol. 1, Midnapore: Madhabi Press, 1956, p.2.
- ^{xxiii} L.S.S.O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer – Midnapore*, Kolkata: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1911,p.42.
- ^{xxiv} K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.39.
- ^{xxv} Ibid., p.43.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid., p.43.
- ^{xxvii} WBSA, 1st- 28th February 1782, Committee of Revenue Vol.11, Part.2.
- ^{xxviii} Binod Shankar Das, *Changing Profile, of the Frontier Bengal 1751-1833*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1984. p.75.
- ^{xxix} Ibid.
- ^{xxx} *Nasaq* system-This system was prevalent in certain parts of the Mughal Empire, especially in Bengal, where the calculation was made on the basis of the past revenue receipts of the peasants without any actual measurement, but the actual area was ascertained from the records.
- ^{xxxi} *Jamabandi* - this is a record of rights or a register that contains name of owners, area of land, shares of owners and other rights.

- ^{xxxii}B. Chatterji, 'The darogah and the countryside: the imposition of *police* control in Bengal and its impact (1793-1837)', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, Vol.18, No.1, 1981, pp.19-42, pp.19-42.
- ^{xxxiii}N. Majumdar, *Justice and Police in Bengal, 1765-1793: A Study of the Nizamat in Decline*, Calcutta: KLM, 1960, pp. 235-236.
- ^{xxxiv} Amrita Sengupta, *Sannyasi-Fakir*, pp.175-176.
- ^{xxxv}*Ibid.*, p.117.
- ^{xxxvi}WBSA, 8th March 1795-30th September 1802, General Letters to the Court of Directors (Revenue).
- ^{xxxvii}*Abwab*- It signified all irregular or illegal financial impositions on the peasants above the established assessment of land in the *pargana*.
- ^{xxxviii}Binod Shankar Das, *Changing Profile*.
- ^{xxxix}N. Majumdar, *Justice and Police in Bengal*, pp.235-236.
- ^{xl}WBSA, 1st February-3rd March 1782, Committee of Revenue, Vol.11, Part.2.
- ^{xli} Amrita Sengupta, *Sannyasi-Fakir*, p. 178.
- ^{xlii} *Ibid.*, p.
- ^{xliiii}British Library Online Catalogues: India Office Records and Private Papers, Papers regarding the disturbances caused by the Chuars in the Bhagrai pargana of Midnapore District, IOR reference: /F/4/607/15046, (January - November 1816, Vol.3). Related resources: Bengal Jud (LP) 13 Dec 1820, (draft 59/1820-21, IOR/E/4/701), pp 653-924. See also Papers regarding the disturbances caused by the chuars in the Bhagrai pargana of Midnapore District, IOR/F/4/607/15045, (Mar 1800-Dec 1815, Vol.2). Related Resources: Bengal Jud (LP) 13 Dec 1820, (draft 59/1820-21, IOR/E/4/701) pp. 653-924.
Url:http://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?fn=search&ct=search&initialSearch=true&mode=Basic&tab=local&indx=1&dum=true&srt=rank&vid=IAMS_VU2&frbg=&v1%28freeText0%29=Chuar&scp.scps=scope%3A%28BL%29
last accessed 6/12/2020
- ^{xliv}Shri Krishna Saral, *Indian Revolutionaries (A Comprehensive Study) 1757-1961*, Vol.1, Prabhat Prakashan, 1999.
- ^{xlv}Gouripada Chatterjee, *Midnapore*, p.55.
- ^{xlvi}WBSA, 13th December 1820, Judicial Criminal (Lower Provinces); WBSA, 6th June 1822, Judicial Criminal (Lower Provinces).
- ^{xlvii}J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, p.106.
- ^{xlviii}*Ibid.*, p.66.
- ^{xlix}J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, p.106.
- ^l*Ibid.*, p.106.
- ^{li}WBSA, Letter to Richard Becker, dated 25th October 1770, Purnia 2nd-28th November 1770, Controlling Committee of Revenue at Murshidabad, Vol.14.
- ^{lii}WBSA, 9th April-28th June, Comptrolling Council of Revenue Patna 1773, Vol.7, Part.2.
- ^{liii}WBSA, Copybook of letters received by the Comptrolling Committee of Revenue at Patna 1st January-20th December 1771, Vol.6.
- ^{liv}B. S. Das, *Changing Profile*, 1984.
- ^{lv}WBSA, 1st November- 27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.
- ^{lvi}Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*.
- ^{lvii}Ananda Bhattacharyya, *Adivasi Resistance in Early Colonial India, Comprising the Chuar Rebellion of 1799 by JC Price and Relevant Midnapore District Collectorate Records From The Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2017, pp.1-71,176.
- ^{lviii}WBSA, Letter to the Magistrate of Midnapore dated 27th January 1795, 30th January-27th March 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.18.
- ^{lix}J C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, pp.14-15.
- ^{lx}WBSA, 17th August 1781, Committee of Revenue.
- ^{lxi}*Ibid.*
- ^{lxii}W.K. Firminger, *Bengal District Records: Midnapur 1768-1770*, Vol.2, Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press, 1915. See also J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, pp.7-8.
- ^{lxiii}WBSA, Letter to Governor General in Council, From Wilkinson, Dinajpore, dated 28th September 1795, 2nd October-18th December Judicial Criminal 1795, Vol.27.
- ^{lxiv}WBSA, Letter to Col. Charles Chapman, Dinajpore, from Hurst, 9th April-28th June 1773, Controlling Council of Revenue Patna, Vol.7 Part.1.
- ^{lxv}WBSA, 4th July- 26th December 1774, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Vol.3.
- ^{lxvi} WBSA, 1st November-27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.

- lxvii W. Hamilton, *The East India Gazetteer*, London: Printed for J. Murray by Dove, 1815, (2nd edition 1828) p. 129; J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, p.67.
- lxviii Russell to Government 14th May 1832 Board Consultations 1501/58887 in J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, p.70.
- lxix *Bengal Hurkaru*, 14th June 1832 in J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, p.76.
- lxx WBSA, 14th June-5th July 1973 Judicial Criminal Vol.3.
- lxxi WBSA, Letter to the Magistrate of Midnapore from John Jendall, dated 27th January 1795, Midnapore, 30th January-27th March 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.18.
- lxxii WBSA, 1st November-27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.
- lxxiii WBSA, 4th March-27th June 1776, Provincial Council of Revenue Dacca, Vol.11.
- lxxiv WBSA, Miscellaneous Records, Revenue Department, Vol.79.
- lxxv WBSA, 20th September- 20th October 1783, Judicial Criminal Vol.7.
- lxxvi Martin to Braddon, 5th June 1832, para 2, Board Consultations 1501/58887 cited in J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, p.77.
- lxxvii Martin to Braddon, 6th June 1832, para 2, Board Consultations 1501/58887 cited in J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, p.77.
- lxxviii Bird to Impey 14th December 1832, Board Consultations 1501/58887 cited in J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij*, p. 93.
- lxxix *Ibid.*, p.93.
- lxxx WBSA, Letter from James Alexander from G.W.B. Rous, dated 28th January 1778, Nattore, 7th June-25th August 1774, Provincial Council of Revenue Dacca, Vol.3.
- lxxxi WBSA, 1st November- 27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.
- lxxxii WBSA, 7th May-28th June, Controlling Committee of Revenue at Murshidabad, Vol.12, p. 3232.
- lxxxiii It appears to be between 'Kernan' and Mirzapur.
- lxxxiv WBSA, Letter to Smith, 20th October 1793, Dinajpore, 1st November -27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.
- lxxxv WBSA, Letter from Harrington to White dated 31st October 1793, 1st November-27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.
- lxxxvi WBSA, Letter to Smith from Harrington dated 2nd November 1793, 1st November- 27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.
- lxxxvii WBSA, 7th May-28th June 1772, Controlling Committee of Revenue at Murshidabad, Vol.12, p. 3232.
- lxxxviii C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- lxxxix Ranjit Kumar Samaddar, *Bangla Sahitya Sangskritite Sthanio Bidrohor Probbhab, Sannyasitheke Sipahi Bidroho Porjonto*, Calcutta: Mamudi House, 1982, p.34.
- xc Gerald Bryant, 'Pacification in the early British Raj, 1755-85', in Patrick Tuck, ed. *Warfare, Expansion, and Resistance*, Vol. V, London, New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 61-73.
- xcⁱ Letter to Ensign John Fergusson, from John Graham, Midnapore 30th January 1767, MDC, No 109. See also Ananda Bhattacharyya, *Adivasi Resistance*, 2017.
- xcⁱⁱ W.K. Firminger, *Bengal District Records: Midnapur*, p.84.
- xcⁱⁱⁱ WBSA, Letter from William Hill, dated 25th May 1795, Midnapore, 3rd July-24th July 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.22.
- xc^{iv} WBSA, Letter from William Hill, Midnapore, dated 25th May 1795, 3rd July-24th July 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.22.
- xc^v *Ibid.*
- xc^{vi} WBSA, Letter to the Magistrate of Midnapore from John Jendall, dated 27th January 1795, Midnapore, 30th January-27th March 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.18.
- xc^{vii} WBSA, Letter from Shaw, dated 18th July 1795, Bhagalpore, 3rd July-24th July 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.22.
- xc^{viii} WBSA, Letter from the Raja of Nepal, 31st July -28th August 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.23.
- xc^{ix} WBSA, Letter to John Carter from Robert Palk and Joseph Jekyll dated 22nd July 1771, 1st-30th July 1771, Controlling Council of Revenue at Patna, Vol.1.
- c WBSA, Letter to Lieutenant Broughton Midnapore, from Pearce dated 3rd June 1781, 1st-29th June 1781 Committee of Revenue Vol.4.
- cⁱ WBSA, Testimony of Morad Ali, 24th Jaistha, 1st- 29th June 1781, Committee of Revenue Vol.4.