

Revisiting the Rangpur Rebellion of 1783: A Study in Covert and Overt Form of Rebellion

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Abstract

In this article, I shall revisit Rangpur rebellion of 1783. I shall discuss the backdrop, causes and nature of the rebellion. I have demonstrated it was a formidable form of rebellion against the excesses of Raja Devi Singh, the revenue farmer of Rangpur and Dinajpur. I have concluded that the rebellion had started off as a covert form of revolt, with the participants indulging in prayers and petitions. It later transitioned into a more open, overt form of rebellion. The participants were stripped off their agency. It was the tragedy of the rebellion.

Keywords: Rangpur, Dinajpur, Raja Devi Singh, Drijinarain, Nawab, Overt, Covert, Prayers, petitions.

Introduction

In this article, we shall discuss one of the most 'formidable' peasant uprisings of the eighteenth century, popularly known as the 'Rangpur *Dhing*'. *Dhing* means peasant rebellion. Ratiram Das' poem *Rangpur Jager Gaan*¹ throws much light on the subject. A short excerpt is given below:

Rangpur Fatehpur prakando chakela.

Raja Ray raja taye achilo akela...

Companyr amolete Raja Debi Singh.

Shey somoye mullukey hoilo bar dhing.

Jemon je debotar murti gothon.

Temni hoilo tar bhushon bahon.

Rajar papetey hoilo mulluk aakal.

Shiyore rakhiya taka grihi mara gelo.

Koto je khajna paibey tar neka nai.

Koto pare toto ney aaro bole chai.

Deo deo chai chai ei matro bol.

Mairer chotote othey krondoner rol.

Manir somman nai mani jomindar.

Choto boro nai sobe kore hahakar.

Soyari toh choriya jai paik marey jota.

Debi Singh er kache sobe holo bhota.

Parena ghatay cholte jhuri bouri.

Debi Singh er loke naye take jor kori.

Purno koli obotar Debi Singh raja.

Debi Singh er upodrobey proja bhaja bhaja...

Debi Singer ottyachar ar nahi shoye.

Rangpur er achilo jotek jomindar.

¹Ratiram Das, "Rangpur Jager Gaan", *Rangpur Sahitya Parisad Patrika*, Rangpur B.S.1315, cited in Narahari Kaviraj, *A peasant uprising in Bengal 1783: the first formidable peasant uprising against the rule of East India Company*, Delhi: People Publishing House, 1973, Appendix.

*Sobakey likhilo potro sethate ashibar.
Nij elakar r bhinno elakar...
It diya paitka diya patkelay khub.
Chari bhiti hathey pore koriya jhup jhup.
Itay dheler chotey bhangilo karo harr.
Debi Singh er barri hoilo itar paharr.
Debi Singh palailo diya gaon dhaka.
Keu bole Murshidabad keu bole Dhaka.*

[Summary of the verse extract in English: In this poem it is implied that Devi Singh's monstrous nature and the cruelty that he inflicted on both the ryots and the *zamindars* made them terrified of him. There was a massive uproar against him. There was chaos and widespread terror because of him. When his cruelty became unbearable, the ryots rose up in a rebellion. Moreover, eventually, Devi Singh had to flee to either Murshidabad or Dhaka.]

Historiography of Rangpur Rebellion

Narahari Kaviraj's seminal work on Rangpur *dhing* is crucial for our understanding of the subject. According to Kaviraj, the Rangpur *dhing* was a peasant uprising which exposed the evils inherent in the colonial system of exploitation. It brought into the forefront the characteristics of colonial oppression.² Ranajit Guha, has attributed consciousness to the peasants. Guha opined that "nothing in the militant movements of the rural masses that was not political. This could hardly have been otherwise under the conditions in which they worked".³ Guha in his later article,⁴ also pointed out there were some plan and coordination amongst the peasant masses. This was the case with the rebels who revolted against Devi Singh, as well as rebels of Kol, Munda and Santhal rebellion. Everything they did, was well planned and deliberate.⁵ Jon Wilson took a new position on the subject. In his "A thousand countries to go",⁶ Wilson argued that the Rangpur uprising was against their British and Indian rulers. It was a peasant uprising, opposing an oppressive socio-political regime. James Lees's article used the example of Richard Goodlad (Goodland)⁷ and the Rangpur *dhing* to illustrate the nature of the Company's district bureaucracy and its relationship with the central colonial authorities in Calcutta during the late eighteenth century, examining the aims and limitations of the European officials who were sent out to administer Bengal's districts. It focused on the conflict between their personal and professional priorities in carrying on the business of local government and investigated the implications of their conduct for the scope and penetration of the Company's rule before it could establish its military-political hegemony across India in the early nineteenth century.⁸

Land and the people of Rangpur and Dinajpur.

² Narahari Kaviraj, *A Peasant Uprising*, pp.80-82.

³ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, p.6

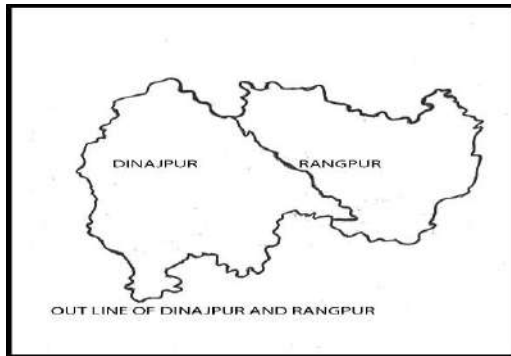
⁴ Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter Insurgency", in Nicolas Dirks, Geoff Eley and Sherry B. Other (eds.), *Culture/Power/History/ A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 335-380. See Anand A. Yang, Review article of Subaltern Studies II, in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.45, No.1. (November 1985), p.175.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jon Wilson, "A Thousand Countries to go, Peasants and Rulers in Late eighteenth century Bengal", *Past and Present*, (November 2005), pp.81-109.

⁷ There are two spellings are of the name. Goodlad and Goodland. I have used Goodland in my thesis as I found this version of the name in the documents at West Bengal State Archives. Printed Materials use the name Goodlad. Goodland and Goodlad is one and the same person.

⁸ James Lees, "A Character to lose": Richard Goodlad, the Rangpur *dhing*, and the priorities of the East India Company's early colonial administrators", (pre-publication Draft), 2014, pp.1-23.



Source: W.W.Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Maldah, Rangpur and Dinajpur*, Vol.7., London:Trubner and Co, 1876.

Before we begin our discussion of the rebellion, we must consider the physiographic and geographic features of the area - Rangpur and Dinajpur, the two hotspots of the disturbances. Rangpur lies between 25 degrees 4 minutes and 26 degrees 19 minutes north latitude and 88 degrees 46 minutes and 86 degrees 55 minutes east longitude bounded on North by Jalpaiguri, on North East by Cooch Bihar, East by river Brahmaputra and the districts of Goalpara and Mymensingh, South by Bogra, and South West and West by Dinajpur. It extended over 96 miles and had an area of 3788. Dinajpur was put under the general charge of the Rangpur collector during Devi Singh's term from 1781 to 1783. This is particularly important because the districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur had never really been peaceful. They had been impoverished since long.⁹

Dinajpur on the other hand lies between 24 degrees 55 minutes and 26 degrees and 23 minutes north latitude. It falls between 88 degrees and 2 minutes and 89 degrees and 19 seconds east longitude. According to Buchanan Hamilton, Dinajpur signified the abode of beggars (from the word Diwaj) It runs 5374 miles.¹⁰ The district was bounded by Jalpaiguri on the North East, Purnea on the North West and West, Rangpur on the East, Bogra on South East, Rajshahi on South and Malda on South West. Karatoya river separated it from Rangpur for about 50 miles South East. The general appearance of the country is flat, sloping gently South West. In the South and West, old alluvium landmass makes an appearance. The country is interspersed with ravines. The elevations are not worthy of the name of hills, highest ridge not exceeding 100 feet. However, it altered the appearance of the country. The area is elsewhere a Gangetic delta. The ravines vary from shallow stretches of land, ideal for rice cultivation. There are deeper depressions called *kharis*. The ridges are covered with scrub jungles and stunted trees. There are many tanks of varying size to hold water, especially in the south. Hills are absent. Therefore it is difficult to trace the natural divisions. However, there are still differences between the north and south of the district.¹¹ There are no mountains in Dinajpur, but, some parts are more elevated than others. For instance, there is a long road extending from Dinajpur to Kantanagar (Kantonogor). There was a considerable elevation in the north-east, from Nalogola, on the banks of Brahmani river. The lands on the riverbeds of Nagar, Mahananda and Tangan are low and during Buchanan-Hamilton's time, were susceptible to inundations. People had to dig tanks and raise the levels of the lands to save their houses from floods.¹² In the next section we shall discuss the events of the Rangpur dhing.

Summary of events

⁹ West Bengal State Archives, Letter to Mr MacDowall, dated 23rd September 1783, 24th- March -7th April 1783, Committee of Revenue.

¹⁰Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District or Zilla of Dinajpur in the Soubah of Bengal*, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1833.

¹¹F. W. Strong, *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers, Dinajpur*, Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1912, pp.1-43. W.W.Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Maldah, Rangpur and Dinajpur*, Vol.7., London:Trubner and Co, 1876, pp. 355-365.

¹²Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *A Geographical, Statistical*, p.3.

According to the Committee of Revenue the *dhing* appeared to occur out of nowhere and without the least warning. The peasants killed Gouri Mohan Chowdhury's death. He was an *gomastha* of Raja Devi Singh (revenue farmer of these districts) and was known to be cruel to the peasants. Richard Goodland (Goodlad) who was the collector of Rangpur, sent a *parwana* to which they paid no heed. They assembled in formidable numbers, stopping collections for 2 months. They wanted to pay their dues after 2 months. This was a form of everyday form of resistance. They plead and petitioned to the Company state whom they considered to be their legitimate rulers. They claimed Gouri Mohan Chowdhury had demanded more than what was just. Goodland asked them to pay the revenue at the 1780's rate. Tranquillity was temporarily restored. On 17th, *ryots* assembled again in even more significant numbers and compelled *ryots* of Cooch Behar and Dinajpur to join. This time Goodland sent military against them and the second general revolt was quashed. Rangpur Commission was set up afterwards under the leadership of J.D. Paterson.¹³ This phase of the revolt was headed by village headmen known as the *busneahs*. This was their overt form of rebelliousness.

The *zamindars* claimed Raja Devi Singh's cruelty did not wane even during the *dhing* itself. His people tortured the *ryots* during the *dhing* as much as they did before the commencement of the *dhing*. The rigor and cruelty of collections implemented by Devi Singh had induced many *ryots* to flee into the jungles. The *ryots* had initially decided to go to Devi Singh for redress. However, he had refused to hear their pleas. However, one unnamed *ryot* left Krishnaganj and went to Rangpur and informed Devi Singh that the *ryots* of Kazirhat had assembled and started an insurrection. Devi Singh tried to seize them, confine them and put them in jail. He killed many *ryots*, hanged them and plundered their villages.¹⁴ Thus, he remained a figure of wanton destruction throughout the 'insurrection'. The sepoys also inflicted violence on the *ryots*. It was the middle of November. The incursions of the people of Lalbari were of such a nature that the late *diwan* Bhagwant Roy repeatedly requested J. Williams to order the sepoys to fire upon them and in every respect to treat them with severity as the only way to put a stop to their 'ravages'. During their expeditions on 28th November 1783 at Lalbari, they seized some principal *ryots*, confined them in such a manner that even the *naib* failed to get them released. Goodland eventually ordered them to be freed as he believed their confinement would prevent the disturbances from subsiding.¹⁵

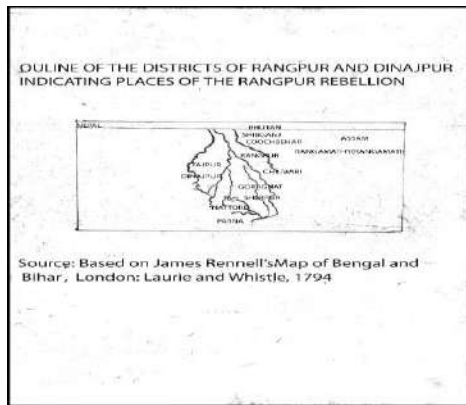
Unfortunately for the peasants of Rangpur-Dinajpur, the government refused to believe that they had any legitimate cause to rebel. They cited a few causes why the peasants had no reasons to be so aggrieved. Alternatively, they stripped the peasants off their active role in the *dhing* by blaming the *zamindar* and the *busneahs* for instigating the rebellion, implying the peasants had no minds of their own.

Goodland's so-called leniency began to wane when he realised that the rebels might not be pacified by the handouts he was offering. They wanted more, and that was when he realised that the *busneahs* could even question the Company state's authority, unlike the ordinary *ryots*. So, he did not take any chances there and razed their villages to the ground and destroyed the rebels. The second phase ended on a bloody note.

¹³ WBSA, Goodland's Parwana, Dated 17th March 1783, 3rd-20th March 1783, Committee of Revenue, Vol.24.

¹⁴ WBSA Report dated 1189(BS), 2nd-26th June 1783, Committee of Revenue, Vol.28,.

¹⁵ WBSA Letter to Paterson Dated 25th January 1784, 19th January-5th February 1784, Committee of Revenue, Vol.36, Part 1. See also WBSA Report of John Duncan, Khalsha dated 8th November 1783, 19th January-5th February 1784, Committee of Revenue, Vol.36, Part 1.



The Rangpur rebellion: inception and causes

Rangpur Commission was set up after the events of the Rangpur rebellion. J.D.Paterson was appointed as the chief commissioner. According to him, the rebellion did not take place without any viable cause. According to Paterson, the following reasons prompted the peasants to rebel. He referred to the following:¹⁶

Rs.162401(appx) was additionally imposed on the *jama* of 1780 on the people of Rangpur.

Certain taxes were instituted for realising the revenue.

Numberous illegal taxes such *derinwallah*, *batta*, *hoonderan*, *rusum* ('rusoom'), *mustajir* ('mustageer') were imposed on the peasants.

Devi Singh infringed the year's engagement with the *zamindars* and forced the *zamindars* to pay their rents in French Arcot rupees. It resulted in a loss of revenue on the part of the *zamindar*.

He altered *Kistbandi* in the middle of the year and charged an additional *batta*.

He compelled the *zamindars*, *naibs*, *amla*, to pay sums they could not possibly pay. He beat them if they refused.

Devi Singh and his officials seized the possessions of of *ryots*. Their ploughs and oxen were put up for sale, silver was sold at 10 *anna*, brass and copper at 8 *annas*, cattle were sold at 1.5 *anna*. *Ryots* were forced to pay interest at 5 *gundas* per *dam* on a rupee.

Devi Singh sold the *Zamindari taluk* for less than a year's rent, then separated from the year's *jama* at less than the *hustabud* rate. The deficiency was charged to the *zamindar's khamar*.

Additionally he sold the Lands of the *zamindars*, and some of this land was given in fees to the *mutasuddies*.

That by these severities Devi Singh compelled the Aluminda *zamindar* of Chowdranee of Conknea, Taotorgan of Mintonna (or Mintoma), Mir Mohan *zamindar* of Tepah, Ragubir of Bapettee, Sham Chowdhury and Ram Kant Chowdhury of Kazirhat, Kali Prasad of Fatehpur to flee the country.

He used corporal punishment for non-payment of revenues.

There were charges of cruelty against different persons employed in the collections like Krishna Prasad, Hareram, Surajnarain, Bahadur Singh.

Devi Singh left the farming of Conknea and Tepah to Surajnarain of Punga and Basettee to Ray Judamuddin and the appointed Sheikh Mohammad *Sezawal* of Kazirhat.

Devi Singh appointed Gouri Mohan Chowdhury to the farm of "Kharije" *mahals*. He increased the revenue by Rs.100,195 (appx).

Devi Singh settled Bedah, Patgong, Baikanthapur, and Perabhanj at a *jama* of Rs.127,668 (appx) to Mirza Taki. Paterson cited it as a cause.

Devi Singh imprisoned the *zamindar* Shiv Chand Chowdhury and put him in irons for complaining to Paterson about *batta* and *derinwallah*

¹⁶WBSA, 1st-17th July 1783, Committee of Revenue, Vol.29.

Devi Singh collected balance of *ryots* who had absconded as well as from those who remained in the country. It was contrary to the general orders of the government.¹⁷

As a consequence of the Rangpur *dhing*, two commissions were set up by the government. They took both their recommendations into account. Accordingly Devi Singh was instructed to collect revenue according to the settlement and restore everything he had taken illegally. Unfortunately he was not punished and was let go with a slight slap on the wrist. He was elevated to the post of Maharaja from Raja instead. Rather his *amlas* and *gomasthas* were banished from the provinces.

Nature of the rebellion.

From the above discussion it appears that the *ryots* of Rangpur and Dinajpur had initially prayed and petitioned to the Company government for redressal of their grievances. But when they found Richard Goodland's solution to be lacking, they erupted into an open form of resistance. It no longer remained a covert, everyday form of resistance. Thus they took collective action against Raja Devi Singh and his *gomasthas*. They killed Gouri Mohan Chowdhury. Thus their collective action eventually turned violent. It may be supposed that Gouri Mohan Chowdhury was a surrogate for Raja Devi Singh who was the real target. They had the greatest grievance against Devi Singh. It may be also pointed out excess revenue was the underlying cause of the rebellion. But the effects of physical and psychological torture also played a crucial role. The rebels took to banditry and vandalism as a part of their defiance. They believed they could win. That may be the reason they dared to rebel in the first place. It may also be added here that the topography of Rangpur and Dinajpur were not conducive for guerilla warfare. The peasants did not indulge in one. There was no need for *harkara* spies to chase them into the hills and jungles. We may assume this is why the Company forces were able to quell the rebellion so quickly.

By way of conclusion

The peasants of Dinajpur and Rangpur rose up in resistance against excessive taxes imposed on them by the intermediary Devi Singh. The Company state was unable to ensure timely payment of revenue from the *zamindars*. Nadia *zamindari* had an arrear of Rs.3,14,112 (appx) and 24 Pargana of Rs, 1,47,865 (appx) in 1781. Since the Company state could not ensure punctuality of payment, they confined the *zamindars* and *naibs* in order to induce them to pay their revenues. Interestingly even though the smaller *zamindaries* too had balances; it was never such a huge amount.¹⁸ The Company state used strictness in realizing their revenue from the *zamindar*, but these methods usually did not yield any results. For example, Casijura *zamindari* had an excess of Rs. 173924(appx) as arrears. Similarly, other *zamindaries* such as Birbhum and Fatehsingh also fell into arrears. Sometimes corporal punishment was used or troops were deployed to induce the *ryots* to pay their dues. These methods were widely implemented in various parts of Bengal by both the government and their agents. It proved to be detrimental for the overall revenue collections.¹⁹ Thus the Rangpur *zamindar* and other landlords thus had a legitimate cause of grievance. It was against the Company state.

The disgruntled landlord of Rangpur joined in with the peasants' cause, often leading the Company government to presume that he was indeed the instigator of the uprising, even though the peasants never really needed any prompting from their *zamindars*. However, they did recognise their Drijinarain, a well to do landlord as the 'nawab' and genuinely wanted him to lead them against Devi Singh. Thus the peasants' grievance was against Devi Singh and not the Company state.

It is pertinent to mention that during the period under review, peasants of numerous districts were oppressed by different kinds of intermediaries - *gomasthas*, revenue farmers, even *zamindars*. The *zamindars* were also infamous for hiring robbers to oppress the *ryots*. The Company state was aware of

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸WBSA, 20th February-5th April 1781, Committee of Revenue, Vol.1.

¹⁹Ibid.

all this. Interestingly none of those areas witnessed any significant rebellions. Similarly, famine devastated parts of Bengal. Rangpur although was not unaffected, it was not so severely affected. Other peasants from famine-affected areas did not rebel. However, Rangpur peasants did. It is interesting to note that the Rangpur peasants had rebelled once before on account of the severity of the collections. Goodland had used this incident as a point of reference. He had argued (in 1783) that if peasants had any genuine grievances, they would have gone to Calcutta to seek redress as their predecessors had done earlier. Also, these facts tend to corroborate with the assumption that there is no clear inevitable link between hardship and collective violence.²⁰ Eric Stokes said that peasant rebellions are essentially against heavy taxation. However, he also warned us not to overlook any other underlying, albeit less important causes that might cause the peasants to protest.²¹ Rangpur rebellion was a most definitely a peasant rebellion where the peasants rebelled against excessive and unfair taxation. However, we should not overlook the fact that in addition to heavy taxation, they were physically tortured. They were unable to save their children, wives and seeds for next year. Thus they witnessed their dignity being slowly stripped away from them. These factors must also be taken into account while writing the history of peasant insurgencies. Thus, we may rule out misery, exploitation, and relative deprivation were the sole causes. Psychological torture also played a role. The Rangpur rebellion, in many ways, seemed to be unique.

Jon Wilson opines that the Rangpur peasants were trying to negotiate with the Company state. I want to conclude that though essentially a peasant rebellion, it was not anti-Company. They were not against their *zamindar* as well, as demonstrated by the participation of Drijinarain and the involvement of Ramakanta *zamindar* in the movement, even though the government wanted to pass it off as 'elite instigation'. It can be divided into two phases. The Rangpur rebellion which started with prayers and petitions eventually turned violent and escalated into a more form of peasant war where banditry and violence, murder and arson were the chief characteristics like in most peasant conflicts in the world. The peasants took a conscious decision to commit 'riots'. The movement did not become anti-Company and remained anti-Devi Singh. The peasants selected their targets; these were not random attacks. Their violent actions met with brutal counter-action by the Company state. This is how the Rangpur rebellion came to a sad and tragic end. The *zamindars* were compensated by getting their money back. The *ryots'* conditions did not improve even after the insurrection was over and the subsequent charade of the two commissions. That was the tragedy of the Rangpur peasants.

²⁰Bernard A. Nkemdirim, "Reflections on Political Conflict, Rebellion, and Revolution in Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol.15, No.1 (March,1977), pp.75-90.

²¹ Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed. The Indian Revolt of 1857*, Oxford: Clarendon Press,1986, pp. 213-215.