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The Bhumij Uprising in Manbhum (Jungle Mahal): A Historical Introspection (1832-33)

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Abstract

The History writing remains incomplete without the study of 'Tribal History'. The various phases/stages of tribal history incorporate the history of domination, subordination as well as marginalization. This article focuses on the lesser-known downtrodden classes in Jungle Mahal area of erstwhile Manbhum, their fight for survival & movement for justice. Their stories of self-sacrifice became a water shed period of cultural history. The tribals tried to protect their cultural identity through the onslaught of the colonial rulers. Their fight against the colonial rulers is a rich history which needs more attention from the researchers. The Tribal communities fiercely protected their autonomy culture and traditional heritage against colonial Government. Their resistance against colonial imposition spans a rich history of defiance, firmly rooted in their quest for autonomy and dignity. This struggle has been an integral part of India's historical narrative, stretching far beyond the colonial era. From the Chuar Rebellion to uprising during independence, these rebellions arose as reactions to exploitation, cultural repression, and oppressive regulations enforced by Colonial Government.

Keywords: Jungle Mahal, Taraf, Ghatwal, Paikan, Tabedar, Hungama, Panchsardar, South West Frontier Agency (SWFA)

Introduction:

Bankura and Purulia, the western districts of West Bengal, are usually considered to be tribe majority regions. These districts are also considered geologically to be extensions of the Chotonagpur plateau. Due to the heavily forested nature of the region, the proto australoid populations are observed to be in the majority here.¹ Different tribal and peasant revolts have rocked the British Government constituted 'Jungle Mahal' district from 1767 itself. History tells us that the Chuar Mutiny first started in the Junglemahal region. Thereafter, the Pyke Revolt (1767-68), Kol Revolt, Bhumij revolt (1832), Santhal Revolt (1853) and Munda revolt (1899) has caused in several parts of jungle mahal district. The tribes and peasants that maintained a unified and determined resistance to foreign infiltration from the moment of the establishment of British Colonial rule. The Chuar

rebellion started in 1767 and spread slowly across the forested regions; rose to a pitch in 1798-99, fell in intensity in between and rose again in the 1830's.² The rebellion rose again to a massive insurrection in 1832 and spread across the south western region near Manbhum, coming to known as 'Ganga Narayan Hungama' or 'Bhumi Revolt'. These insurrections eventually would all find common cause and come together to sow the seeds of Great Rebellion among the sepos in 1857.

The establishment of Jungle Mahal as a district was soon followed by the rebellion in 1832 called Ganga Narayan Hungama. While different minor kings, chiefs, and Zamindars of the region, such as the Zamindars of Dhalbhum, Brabhum, Panchakot, Kuilapal, Patkum, Begunkodar all participated in leading the rebellion, they worked under the main command of Raja Ganga Narayan Singh, King of Barabhum. Barabhum was an immense zamindari in Jungle Mahal district in Manbhum.³ 'Barabhumi' is mentioned in the Brahmandakanda in 'Bhabisyapurana'. This huge estate had to its east Kuilapal, to its west the Singhbhum area, to its north the panchet zamindari and to its south the Dhalbhum area. Most of the zamindari was forested; and the zamindari was conducted through the Ghatwal system. Despite there being ten Ghat (Dash Mahal) or Subdivisions. The first king in the Barabhum area to have launched a mutiny against the Colonial Government was Viveknarayana III.⁴ He was the last independent ruler of Barabhum and led the first revolt of the Junglemahal, the 'Chuar Rebellion' in 1767.

Origin Of Bhumij:

As the original dwellers of the Barabhum Zamindari, the Bhumij also constitute the majority among tribes in Manbhum area. Risley and Dalton first analyzed the story of origins of the community. The word 'Bhumij' has been traced the word 'Bhumi' (Land). According to H.H. Risley, 'the Bhumij was originally purely Mundas, but in time they became disassociated from the Munda community'.⁵ The story observes that they fled from the Magadha region somewhere around 8th century AD and settled east in the Banks of Kashai, Kumari and Subarnarekha. They eventually cleared the forests and took up agriculture as their livelihood while settling down in Manbhum, Dhalbhum, and Barabhum region. After becoming lords of the great stretches of land in jungle mahal, their power and prestige kept increasing as minor kings of the region. Risley had called the Bhumij community "Hinduised branch of Mundas". W.W. Hunter had considered the Bhumij to be a tribal community similar to the Santhals and equally as brave and warlike.⁶ From the latter half of the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century, there was no central authority in the Jungle Mahal area, and power was shared entirely between the local landlords and the chiefs. The relationship between local Kings and local kings and local subjects were cordial, due to the similarity of culture and society. During the early period of British Rule, Officials cooperated with the kings and tasked them with the job of collecting the revenues. The-then magistrate Henry Strachey had appointed the Bhumij chiefs as the officials in charge of protecting the peace and had created Ghatwali System. Therefore, the Bhumij Chiefs because of their duty of protecting the Ghats or regions came to be known as 'Ghatwal'.⁷ The bhumij chiefs steadily increased their power and influence due to their work in policing the peace. This was overturned with the new taxation rules and sunset laws that was established early in the nineteenth century. The fall of Ghatwal in the jungle mahal intensified local anger against British administration. Many local chiefs Ghatwals and Landlords started losing ownership rights over land due to the inability to

handle the permanent settlement taxation regime. The paikans, losing power over their land, fed into the popular resentment against the British and the local chiefs and Kings started finding common cause. The angry zamindars and Ghatwals united to kill the Serestadar Rasiklal Ghosh and then started agitating against the local officer in charge of Balarampur Police Station and the police themselves.⁸ Despite the Chuar Revolt started in terms of disparate movements, it can be said to have found its ultimate manifestation in bhumij rebellion. Although the Barabhum domestic unrest can be considered the reason for the Bhumij rebellion, this intensifying anger against the British can also be considered to be the main reason for the revolt. The Bhumij chiefs and local adivasis united under the leadership of Ganganarayana against the British policy of destruction of local customs, economic infrastructure and local zamindars. The Barabhum zamindars led this rebellion, but one of their ancestors Raja Vivekanarayana, had started it all off with leading the first Chuar revolt in the 1760's.⁹ In 1798, with the death of Raja Raghunath Narayana, a succession crisis began in the family, as Viveknarayana had two sons from two marriages: Lachman Singh and Viveknarayana. According to social law of Adivasi Bhumij, the son of the first wife would be the king, despite being born later. Therefore, despite being elder than his half-brother, Viveknarayana could not be king as he was the son of second wife, and son of the first wife Lachman Singh was the true successor. However, Viveknarayana still manage to claim the throne despite bhumij customs, because he was military backed by the British. Again, after Viveknarayana's death, a similar succession crisis started between his son Madhav Singh and Lachman Singh's son Ganganarayana.¹⁰ After the death of his father Ganganarayana received the responsibility for the 'Taraf' of Panchsardari. However, his cousin Madhab Singh solicited British patronage and denied Ganganarayana from his 'Taraf' rights. Ganganarayana had kept his son and wife under Madhab Singh protection and returned to see that they had been imprisoned for a year. Hatred rose from anger at this outrage, and Ganganarayana kill Madhab Singh with a sword near Dungri in Bamani. After the murder on 2nd April 1832, Ganganarayana and his followers formally started the bhumij rebellion in Barabhum Zamindari.

Bhumij Revolt:

Therefore, though the rebellion initially sparked off from domestic dispute and anger at the injustice meted out to Ghatwals, the way the British officials dismissed local customs and failed to adopt neutral and righteous policies towards the local zamindars made the British the main enemies of this revolt. Added to this was the great anger the people felt at the end of the 18th century towards the oppressive high caste moneylenders and the Brahmin community. The tyranny of the Diwan of the Barabhum Zamindari, Madhav Singh also was exacerbated by the company officials and administrators treating the Bhumij community as a criminal tribe.¹¹ The British official Russell in charge of the Jungle Mahal from 1828 to 1833, had not been an example of responsibility and sympathy for the indigenous communities of the region. Therefore, the majority of Bhumij in Barabhum rose in rebellion. Ganganarayan gathered arms and supplies for his army and his subjects and started the struggle against the British.¹² The peasant leader of Dalma region allied with him and under them the tribal rebellion took on the nature of popular revolt. On 1st May, 1832, Ganganarayan and his followers set fire to the Munsef Courthouse, and looted it and the bazaar. They started advancing towards the English camp on 14th May, screaming and beating the musical instruments (like Dhamsha-Madal) armed with swords and arrows.

Macdonald made an initially futile attempt to suppress the revolt with his army. In December of 1832 and January of 1833, the British started tyrannically suppressing people all over Manbhum region. British supplies are looted and the 50-regiment- strong army under Colonel Cooper and Lieutenant Russell failed to attack Raydihi. British plans to bribe other Ghatwals into submission also failed to bear fruit. The British General sent an offer of truce to the Ghatwals without any response.¹³ Russell then announced a reward of Rs 10000 rupees for the live capture of Ganganarayan. In this situation, another British official, Martin brought a large army through Barabazar to Ganganarayan's village to suppress the revolt; the rebel attack on the army led to the death of 19 British soldiers and Martin was forced to call a truce when he was unable to conduct a jungle war in the monsoon.

The defeat of Martin at the hands of Bhumij people and chiefs boosted the morale of the rebels. Ganganarayan started to think of himself as an undisputed leader. Hence he defeated the zamindars of Ambikanagar, Kuilapal, Pancha, Raipur, Jhalda, and incorporated all their subjects into his army to renew the struggle against the British, who started to make different plans this time to suppress the rebellion.¹⁴ The capture of Barabhum estate was planned through a two pronged attack. Two special officials, Dent and Wilkins were appointed to handle the operation and Martin and Russell were tasked to be their deputies. After this the British Army split into three and advance towards Barabhum accordingly. The large army attacked first the main co-leader of Ganganarayan, the peasant leader Jilpalaya. Jilpalaya's village was encircled and was set on fire. The same was done with Ganganarayan's village Baghdi the next day, with Ganganarayan's own house being burnt down. The British army managed to capture three bhumij leaders by middle of December: Tulshi Digar, Dina Singh and Buli Mahato. When main bhumij leaders started getting captured Ganganarayan's position got more weakened.¹⁵ To escape the situation, Ganganarayan fled to Ranchi in Bihar. There, he begged for a shelter from Kharsara region's tribal leader Thakur Chetan Singh. However in a twist of fate, Thakur Chetan Singh betrayed Ganganarayan and secretly assassinated him so that he could establish himself as a leader of tribal people. The sudden death of Ganganarayan greatly pleased the British, but when Chetan Singh asked the British for the bounty for Ganganarayan's death and his property, he was clearly rebuffed by the British, who started the rumour that Ganganarayan had died in battle with the British.¹⁶ The Adivasi Bhumij scattered and lost morale due to lack of skilled leaders. Many rebels surrendered to the British.

Unrest in the Jungle Mahal area slowly stopped after the death of Ganganarayan, and to lessen the importance of the Bhumij rebellion in perception, it started being branded as '*Ganganarayan Hungama*'. However, the sheer amount of fear in Junglemahal generated in the British can be seen in the decision to break apart the district that was created in 1805. The British Government created the Manbhum district in 1833 out of fear of the Chuar revolt, the Bhumij revolt and the kol revolt in the Ranchi/Palamau area. This new district incorporated the Dhanbad and Purulia Headquarters with the Dhalbhum headquarters which is now the Raipur, Phulkushuma, Simlapal of Bankura district. Manbazar became the capital of new district.¹⁷ But in 1838, the capital again was transferred to Purulia town. Due to the rebellion, a new administrative division called 'South West Frontier Agency' was created for administrative ease in Jungle Mahal. However, after the creation of the

Manbhum district, the 'South Western Frontier Agency' (S.W.F.A.) was disbanded and the administrative region was entitled the Chotonagpur division. Captain Wilson, then a Military official at work in Jungle Mahal, had remarked that it is only after the revolt of the tribes that British Company sought to restructure the administrative system of Jungle Mahal. The infiltration of marchents from Rajputana and central India into the tribal regions started seriously impacting the originality of Bhumij or the non-Aryan Adivasi culture.¹⁸ Due to the exploitation of the former, the latter started to abandon Jungle Mahal and set out for work in the tea estate of Assam and Darjeeling, something that indirectly pushed Bhumij culture to its destruction.

Characteristics of Revolt:

In the Colonial period, the Bhumij Revolt of 1832-33 in the Barabhum Zamindari was a landmark peasant rebellion. This was the ultimate expression of popular anger stemming from the days of the Chuar revolt. According to *Suprakash Roy*, all the revolts of Jungle mahal are connected; the agitation that was started from 1769 by the adivasi peasant community and zamindars against the British land taxation regime, eventually coming to be known as the Chuar revolt, found its main manifestation in the Bhumij rebellion.¹⁹ Each revolt started to give a more structured and coordinated form to its successors in the Jungle Mahal. Therefore, though Tribal rebellions in Jungle Mahal may be considered distinct and separated from each other, the links between them can always be observed. Although according to *Narahari Kabiraj*, these different revolts were often regional and separated in nature, because they had limited power and remained restricted to very localized boundaries. Although Nationalist historians have deemed these rebellions to be national rebellions, it might be more preferable to consider the Jungle Mahal revolts to be 'Regional Rebellions'.²⁰ However Marxist historians have often considered these rebellions to be the ultimate expression of Adivasi desire to gain statehood and establish political independence and autonomy. The Marxists have therefore considered these tribal rebellions of the 18th century to be the first attempts to create a people's republic. The foreign imposition of new land taxation regime in Bengal had resulted in the total collapse of the ancient zamindari systems and inheritance laws, which in turn resulted in the collapse of feudalism. Hence local chiefs and peasants found common cause against new systems of land taxation. However, in the nineteenth century, some changes can be observed in the reason and character of tribal rebellions. According to *J.C. Jha*, the Bhumij rebellion did not have the domination of one class; different classes, communities and tribes cooperated and allied in the resistance against the exploitative British Administration.²¹ Despite many historians considering the Bhumij Rebellion to be an isolated and regional mutiny, the famous anthropologist and researcher *Pashupati Prasad Mahato* has argued that the Chuar and Bhumij revolts were the Adivasis' attempts to protect their heritage and culture. This is due to the fact that the deeper the British Colonialism started taking root in India, the more challenges were faced in new ways by the social structure, economic and land systems of tribes. Colonialism and Brahmanism entered into culture and started a semi feudal mindset among the Tribes. The feudal kings and chiefs of their own areas started getting isolated from the main community. The British and the Brahmin communities did not ascribe any importance to the autonomous identity and tolerance of the Adivasi.²² The mass participation of lower caste people from all sections of the society, starting from the Chuar Revolt to Bhumij Revolt, transformed the

nature of a local peasant rebellion to a popular mass revolt against the exploitation and tyranny of British Government.

Historiography of Bhumi Revolts:

Most other tribal revolts have not been as extensively covered by historians as the santhal mutiny. As previously mentioned, *Sarat Chandra Roy and Nirmal Kumar Basu* have published research on Mundas with Sarat Chandra Roy focusing especially on the Oraons. The historiography of tribal revolts do not get a mention in Surendra Nath Jha's long essay '*Historiography of Tribal Movement in Colonial India (1770-1947)*' and Sanjukta Das Gupta's essay '*Peasant and Tribal Movements in Colonial India: A Historiographic Overview*'. However, these two texts are very important from other perspectives. In J.C. Jha's essay '*The Changing Land System of the Tribals of Chotonagpur, 1771-1831*', we see how the transition from the '*Tribute system*' to the land taxation system created fractures in the traditional adivasi land centred heritage, inspiring the Tomar (1820), Kol (1831) and Bhumij Mutinies (1832-33). Jha quoted Verrier Elwin in noting that "most of these uprisings were caused over the Government's attitude towards land".²³

Two of Jagadish Jha's books, '*The Kols Insurrection of Chotonagpur*' and '*The Bhumij Revolt 1831-1833*' are important for learning about Kol and Bhumij revolt. The first book's primary texts have been collected from the records in the British Museum and Library and from newspaper and folk music. According to Jha, the Sanskritization of the Adivasi Chiefs had increased this social divisions.²⁴ The second book, the author observes the revivalist strain in the Bhumij, Santhal, Birsha Movements and Chero movements. The Bhumij revolt got a political character after the Ganganarayana ascended to the leadership. Jha quotes Charles Metcalf when he says that 'The Kols wanted their independence and utter annihilation of the Governments.'

In terms of analysis, Prabhuprasad Mahapatra's article '*Class Conflict and Agrarian Regimes in Chotonagpur 1860-1950*' (*The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol 28, 1991*) has many dimensions.²⁵ He has analyzed the adivasi revolts through the perspective of class. These were mainly class conflicts between feudal landowners and their subjects. Because of Colonial rule, most landowners did not belong to tribal society, and the reasons for the revolt starts to become evident when attention is turned towards the class structures, conflicts and excess production theory in both communities. Another book must also be discussed with regards to Adivasi movements. S.P.Sinha's '*Conflict and Tension in Tribal Society*' was published from Concept Publishing Company in New Delhi in 1993. Here, he has focused on four main reasons of the Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kherwar, Gond and Bhumij.²⁶ The first is administrative confusion, because of which their cultural troubles, as they introduce 'alien values, different standards, different standards, different values. Secondly, the Bhumij taxation system where the tribal lost their lands; Thirdly, the work of the missionaries in creating divisions among adivasis; and fourthly, Western education and influence it had Adivasis, making them more politically aware and active. Ranajit Guha's '*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*' was published in 1983. Using Antonio Gramsci's theory, Guha had identified the tribal movements as Subaltern Movements. According to him, the tribal movements too were politically aware movement disguised as religious movement, without any influence of the elite section of society.²⁷ He observed that all tribal rebellions had at their roots three kinds of exploitation- Governmental, Banking/Money lending and Zamindari system. Bhumij

revolt was therefore a rebellion against these three exploitative mechanisms and therefore a rebellion against the moneylender, the zamindar and the colonial state. In his book 'Primitive Rebels, Hobsbawn has shown that the initial peasant and Tribal revolts had not displayed significant political awareness. According to Guha, however, "There was nothing in the Militant movements of rural masses that was not political". Religion was therefore not a supernatural issue but rather one that collaborated with political systems to destroy imperialism. Hobsbawn did not accept the influence of religion in all types of Millenarian movements.

Kumar Suresh Singh is an administrator and anthropologist. He wrote his famous book, 'The Dust Storm and Hanging Mist' on tribal movement.²⁸ He was the district magistrate of Khunti district and then Director General of Anthropological Survey of India. At that time, i.e. while resident at Khunti, he had collected lot of oral narratives and folk music about tribal leaders. In his book, the leaders of Santhal and Kol revolt are the mythical hero. In the introduction to the fourth edition of his book, Suresh Singh wrote: "When about forty years ago I wrote the story of a man and his movement - In fact I had used Birsa as a metaphor to tell the story of his people's struggle - little had I realized that it would have such a far-reaching impact on Subaltern studies and tribal politics".²⁸

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