

Dhalbhum Uprising: Granting Peasant Participants Subalternity in the Historiography of Early Colonial Resistance

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***Abstract:** In Eighteenth century, aristocrats responding negatively to the juridical-political change that stripped them of their erstwhile authority and privileges were joined by peasantry and aboriginal people of the periphery. Around the same time, Dhalbhum region became a hotbed of resistance when a local grandee Jagannath Dhal led the Chuars, Bhumij and aboriginal peasantry in a tumultuous resistance against the Company rule of law. The purpose of this paper is to bring to light the historical significance of the uprising as an integral part of the narrative trajectory of eighteenth-century Indian history. Alongside, the paper also proposes to intervene and interrogate the subalternity of the participative masses in the historiography of the western parts of Eastern part of the subcontinent using the resistance movement of the Raja of Dhalbhum to understand the cognitive trajectory of these uprisings in the early colonial period.*

Keywords: *Dhalbhum, Jagannath Dhal, English East India Company, subalternity, eighteenth century, Chuars, Bhumij*

Eighteenth century India witnessed a transition from one political culture to another. As the Mughal sway waned over the South Asian landmass a new political power began to make its presence felt in the region. The new authoritarian structure did not just replace the Mughal political authority; it also altered it in essence and substance. Aristocrats responded negatively to this juridical-political change that stripped them of their erstwhile authority and privileges. But they were not alone in resisting this change. The peasantry and aboriginal people of the periphery actively joined their resistance. The subaltern school has made a series of attempts, and not without vain, to reinstate agency to these aboriginal men of periphery who did not just follow the dispossessed landlords and aristocrats in their resistance but nurtured a resistive mentality and organized plan of action for the same. Around the same time, Dhalbhum region of southwestern part of Bengal became a hotbed of resistance when the local grandee Jagannath Dhal led the Chuars, Bhumij and aboriginal peasantry in a tumultuous resistance against the Company rule of law. The purpose of this paper is to bring to light the historical significance of the uprising, along with many of the same nature that occurred during the same time, as an integral part of the narrative trajectory of eighteenth-century Indian history.

Narrative trajectory of eighteenth-century Indian history has coursed through two key elements: decline of the Mughal grandees and the rise of the Company Bahadur. Series of events that unfolded during this century has been placed under

the larger context of transition of power unfolding in the eighteenth century. Uprising of regional grandees, who catapulted to prominence after the decay of the Mughal administration set in, especially the likes of Dhalbhum uprising, or the Chuar rebellion, against the new order of Company Bahadur have remained restricted to the domain of civil disturbances. Failing to move beyond this niche historical treatment they have seldom acquired a space of their own, crucial for understanding the unfolding of mentality and reaction of people against the new order. In the imperialist and nationalist treatment, they seldom moved beyond the boundary of unrest or rebellion of malcontent and dispossessed, respectively. Hence, in their assessment these occasions of colonial resistance remained sporadic, violent, and short-lived. Beginning of subaltern intervention into the so-called civic disturbances of the eighteenth century opened a new avenue for understanding and analyzing the place of these events in the trajectory of South Asian history. But subalternity failed to reach masses and their resistances deep into the western part of Bengal, particularly Birbhum, Burdwan, Bishnupur, parts of Midnapore and Jungle mahal area. The southwestern part of Bengal turned into a hotbed of resistance violently resisting the onslaught of colonialism. A similar story unfolded in the Dhalbhum region in the early months of 1768 when Jagannath Dhal raised the banner of rebellion against the Company Bahadur and was enthusiastically assisted by the local Bhumij, and Chuar population, and the pikes dispossessed of their erstwhile position of power. Close inspection of the manner in which the narrative of resistance unfolded in Dhalbhum brings fore elements of similarity that it shares with the other resistive narrative and the pattern of resistance that rocked the southwestern parts of Bengal during the same time. In the late eighteenth century Bhumij, Chuars peasantry of these regions time and again gathered around various leadership to resist the onslaught of the new rule of law introduced by the Company Bahadur. Socio-economic composition of the opposing masses remained almost the same with minor permutation and combination in most of the resistive movements witnessed by the regions during this time. Repeated participation of the masses in such civil resistances, gathering around different leadership, raises a pertinent question regarding the resistive mentality of the people. It calls into question the judgment of unthinking sporadicity laid against these resistances that unfolded in the locality, something that has gone unheeded in the subaltern interventions. The objective of the present essay is to intervene into the historiography of the eighteenth century peasant resistance and interrogate the subalternity of the participative masses of the western parts of Eastern part of the subcontinent using the resistance movement of the Raja of Dhalbhum.

Frontier of Resistance: Geographical Limits of the Uprising

The western frontier of colonial Bengal was a centre of disobedience since the Mughal period. The topographical terrain of the western lands was so harsh and impenetrable that refractory elements abounded in the region. Onslaught of marauding bands of *bargis* or the Maratha bandits left a deep impact on the

economic and political stability of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bishnupur, parts of Midnapore and Junglemahal area. Raghuji Bhonsle led annual attacks on the western lands until it was turned into a more concerted marauding expedition in 1741. Continuous marauding expeditions under the leadership of Bhaskar Pandit from 1741 till 1751 devastated the economy and social security of these regions. Ferocity of these attacks made livelihood and security of the people residing in the region uncertain. After the assassination of Bhaskar Pandit the attacks gradually subsided but the fear gripped the minds of the people and left an enduring mark on their sense of law and order.

Nawabi era did witness a strong attempt on the part of Alivardi Khan to quell the banditry of the marauding *bargi* forces, but it could not fully restore the faith of the people in durable security, peace, law, and order. This upturned the revenue system and its acquiescence in the region, as well. Legendary fear of these attacks and the insecurity it bred percolated the local cultural praxis as visible in a popular Bengali lullaby. The lullaby claims, "*Khoka ghumalo, para juralo, Bargi elo deshe, ghulghulite dhaan kheyechhe, Khajna debo kishhe*" [As my child falls asleep, so does the locality, *bargi* attacks plague the country, looted are the harvested crops, how shall one pay the revenue.] The fear it bred in the minds of the people found voice in the lullaby composed around the same time. It further informs that the people of the region were so divested by this constant threat of banditry that they often failed to meet the revenue demands of the State. Such uncertainties made the local population less associated with the centralized administrative system of the State and more reliant on local aristocracy who styled themselves as Rajas. The dissociation and resistance to centralizing forces became the normative practice of the region, a necessity that the semi-tribal aristocracy of the region, and their subjects, felt was a necessity to survive the harshness of the terrain they inhabited. S. B. Chaudhuri categorizes these resistive outpourings the outcome of a national spirit that turned the aboriginals against elements that were foreign to the land and customs. True, the Company once they acquired hold over the southwestern lands had no sympathy, as with the other parts of the subcontinent, for erstwhile hierarchy and social practices. Led by an ardent desire of profit maximization the English East India Company played by the rules of mercantilism and turned a blind eye to the rising tide of discontent signaled by these resistive attempts on the part of peripheral and marginal people. This resulted in the creation of a frontier in the southwestern lands of Bengal that was impenetrable and resistive at the same time.

Topographical and political ruthlessness of the terrain continued to influence the imagination of the people who resided there and of those who looked on it from outside. The imagery that the two parties created from within and without seldom found a common ground of interaction, but on one score their opinion expressed unanimity- the resistive frontier. The idea of the frontier here needs some qualification. It would be too simplistic to define the frontier as a mere geographical

limit. It outgrows the territoriality of the socially ascribed meaning of the word and assumes the shape of a cultural mentality and practice emergent from the territoriality. The dissociative mentality that the aboriginals of the region shared with each other and against the centralizing authorities remained a bond that held them together as a community of peasantry. Perhaps, it was not a well-defined peasant consciousness, in the sense the subaltern group would identify it, but it pervaded their cultural dealings with each other and against anyone who was not a part of this fabric. One needs to contextualize the uprising of Dhalbhum in this cultural topography to understand the trajectory of peasant resistance.

Historiographically Situating Jagannath Dhal: Rebel Leader or Local Grandee?

The rebellion that scourged the southwestern frontier of Bengal began with the resistive stance of the local zamindars beginning from mid eighteenth century when the Maratha *bargi* attacks began on the region. The department remained unchanged when authority began to change hand and gradually passed into that of the English East India Company. In 1760 Midnapur along with Burdwan and Chittagong was handed over to Company administration. The change of hand of the region from the Mughals to the Company brought about a new rule of law. But that could not alter the existing power equation of the region. The local zamindar and leadership encroachment of revenue administration into the region could not be easily accepted by the local leadership. Discontent of a sporadic nature erupted against this unwarranted encroachment. Eruption of the discontent was primarily led by the Zamindar of Ghatsila or Dhalbhum hence Ghatsila became the primary centre of the rebellion. In alliance with a local bandit by the name Damodar Singh Raja of Dhalbhum put up a strong resistance by building stockades of felled trees and barricading narrow passes. Local peasantry and population combined force with the Raja and rose in rebellion against the onslaught of the alien forces (Chaudhuri, 1955, p. X.). Though identified as refractory aristocrat Chaudhuri believes the rebellion that spread through the stretch of southwestern Bengal was not “purely political commotions originating from the conspiracy of ambitious or disgruntled Indian rulers” (Ibid.). Despite having a large band of followers Raja of Dhalbhum could not counter the oncoming force of the Company sent under the leadership of Mr. Ferguson. Under his leadership the fort of Ghatsila was recovered on 22nd March 1767. Apprehensive of retribution Raja of Dhalbhum absconded. In order to pacify the situation nephew of the absconding zamindar made a bargain with the British forces. In return for a penalty of Rs. 5,500 to be paid as annual tribute to the Company administration Jagannath Dhal took over the position vacated by the erstwhile zamindar or the Raja of Dhalbhum.

The bargain that Jagannath Dhal had made with the Company officials was short lived. Believed to be a lasting solution by the Company administration it did not survive long because Jagannath Dhal from the very beginning considered it a

temporary arrangement. Incensed by the disrespect shown by Jagannath Dhal towards the Company administration another force was sent to Ghatsila under the leadership of Lieutenant Rooke in 1768. He was sent to reclaim the due denied to the Company by Jagannath Dhal. However, he also absconded once the forces were sent to Ghatsila. Jagannath Dhal's place was overtaken by his brother Nimu Dhal. Though Jagannath fled Ghatsila he did not leave the Dhalbhum region. Soon he rallied the Bhumij and Chuar peasantry of the surrounding Barabhum region in his favour and against the oncoming forces of the Company. (Chaudhury, p. 54) Reports of the unrest brewing in the region soon reached the Company administration. To quell the unrest another force was sent under the leadership of Captain Morgan (Price 1876, p. 58).

But the forces of Company faced tremendous harassment in the hands of the resistive peasantry and aboriginals. They had to engage in sudden and jungle warfare trusted upon them by the resistive peasantry. Based on the evidence gathered from the writings of J. C. Price it can be surmised that the rebellion of Dhalbhum was definitely led by Jagannath Dhal but it was never led on his own. The aboriginals and the peasantry of the region gathered under the leadership of Jagannath Dhal. But the motive of resistance of Jagannath Dhal and that of the peasantry was never the same. In that sense, it can be said that Jagannath Dhal raised the banner of rebellion not as a leader of people but gathered around himself a group of people who harbored discontent against the Company's rule of law. In that sense, Jagannath Dhal can be considered a local grandee who raised the banner of rebellion for protecting his familial authority over the region.

The historiographical narrative of Baronial Resistance in Dhalbhum

S. B. Chaudhuri while putting together the accounts of the civil unrests in British India prior to the violent upheaval of 1857 noted, particularly in case of Bengal, the active role played by zamindars in resisting the onslaught of the Company rule (Chaudhury, 1955, p.1, 2). What he was insistent upon, drawing his conclusion from *Siar-ul-Mutakherin* that described the zamindars as "malevolent and incorrigible", that the local ruling aristocracies were always too eager to raise the banner of rebellion? The wilderness of the southwestern frontier not only made the terrain unresponsive to centripetal tendencies, but it also allowed centrifugal tendencies to flourish and thrive in the area. The local aristocrats nurtured this tendency to their favour leading to the foundation of regional administration. The unimpeachable terrain of the region (already discussed in an earlier section) had given the grandees of the region a Baronial independence since the late Mughal period. But when the unwarranted freedom they enjoyed in the locality was finally interrupted and questioned by the ever-penetrating rule of law of the colonial regime they needed more than an impending sense of independence to raise the banner of rebellion. Chaudhury glorifies the role of Jagannath Dhal in rallying the discontented Chuar and Bhumij peasantry of Barabhum region, and the

dispossessed Pikes around his banner of rebellion. The participation of the peasantry, Chaudhury opines, occasioned from the inherent sense of patriotism that was denied and defiled by the alien revenue agents of colonialism. So by extension, he concluded it was an act of patriotism on the part of the peasantry against the Company Bahadur, the foreign rulers. However, his treatment of the rebellious treatment makes an over simplistic assessment of the mentality of the rebels. What made the peasantry rally around the cause of Jagannath Dhal, a grandee, and a socially detached class in the hierarchy of local power schema? Was it simply an act of loyalty? Or did they have some vested interest of their own in resisting the colonizing agents?

It was but too obvious that these men who had begun functioning like local aristocrats since early eighteenth century had an extensive social base in the periphery. Having a strong emotional bond of customs and practices with the local masses was not something wholly unexpected. Chaudhuri, therefore, likens these acts of rebellion as a natural outcome of trespassing of customs and practices, and acts of racism practiced by the foreign rulers over various regions (Ibid: 1, 2). It was, as he surmises, outcome of an injury dealt to 'national character and national spirit' (Ibid: xx-xxii) of people. What he describes 'national' can be loosely interpreted as something that is foreign to the soil, to the manner, and blood of the country (Ibid: xix). Thus, in the opinion of Chaudhuri the 'civil disturbances' of early eighteenth century were representative of a national spirit that resisted the onslaught of something alien and foreign disruptive of the existing fabric and exacting in nature.

Unlike Chaudhuri Ranajit Guha's subaltern intervention into the history from below tried to identify and allot agency to civil population who participated in the resistive projects against colonialism. A major shift in the approach to the subject occurred for enabling the hitherto unheard voices of those who remained turbulent multitude in imperialist narrative to find its marked place in history (Guha, 1999, p. 1, 3). However, David Ludden opines subalternity has undergone several changes ever since it appeared in the academic arena around the 70s (Ludden, 2002, p. 1-8). The discordant rebels who formed a part of the imperialist narrative and often appeared as martyrs in the nationalist narrative were brought out of the stereotypical role allotted to them by the subaltern study group and given agency, meaning allowed to reclaim the narrative, by the subalterns in early years. But this was before Spivak expressed her skepticism by pointing out if it was at all possible to allow the subalterns to speak in a language and in texts so rift with epistemic violence. The attempt to find the small voices that were denied agency nevertheless remained undaunted. But neither Guha, nor the works of Spivak (1988) or even those of Kathleen Gough (Gough 1974) and Eric Wolf (Wolf, 1971, p.xviii) have tried to reclaim the agency of the Bhumij and Chuar peasantry of southwestern Bengal. Even the later interventions of B. B. Chaudhuri (1979) has failed to

mention the unrest that the Bhumij and Chuars unleashed in the Manbhum, Barabhum and Dhalbhum regions in the early eighteenth century. This raises two pertinent questions: a) did the Bhumij and Chuar participation in the unrest too incomplete and lacked a common consciousness that has made the subaltern scholar deny subalternity to these resistive social components? (b) Was the Dhalbhum uprising unrest of vested interest of the local Raja or in a more Eurocentric manner of putting it, unrest of local Barons? The local aristocracy, the so-called grandees, did act out of vested interest, as in the case of Jagannath Dhal, whose sense of independence was injured by the revenue and police administration of the colonial regime. True, this served as a propelling force allowing the unrest a head start, but the momentum it gained owed its pace not to the rebellious chiefs or rajas or barons. It was the ready association of the Bhumij and Chuar peasantry and the Pikes that catapulted the unrest from unrest to a resistance. Hence, while interrogating the uprising of Dhalbhum Raja one must be cautious and steer clear away from the Baronial unrest Schema.

Transcendental Peasant Consciousness: Resituating Subalternity in Eighteenth century Historiography

“...most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity.” (Scott: xv)

Scott pointed out that peasants seldom have an organized front to oppose the oppressor. Fear retribution binds them in silence, at least in public space. Hence, they take recourse to dissimulation, deception, and desertion (Ibid: xvi). Being a “class scattered across the countryside” (Ludden, p.1-2) peasantry is best equipped for “extended, guerilla-style, defensive campaign attrition.” (Scott: xvi). The Bhumij and Chuar peasantry of the Barabhum and Manbhum region shared a common consensus on the discontent against the new rule of law. The new order of law founded by the Company governance upturned the existing socio-legal and customary legal system that prevailed in these peripheral borderlands. This shift from custom to contractual system took a heavy toll on the peasantry. Despite this consensus the peasantry could not raise a banner of rebellion perhaps for the fear of retribution. The historiography of the Dhalbhum insurgency does not provide any empirical data on peasant consciousness. Unlike the peasant insurgencies that Guha talks of in his book the rebellion of the Bhumij and the Chuar peasantry involved in the Dhalbhum uprising did not have a mentality and organization of insurgency. But at the same time, as the report of Price suggests, the peasants took recourse of sudden and surreptitious jungle warfare to resist the onslaught of the oncoming colonial forces. The new colonial revenue intervention rendered the peasants at the mercy of rapacious revenue farmers and collectors who seldom took into account physical calamities and climatic inconsistencies. Naturally, the peasantry hid in the niche of their heart a deep discontent for the perpetrators of the new order, who they dare not resist alone. The desire, though hidden, to overthrow

the new order of things suggests the presence of a resistive mentality that just needed the fillip of a leadership to burst out into a full-fledged rebellion.

The consciousness that the Bhumij and Chuar peasantry shared in the region was, to borrow S. B. Chaudhuri's words, was based on the custom of the region. Violation of those customs that bonded them together by the colonial regime created a fracture within the fabric weaved by the peasant world. This was a transcendental peasant consciousness that rose above caste and social hierarchy. It is in this transcendental peasant consciousness that the subalternity of the Bhumij and Chuar peasantry of the Dhalbhum uprising needs to be situated. Based on this analysis the Dhalbhum Uprising needs to be rooted not just in the resistance of the Raja of Dhalbhum, but also in the resistive mentality of the peasantry. The new order considered them unskilled and untrained soldiers who were of no use to the State. Regularization of state policing forces had rendered them unemployed. Stripped of their livelihood as well as of the social status they enjoyed because of this position turned them against the Company Raj and their regional collaborators. So, when Jagannath Dhal began recruiting them to debase the new system, they were but all too eager to participate in it.

Presence of this transcendental consciousness has not found due attention in the existing historiography that has seldom allotted a space of recognition to this chapter of anti-colonial resistance. Since the objective of the paper was to grant subalternity to the peasants in the historiography of the early colonial resistance movements, the paper has also demonstrated that many such episodes of resistance have gone unnoticed, just as the episode of Dhalbhum uprising that seldom figures in the historiography of early colonial resistance movements. Moreover, the lack of historical attention paid to the resistance extends veritably so to the peasant participants. True, the process of interrogating the mentality of the peasants, the general impact of the revolt and the participation of the general masses in the resistance is a difficult proposition because dearth of empirical data has stayed the hands of the present researcher in finding answers to these questions raised in the process of interrogating the revolt. Nevertheless, an attempt can be made, as done in this paper, to reconstruct the peasant consciousness through an interrogation of the mentality demonstrated by them in other resistances in the southwestern parts of Bengal that either preceded or followed it. This can provide a pattern to the historian to try and reconstruct the trajectory of the mentality that might have made the peasants engage in such consternations. This might develop a strong base for granting subalternity to those peasant participants who have remained beyond the purview of history.

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