

The Administration Of Augustus Cleveland In Santhal Pargana

Minakshee Kumari

ABSTRACT: *This essay highlights the legacy of a colonial bureaucrat, Augustus Cleveland (1754–1784), who played a pivotal role in shaping British tribal policy in India during the late 18th century. As Collector and Magistrate of Bhagalpur, Cleveland adopted a compassionate approach toward the Paharia tribe of the Rajmahal hills. His respect for their customs and personal engagement led to positive changes in their socio-economic conditions. In return, the Paharias embraced him, expressing their gratitude and affection, which is reflected in their legends about Chilmili Saheb. Thus, this relationship marked a notable deviation from the typical British-tribal interactions based on conquest.*

Keywords: Rajmahal, Paharias, Jungle, Tribals, Policy.

The complex problem that the British colonial powers inherited revolved around the longstanding and intricate conflict between the Paharias, an indigenous tribe inhabiting the elevated terrains of the Rajmahal Hills, and the zamindars, or landed aristocrats, who managed the fertile plains surrounding these hills, including the town of Rajmahal itself. For many years, the Paharias had engaged in raids into the plains, stealing food supplies, livestock, and other resources, retreating to the relative safety of the hills where they could easily defend themselves. However, this conflict was not simply characterized by a clear-cut division between attackers and defenders.¹

In fact, the dynamics of this relationship were far more complicated. The zamindars often incited the Paharias to carry out raids against their rivals, thereby facilitating a form of covert alliance. They would provide the Paharias with safe passage, encouraging them to ravage the lands of their enemies in exchange for a shared benefit. This arrangement created an uneasy form of symbiosis, where a precarious truce existed among certain zamindars and Paharia leaders. Some zamindars would go so far as to bribe key Paharia chieftains, ensuring that their territories remained untouched during raids.

During the significant festival of 'Dasahara',² which marked the harvest season with celebrations and feasting, the zamindars would often host lavish banquets for the Manjhis and Sardars³, prominent leaders within the Paharia community, showering

¹ Yorke, M. P. Tribal identity among the Santals 1770-1857. <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00029527>

² Sohrae' the festival after the gathering of the harvest, after which the Paharias would go raiding.

³ The leaders of the Paharia villages. Similar to the Santal Manjhis

them with gifts and tokens of goodwill. These acts of generosity were meant to strengthen their ties and secure local peace.

However, this tenuous bond began to unravel dramatically following the siege and attack by Surajah Dowlah on the British in 1756⁴. The resulting chaos shattered the fragile trust that had been established over the years. In December of that same year, tensions escalated to a breaking point when the zamindars, in a shocking act of betrayal, slaughtered the Sardars and Manjhis during the Dasahara festivities. This gruesome event incited widespread retribution among the Paharias, leading to a swift escalation of hostilities and a complete breakdown of the previously established symbiotic relationship.

The situation deteriorated further during the catastrophic famine of 1770, which struck the region with devastating impact. As the famine ravaged the plains, the British outposts stationed at the foothills, manned by ghatwals⁵—local constables tasked with maintaining order—were abandoned, leaving the area vulnerable. The Paharias, whose access to the otherwise-assailable wild foods of the jungle allowed them to weather the famine's severity more effectively, seized the opportunity to raid the plains unchecked.

This unrestrained aggression exacerbated the already dire consequences of the famine, dealing a further blow to the power and influence of the local zamindars and their principalities. The severity of this breakdown in social order was aptly captured by the Judge of Benares in 1808, who provided a keen observation on the turmoil engulfing the region, reflecting the grave implications of such conflicts in a milieu torn apart by betrayal and desperation.

*"At an early period of British administration that tract of country lying between Birbhum and Bhagalpur was in a state of extreme disorder. The inhabitants were in open arms against the Government and its other subjects. A perpetual and savage warfare was maintained by them against the inhabitants of the plains, and they were proscribed and hunted down like wild beast; so that I have been informed by a gentleman who was at the time Collector of Birbhum, their heads were brought to him in basket loads."*⁶

The pursuit of peace in the region was a matter of considerable urgency and importance for the British colonial administration. The persistent and systematic

⁴ In 1756 Surajah Dowlah attacked the British at Calcutta and entered the town on June the twentieth, which resulted in the incident of the "Black Hole of Calcutta". A few days later he returned to Murshidabad, his capital of Bengal. This turn of affairs could only increase the chaos and insecurity in the region, as any success by Surajah Dowlah would mean a return to an unstable and corrupt government

⁵ Ghatwals are retired sepoy, who were given rent free estates in return for maintaining law and order.

⁶ L.S.S. O'Malley, Bengal District Gazetteer, Santal Parganas. Calcutta, 1910, p. 35? reference given, Fifth Report (Madras Reprint, 1883), p. 767

nature of banditry posed a serious threat to the ideals of progress and development that the company's officials were eager to implement in Bengal. These officials, who envisioned a region thriving under their governance, found their ambitions challenged by the lawlessness that permeated the landscape. One particular area of concern was the 'dak'⁷, the crucial postal route that wound its way through the Teliagaria Pass, where frequent disruptions were undermining communication and security.

This rampant banditry increasingly captured the attention of British authorities, compelling them to direct their focus towards the local tribes residing in the hills. The Paharias, known for their fierce independence and mastery of guerrilla warfare, became a primary target in the British campaign against banditry. In 1772, in response to the escalating unrest, an expeditionary force was assembled under Captain Brooke, specifically tasked with tackling the challenges posed by the outlaw tribes nestled in the hilly terrain. Unfortunately, the rugged and inhospitable landscape, combined with the cunning and resourceful tactics employed by the Paharias, thwarted the British attempts at offensive military action. After years of struggle, the British forces found themselves unable to secure a decisive victory, leading them to adopt a defensive posture that would continue for the next six long years.

In 1778, a change in strategy emerged as Captain Browne sought a more conciliatory approach to this persistent problem. Recognizing the existing power dynamics, he decided to emulate the zamindars—local chieftains known for their influence and connection to the indigenous population—by financially incentivizing local leaders, such as the Sardars and Manjhis, to safeguard the postal routes. This tactic involved providing them with payments to cultivate a sense of responsibility towards the safety of the dak.

Browne's plan also included the reinstatement of the Thannadars, local police officers responsible for maintaining order, along with the revival of the traditional Chaukibandi system—previously an effective method of governance in the area. These measures were designed to create a more structured form of oversight and reduce the rampant lawlessness plaguing the region.

To further entrench British authority and secure the loyalty of the local population, new leaders known as Ghatwals, labeled as "Invalid Jagirs," were awarded estates at the southern foothills, strategically positioned between the Mor and Brahmani rivers. The stipulation for these landholders was that they establish settlements in the rugged terrain and maintain law and order within their jurisdiction. This comprehensive approach, blending military might, financial inducements, and local

⁷ The 'dak' is the mail service that ran between the administrative centres in India, its protection was vital to the government of all areas, and particularly to those more distant from the centre at Calcutta, such as were Bhagalpur and Monghyr who used the Teliagaria Pass

governance, aimed not only to quell the banditry that threatened British interests but also to foster economic stability and reinforce the presence of British rule in the increasingly turbulent landscape of Bengal.

In 1774 a report states:

*"By the battalion employed in the Jungleterry (as the district was then known) a tract of country, that was considered as inaccessible and unknown, and only served as a receptacle for robbers, has been reduced to Government, the inhabitants civilized, and not only the reduction of revenues, which was occasioned by their ravages, prevented, but some revenue yielded from this country itself, which a prosecution of these measures will improve."*⁸

In the year 1779, August Cleveland, a resident of the historic town of Rajmahal, was appointed as the Collector of Bhagalpur. This period was marked by rampant dacoities and banditry, creating a sense of peril that loomed over the region. Notably, Cleveland experienced firsthand the challenges of his new role when he had his tents stolen while they were pitched in a serene mango grove, just a few miles outside Bhagalpur. Recognizing the dire need for order, Cleveland understood that he would have to bring the rugged Rajmahal Hills under the exclusive jurisdiction of Bhagalpur. Demonstrating determination and leadership, he succeeded in this endeavor within the same year. With this crucial step accomplished, he dedicated himself to thoroughly evaluating the prevailing conditions and crafting a comprehensive policy aimed at restoring stability and security to the troubled area.

*"The inhabitants of the hills would in a short time be forced to submit. We have lately considered these people as our enemies, and treated them as such. It is but consequent with our principles of humanity and justice to use every means within our powers to avoid a state of warfare."*⁹

The British policy towards the Paharias, meticulously crafted by Cleveland, laid the groundwork for significant historical developments and social transformations that would follow. Although my primary focus does not directly involve the Paharias, their history and circumstances are integral to my thesis. After the year 1820, a wave of Santals migrated northward, finding a new home alongside the Paharias in the picturesque Rajmahal Hills. However, since the Santals were not present in this area during Cleveland's administration, their relationships with external entities and their overall sphere of influence did not evolve in the same manner as those of the Paharias. This contrast highlights the distinct paths of these two communities in the context of colonial governance and social dynamics.

⁸ Report from Warren Hastings to the Court of Directors, December, 1774.

⁹ Letter from the Collector at Bhagalpur to Warren Hastings, November, 1779* See L.S.S. O'Malley, Bengal District Gazetteer; Santal Parganas. Calcutta, 1910, p. 37

In 1780 Cleveland wrote in appreciation of his predecessor's policy:

*"The first question that occurs is whether it is for the interest of Government to supply the means of subsistence for a short while or to suffer the inhabitants of the hills to commit devastations on the country as they have done for many years past. Certainly, the former. For although the losses which the Government has experienced on this account have been trifling owing to the rigid observances made with the zamindars, yet the suffering of the low country propels are not to be described."*¹⁰

The initiative undertaken to safeguard the region and to cultivate a sense of civilization among the local tribes required significant financial investment aimed at enhancing trade opportunities. One of the most captivating examples of this endeavor was Cleveland's pioneering plan for the Paharias, which would later see expansion. He launched an ambitious scheme, allocating a budget of Rs. 29,440, intended to incentivize the Paharia Sardars and Manjhis to assume responsibility for addressing minor civil and criminal offenses within their designated districts. Concurrently, Cleveland envisioned the establishment of a specialized unit of archers, composed of Paharias, tasked with functioning as Hill Rangers to maintain order.

In his reflections on this initiative, he stated, *"The disbursement and, of course, the circulation of money in the hills by the Government appears to me the most likely bait that will ensure the attachment of the chiefs, and at the same time nothing will be so conducive to the civilizing of the inhabitants as to employ a number of them in our service."*¹¹

The overarching aim of these strategic moves was twofold. First, it sought to integrate the Paharias into the British governance framework by assigning them partial authority over maintaining peace. Cleveland, displaying remarkable foresight, understood that the resources allocated to this cause would not be squandered; rather, they would firmly entrench the Paharias within the British economic system. Initially, only the first segment of the scheme received approval from Warren Hastings, while the establishment of the corps of archers was deemed too costly and thus abandoned.

In 1782, Cleveland set out to broaden the scope of his original scheme. His vision was to transform the Rajmahal Hills into a self-administered entity, operating along British standards as much as possible. This area would serve as a strategic buffer zone for the British interests in Bengal. That same year, he successfully attained permission to exempt the Rajmahal Hills from the ordinary court systems, instituting instead a local framework for summary justice presided over by a Court

¹⁰ Report from Warren Hastings to the Court of Directors, December, 1774, given in L.S.S. O'Malley, *ibid.*, p. 36

¹¹ Letter from August Cleveland, dated 21st November 1780, given in L.S.S. O'Malley, *ibid.*, p. 39.

of Sardars. The Sardars, who agreed to this new arrangement, were granted magisterial authority over the newly defined judicial territory.

To solidify this alliance, Cleveland also succeeded in establishing the corps of Hill Rangers, which functioned as a police force comprising 400 personnel dedicated to the region's safety. Eight of the most trusted Sardars were appointed as leaders of this unit, each receiving a remuneration of Rs. 10 per month, while the rank-and-file members earned Rs. 3 each. Additionally, every Manjhi was compensated Rs. 2 for supplying the necessary recruits. The projected annual expenditure for maintaining this force was estimated to reach a considerable total of 3.2 lacs of rupees.

Shortly thereafter, the Hill Rangers evolved into a formidable regular force based in Bhagalpur, meticulously trained, drilled, and armed in the manner of sepoy. At this pivotal moment, their ranks swelled to a robust strength of 1,300 soldiers. The implementation of various strategies proved immensely effective in quelling raids across the southern expanse of the Rajmahal Hills, a region considerably distant from the heart of British administration.

The Hill Rangers faced a formidable test in 1783 when a faction of Sardars from the southern territories revolted against their northern counterparts. The corps rallied to suppress this insurrection, bringing the insurgents to trial. The judicial proceedings unfolded seamlessly, with Cleveland reporting with satisfaction in 1783:

*"Since the establishment of the corps of hill archers, this is the third time that I have had the occasion to employ them against their own brethren. And they have always succeeded in their business. I flatter myself the Honorable Board will not only be convinced of the utility and attachment of the corps, but that they will have full confidence in the general system which I have adopted for the management of this wild and extensive country."*¹²

Ultimately, the court handed down three death sentences and seven life imprisonments. However, the life sentences and one death sentence were commuted under the condition that 700 stolen cattle be returned. Cleveland, demonstrating resolute authority, executed the two men who had been condemned.

Cleveland's tenacity and persuasive prowess enabled him to champion these initiatives against considerable odds. He effectively bridged the chasm of mistrust that the Paharias harbored toward outsiders. As Bradley-Birt aptly observed, "this was a new kind of outsider and they reckoned differently," given that he was European. This shift in dynamics positioned the Paharias as steadfast allies of British interests in the region.

¹² Report by A. Cleveland to the Honorable Board of Directors, February 1783, given in L.S.S. O'Malley, Bengal District Gazetteer; Santal Parganas, Calcutta, 1910, p. 40.

The Hill Rangers were not merely a peacekeeping force; they became a significant instrument of social evolution, maintaining their official status without reorganization until after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. They played a crucial role in the Santal uprising of 1855, contributing to the transformative societal changes unfolding at the time. The political relationship between the Paharias and the British shifted from one of antagonism to that of alliance, fostering a channel for cultural exchange that had been institutionalized.

Throughout his tenure as Collector in Bhagalpur, Cleveland endeavored, albeit unsuccessfully, to encourage the Paharias to settle in the uninhabited areas bordering the plains, zones that had previously been lawless due to rampant bandit activity. Tragically, Cleveland passed away in January 1878 at the young age of 29. His legacy in the region resonated profoundly, as encapsulated by a traditional song sung by the Paharias at his death, expressing their deep sense of loss: "Lo, we have lost a father. Yeah - the father and mother of a tribe." Over time, Cleveland's impact on initiating change became somewhat mythologized, and he was affectionately remembered as "Chilli milli Saheb," a name that endearingly endured in the hearts of the Paharias until today.

References:

I. Archival

Buchanan, Francis. 1939. *An Account of the District of Bhagalpur in 1810–11*, Patna: Bihar and Orissa Research Society.

McPherson, H. 1909. *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Santhal Parganas, 1898-1907*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.

II. Travellers' Accounts

Heber, Reginald, Rev. 1828. *Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824–25*, Vol. I, Philadelphia: Adam Waldie & Co. Printers.

Hodges, William, 1793. *Travels in India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 & 1783*, London. Valentia, George Viscount. 1809. *Voyages and Travels*. Vol. I. London.

III. Journals

Basu, K.K. 1942. 'Augustus Cleveland', *The Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. XXVIII, Part I, March, Patna, 75–88.

Brainbridge, R.B. 1907. 'The Saorias of the Rajmahal Hills', *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. II, No. 4, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 43–84.

Choudhary, I.K. 2016. 'The Socio-political Organisation of the Paharia Tribe of Damin-I-Koh of Bihar–Jharkhand: A Story of Continuity and Change (1595–1784 AD)', *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies* (online), Vol. 5, No. 2, August 2016, 1–18.

Shaw, Thomas. 1799. 'On the Inhabitants of the Hills near Raajmahal', *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. IV, London, 45–107.

Sherwill, W.S. 1852. 'Notes upon a Tour through the Rajmahal Hills', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XX, No. I–VII. —1851, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 544–606

IV. **Published works**

Bradley-Birt, F.B. 1905. *The Story of an Indian Upland*. London: Smith, Elder, & Company

Browne, Major James. 1788. *India Tracts*. London: Logographic Press. Calcutta Annual Register for the Year 1821. 1823. Calcutta: Government Gazette Press.

Dalton, Edward Tuite. 1872. *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing.

Datta, K.K. 1968. *Selection from the Judicial Records of the Bhagalpur District Office (1792- 1805)*. Patna: Bihar.

Houlton, John. 1949. *Bihar: The Heart of India*. Calcutta: Orient Longmans Ltd.

Hunter, W.W. 1877. *A Statistical Account of Bengal. Vol. XIV*. London: Turner and Company.