

**The Adivasis of Bengal in the mMid- nineteenth Century with  
special reference to Bhumiz**

Sutapa Bhattacharya<sup>1</sup>

**<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar  
Department of History  
Bankura University  
Bankura, West Bengal, India  
Email:bhattacharyasutapa190695@gmail.com**

---

**Abstract:***The initial decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an era of contentious pacification, where the British East India Company had been playing a battle between ‘the dog and the fly’ with various aboriginal communities, resisting colonial intrusion. Most of these eruptive occurrences seemed to be different from their outer grabs but there was deep seated synchrony of discontent. In 1831-32, vast tracts of Chottonagpur region was plunged into the fire of tribal revolt, Bhumij Kols of Manbhum area also rose up into a short lived but equally troublesome uprising known as Ganga Naraian Hangama or Ganga Naraian’s commotion. The titular cause of the uprising was an ancestral feud between two parties of the Barabhum estate which had started in the previous century. But the fascinating thing is that the common tribal mass zealously joined the disturbances, whose causal and leading aspects were totally non-tribal. To find out the profound causes a recapitulation of the prior historical profile of this terrain as well as the Bhumijis, the chief insurgent tribe is necessary.*

**Keywords:***Bhumiz, British Rule, Diwani, GangaNarain, Chuars, Hos, Kols, Manbhum etc.*

---

**Date of Submission: 15-09-2023**

**Date of Acceptance: 13-10-2023**

---

.....  
**Introduction**

Immediately after the grant of Diwani to the British in 1765 AD, armed resistance against the British rule took place in the Manbhum area in the western part of the Midnapore district. This protest of the people of Manbhum against the British rule is known as the Chuar rebellion (1767-1799). This rebellion changed the thinking attitude of the Company. The English Company passed Regulation XVIII in 1805 AD to maintain law and order in the region, collect revenue and

---

## The Adivasis of Bengal in the mid- nineteenth Century with special reference to Bhumiz

---

bring the whole region under their control. According to this law, a separate district called 'Jungle Mahal' was formed with 23 Parganas or Mahals. However, the formation of Jungle Mahal district did not solve the land problem of the tribals. So, in 1832 AD another anti-British coup took place in the jungle Mahal area, which is known as Ganga Narayan Hungama (riot) or Bhumij Rebellion. The revolt was started by Ganga Narayan against the English Company on the question of the inheritance of the Zamindari of Barabhum, but was joined by various tribal groups and local Jungle chiefs, including the Bhumij of Jungle Mahal. Originally to protect their individuality, to oppose the inheritance act, the Jungle act and not to pay revenue to the Company, they joined forces in favour of Ganga Narayan and gradually it turned into an anti-British mass uprising in the vast area of Jungle Mahal. Ganga Narayan Hungama forced the British Government to change its attitude towards Jungle Mahal. They took administrative measures to prevent such revolts in the future. In 1833 AD, according to regulation XIII, the Jungle Mahal district was dissolved and a new district called Manbhum was formed.

Prior to the work of J. C. Jha, some other writers, like, S. C. Roy and others<sup>1</sup> made an attempt to present a sympathetic study of the tribal people, but the greatest limitation of his work, has been the lack of access to the original records.<sup>2</sup> Those who, after Independence, have discussed this subject, treat it as a part of the general freedom struggle against the British. Even S. B. Chaudhuri has taken the tribal point of view into his account.<sup>3</sup> J. C. Jha may be considered as the path breaker in this area of study as he not only consulted the official sources but also the original primary records which are mostly preserved in India Office Library & Records, London. Jagadish Chandra Jha in his book *The Bhumij Revolt (1832-33): Ganga Narayan's Hangama or Turmoil* mentioned that the Bhumij are part of the Mundari-speaking tribes, who later on abandoned their Mundari language and culture. Jha's work actually deals with the British impact on tribal society in the districts of Dhanbad in South Bihar and Purulia in West Bengal. Jha has shown how the evil consequences of introducing into an underdeveloped tribal area the complex regulation-bound Lord Cornwallis system. J. C. Jha in his prologue tells us that few have been interested in the tribal history of India and these have 'looked at things with western standards and values'.<sup>4</sup> We are promised a look at the evidence of primary sources, seldom utilized by those who came before. Most striking characteristic of his work is that the standards and point of view of the author are so much like that of the almost exclusively English sources of the nineteenth century upon which he relies. Thus Jha's understanding of British colonial point of view, even including the generous use of Anglo- Indian pejoratives i. e., 'chooar' covering everything from a petty thief to one in revolt against government authority. While writing the concept of territoriality in defining the various aspects of peasant Insurgency in colonial India from Rangpur Dhing to Birsaites Ulgulan, Ranajit Guha placed the Bhumij Revolt in this way 'These dispossessed *bhumihars*<sup>5</sup> were among the more active participants in the Bhumij rebellion and the Sardar agitation which formed the most important links between the revolt of the kol and that of the Birsaites at the end of the century. Bindrai, one of the mankis responsible for

## The Adivasis of Bengal in the mid- nineteenth Century with special reference to Bhumiz

---

inspiring the kol to rise in arms , joined forces with Ganganarayan in the Bhumij rebellion in 1833 , while from 1858 onwards the ‘class of uprooted bhumihars’ constituted , according to Singh , ‘the core of the Sardar movement’<sup>6</sup>. Both the Bhumij Revolt and the Revolt of the Tribals, according to Guha,<sup>7</sup> ‘represented the uneasy response of the tribal peasantry of Chota Nagpur’ for organizing a combined rebellion.

The Bhumij are close relatives of several Mundari speaking tribals who share with them the portion of India described as the Choto Nagpur plateau. Jha sets the stage for his historical treatment by describing the region as a ‘secure asylum’ for tribal people prior to the days of control by the East India Company. But Jha makes clear that the Bhumij had completely abandoned their Mundari language by the time the British first arrived in the later part of the Eighteenth century. Their leaders had either set themselves up or being established as Maharaja, Rajas, Sardars, etc., as though they constituted a governmental hierarchy in the Mughal manner. The most one could say was that by the beginning of the nineteenth century the Bhumij were still mainly tied to officials who were at least formerly Bhumij, and that they had not yet seriously begun to lose their hand to outsiders and enter into hereditary debt bondage. Just before the advance of the British in these areas Bhumij had already turned into hierarchical, landed society highly influenced by their Hindu and Muslim neighbors. They have fashioned themselves as rajas or *sardars* following the Mughal aristocracy who found their positions threatened by the outsiders by the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century British East India Company tried to resettle the farming system of this area and after 1813’s Charter Act the whole process acquired impetus as company servants started to flock into these lands in search of new lands. Advent of the British government with its new fiscal systems made pathways for the collaborators like money lenders. This area had already witnessed its previous resistance to early colonial military intrusion as successive episodes of Chuar Rebellion so the resistive tendencies were still prevalent among the tribal or semi-tribal people of those areas. To keep up their estates against the rising fiscal demands of the Company Bhumij *sardars* had to lose substantial portions of their lands or enter into heritable debt bondage. So, Bhumij were not purely tribal and Ganga Narayan, a Bhumij leader with personal grievances channelized that grievance against ‘alien administrative system’. The emergence of the Bhumij had taken place in modern Manbhum and Dhalbhum districts on what geographers call the Choto- Nagpur plateau. It is a temporary area of hills and valleys densely clothed with forest. This forest tract make the country a natural fortress, as , Dalton , has rightly said that ‘ the approaches to it from the North, North- West , East and South, are exceedingly precipitous , the paths winding up defiles which a handful of resolute men could hold against hosts of invaders’<sup>8</sup>. The actors on this stage were tribal peoples who had here found ‘a secure asylum’<sup>9</sup> . Its inviolability they maintained throughout the period of Hindu and Muslim empires. Thus Chaitanya, the great Vaishnava apostle of Bengal, passing through the area in 1509, described the tribal folk as ‘pirates gathered on the rivers, and robbers on the

## The Adivasis of Bengal in the mid-nineteenth Century with special reference to Bhumiz

---

land'<sup>10</sup> It was in 1767 that the British penetration of the hill areas began, when Graham, the Resident at Midnapur, with Calcutta's approval,<sup>11</sup> dispatched a military force under Ensign Fergusson to subjugate the jungle zamindars to the west of Midnapur. He was instructed not only to secure reparations for robberies committed by the zamindar of Phulkusma<sup>12</sup>, but to begin the process of assessing the jungle districts to revenue.<sup>13</sup>

Immediately following the Kol rising, there broke out the rebellion of the Bhumij in Manbhum in 1832, known as Ganga Naraiyan *Hangama*. Ganga Naraiyan, the leader of the insurrection was a disappointed claimant to the Barabhum estate. There was a long family feud between Ganganarayan and Madhav Singh, the Dewan of the estate, then ruled by Madhav's brother Ganga Govinda. Madhav, besides being extremely unpopular because of his oppressive fiscal policy and usurious money-lending business, had deprived Ganga Naraiyan many of his *tarafs*. Ganga Naraiyan gathered a large force of *ghatwals* (Keepers of the hill passes) and strengthened his position by attaching himself to the peasantry who were also alienated by the exactions and excessive demands of the *Dewan*. On 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1832, Madhav was attacked and murdered: the murderous gang then proceeded to plunder the whole country, Barabazar, a town of importance was sacked, all government offices viz., the *Munshiff Kachari*, police Thana and Salt Daroga's kacharis were burnt down. With his levies which included the Chuars and numbered between two and three thousand men, he attacked government troops. The situation became so threatening that in the first week of June, 1832, Government force had to retire to Bankura leaving Barabhum to the possession of the rebel chief. Ganga Naraiyan assumed the title of Raja, and levied contributions from the surrounding country.

Another effect of the succession struggles was that the tribal chieftains, who were alienated by the Company's overriding of their succession customs, became aware that it was possible to defy the Company with some impunity. This was particularly true of Ganga Narain, who had a double grievance over his father's death in prison and the harassing of his uncle, and by their rejection of his own claims, despite the presentation of five or six petitions<sup>14</sup>.

Ganga Narain had a grievance against the Raja of Barabhum as well. He still remembered that his father had been seized and ill-treated with the connivance of the father of the Raja and that he himself had been ill-treated by the troops several times at the request of the Raja or his *diwan*.<sup>15</sup> He made several allegations against the Raja and his family, and had once even tried to seize the person of the Raja's son.<sup>16</sup> Ganga Narain's long years of destitution made him a man of iron will, and he was always planning his revenge. First he extended his family connections, with the neighboring Rajas; one of his wives came from the Bishnupur Raja's family and the other from Manbhum. One of his daughters was married to one Kanu *Babu* of Ambikanagar, the second to Hari *Babu* of the same pargana, the third to Amru *Babu* of Manbhum and the fourth to an illegitimate *Babu* of the Pachet Raja's family. These matrimonial alliances stood him in good stead, and he was 'generally countenanced by them' during the unrest.<sup>17</sup> Even during the stormy

## The Adivasis of Bengal in the mid- nineteenth Century with special reference to Bhumiz

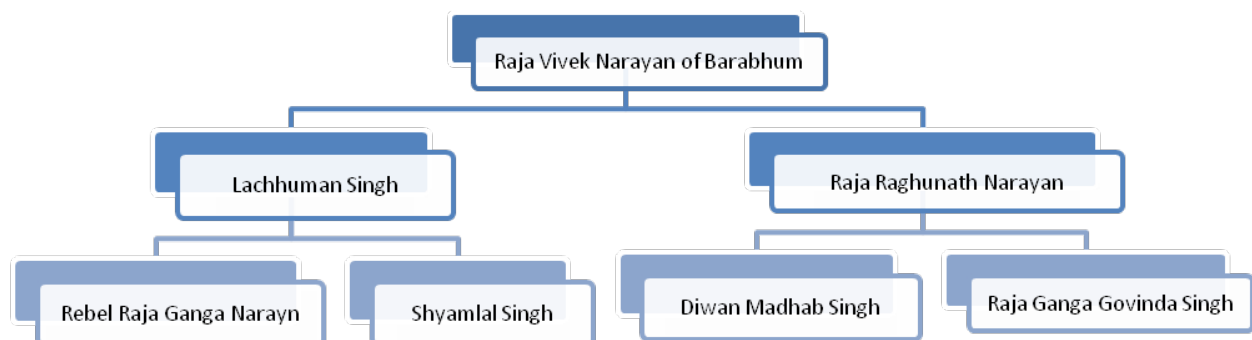
days he won over the zamindar of Ambikanagar with the offer of marrying his son to the latter's daughter.

Then he developed the closest connections with the tribal *sardars* and the Bhumij masses. In the course of time he came to possess great influence among the Bhoomijis [ sic] and was latterly indebted to their kindness..., for almost the necessities of life'<sup>18</sup>.

Agrarian conditions led to considerable inactivity for the time being, but as soon as, the rice crop was planted and his peasant soldiery became free, Ganga Narayan commenced plundering all the estates to the east of Barabhum with renewed strength. The Bhumij Kol of the district who had so long held aloof now joined the insurgents and brought about a terrible explosion. Thus Ganganarayan hang like a dark cloud in the horizon unleashing the forces of the chaos and disorder. The British authority was gradually re-asserting itself. The 34<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry which was brought into the field commenced operations in November 1832. Small detachments were sent out in different directions which overpowered the rebels in many isolated engagements. Ganganarayan fled to Singbhum where he endeavored to gain over the Hos but failed, and was later on, killed in an encounter with the chiefs of the Kharswan. With his death the insurrection came to an end.<sup>19</sup>

Another important issue was the discontent of the *ghatwals*(warden of passes) or local barkandazes, due to the introduction of the Daroga system. Most of these colonial policing officials came from the plains and acted in favor of the outsiders. At such a situation *ghatwals* who had traditionally fulfilled the duty for long felt dispossessed of their ancestral *jagirs*. These men snubbed away from cooperating with the new officials and eventually felt related to the same situation of Ganga Narayan, a dispossessed lord.

*The Family Tree of the Rajas of Barabhum:*



Ganga Narayan was the son of Lachhuman Sing, younger son of Raja Vivek Narayan of Barabhum from his first wife. Being the son of a Patrani or elder wife, Lachhuman claimed his

## The Adivasis of Bengal in the mid-nineteenth Century with special reference to Bhumiz

---

position as the heir apparent to the throne. British authority uprooted his claim in favour of Vivek Narayan's another and comparatively imbecile son Raja Raghunath Narayan. Lachhuman was sent to the Midnapur Jail. Lachhuman's son Ganga Narayan mobilized discontented Bhumij leaders and ghatwals against Raja Ganga Govinda and his brother Dewan Madhab Singh, who had succeeded Raja Raghunath Narayan. Dewan Madhab Singh was already unpopular due to his 'oppressive fiscal policies and usurious money-lending business'.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1832 Dewan Madhab Singh was killed by rebels. These insurgents further sacked the town of Barabhum in which not only the palace of the raja but also nearby *cutcheries* (office of revenue collection) of *Munshies* (revenue officials), governmental offices were affected. When Ganganarayan's men were unleashing havoc all over Manbhum, British authority was busy with the Kol Rebellion. According to J.C.Jha this uprising was latecomer child of previous Kol Uprising and had very little difference in objectives or methods. British troops' commander Robert Fransis had taken defensive attitude towards the rebel but the irregular recruits who were enlisted for quelling the rebels acted in rapacious ways. These irregular recruits were often collected from the uplands or non-tribal population who had very little empathy for the rebels. This depredation of these irregular battalions made people more furious which ultimately swelled the ranks of Ganga Narayan. While British troops were successfully subduing and pacifying Chottonagpur, a huge portion of fugitive Kols, Chuars were joining the Ganga Narayan's rebel ranks. Bindrai Manki, one of the chief Kol leaders who had submitted to the British later on joined the rebels of Barabhum. Later on he was captured and imprisoned in the Hazaribagh jail. By June, 1832 the situation of Barabhum and Manbhum area became so deplorable that the British authority had to retire to Bankura, while Ganga Narayan styled himself as raja and collected contribution from subjects to legitimize his rule.

Meanwhile due to ensuing monsoon all the peasant levies of Ganga Narayan departed only to return again after commencement of agricultural activities. Initially Ganga Narayan's troops were highly successful. British authorities were so frightened with his advance that they have granted privileges. In November, 1832 34<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry under the command of Captain Dent pursued the rebels. Ganga Narayan suffered some defeats and fled to Singhbhum to stir up the Hos and Larka Kols. Colonial forces successfully hunted down some of the tribal chiefs like Gardi Munda while others like Bikal Sardar, Ghambir Singh were bribed to join in the pacificator campaigns. On his way back from Singhbhum, Ganga Narayan was captured and killed by Thakur Chetan Singh of Kharsawan. Ganga Narayan's severed head was sent to the authorities and the Thakur was rewarded.

Ganga Narayan's revolt was at a glance a very common dynastical feud, an endemic character of that area. Prior to him Raja of Pachet had also objected to the colonial act of selling of his estate. Captain Dent who was invested with the duty of quelling the rebellion reported later on that 'atrocious laws of debtor and creditor had flared up the discontent and the 'general improvidence' was the binding factor. That's how Ganga Narayan's revolt had gone beyond the

## The Adivasis of Bengal in the mid- nineteenth Century with special reference to Bhumij

---

personal interests and rallied tribal mass into this resistance against alien rule. The legacy of Bhumij community's anti-colonial mentality does not ended in 1932 but this semi-tribal landed class rose up again as an important part of the Sardar movement in post-1857 India.

Jha attributes the Bhumij Revolt to fending among Bhumij leaders and hostility to the alien administrative system imposed upon them by the Company. These causes are seen to be interactive, and the special role of Ganga Narayan, a Bhumij leader with personal grievances who played a primary role of leadership in the revolt. Frequent retaliation against external police officials, money-lenders and merchants make clear what some of the discontent arose from. The revolt may be described as it would appear that alienation of land by the agents of the Company for failure to pay taxes was the most common foundation for organization of armed opposition. The terrible depredation causes by the sepoys is also cited as furthering the hostility of the Bhumij.

### Conclusion

J.C.Jha sees the whole thing as the result of the permanent settlement which 'tried to suddenly substitute contract for custom'<sup>20</sup>. The difficulty of that we are given virtually nothing of Bhumij custom which we may imagine confronting contract. About all that is indicated is that previously officials did not lose land for non-payment of taxes: there is also an interesting case where company officials are held to have insisted on primogeniture, though local Bhumij officials claimed that their customary heir was rather the eldest son of the primary wife. Since the British heard and rejected this claim, we are at a loss to understand what the basis of judgment was, nor does J.C.Jha looked into the matter. Like the British officials who looked into the disturbances when they broke out and afterward, J.C.Jha often treats the revolt as though it was the result of certain oversights and ignorance on the part of the Company; these 'errors' were exacerbated by venal and greedy non-British subjects who took advantage of the Pax Britannica with its tax farming opportunities etc. to fleece the natives. Indeed the Bhumij Revolt was historically connected with a related revolt among the Ho and the numerous other tribal revolts broke out later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Notes& References

## The Adivasis of Bengal in the mid- nineteenth Century with special reference to Bhumiz

- 
- <sup>1</sup>Sashi Bhusan Chaudhuri, *Civil Disturbances during the British Rule in India*, Calcutta: The World Press Ltd. 1955, pp. 101-02; Jagdish Chandra Jha, 'The Changing Land System of the Tribals of Chotanagpur, 1771-1831' in Tarasankar Banerjee (ed.) *Changing Land Systems and Tribals in Eastern India in the Modern Period*, Calcutta, Subarnarekha, 1989), pp. 80-87; Kali Kinkar Dutta, *Anti-British Plots and Movements before 1857*, Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1970.
  2. Sarat Chandra Roy, *A Mundari English Dictionary*, Gyan Publishing House, Delhi, 2002; Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'The Oraons of Chhotanagpur: A journey through colonial ethnography' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 56, Special Issue 5 : Multiple Worlds of the Adivasi, September 2022, pp. 1375 - 1415
  3. *The Bhumij Revolt (1832-33): Ganga Narayan's Hangama or Turmoil, With a Foreword by Ram Sharan Sharma*, Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967.
  4. *Ibid*, p. VIII.
  5. Kumar Suresh Singh, *Dust-storm and Hanging Mist*, Calcutta, 1966, p.26.
  6. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency In Colonial India with a Foreword by James Scott*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999, p. 287.
  7. E. T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872, p. 164.
  8. *Ibid*. 163.
  9. H. Coupland, *Bengal District Gazetteer, Midnapore*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1911, p. 22.
  10. H. Verelst to J. Graham, Midnapur Resident, 17 March 1766, W. K. Firminger, ed. *Bengal district Records: Midnapore*, Vol. 4, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1914-26. no.60
  11. Graham to Fergusson, 4 Feb. 1767, Midnapur Collectorate Records .no.117.
  12. Graham to Fergusson, 30 Jan. 1767, *ibid*. no.109.
  13. Dent to Government, 4 September 1833, para 24, Boards Collections 1501/58880 ( IOLR, London ).
  14. Petition, No. 3, Ganga Narain, enclosure, Braddon to Govt., 4 September 1833, Boards Collections, 1501/ 58886.
  15. Pubeen Singh and others, appendix 3, Dent to Govt., 4 September 1833, Boards Collections, 1501/58886.
  16. Dent to Govt., 4 September 1833, Para, 8 Boards Collections, 1501/58886.
  17. *Ibid*.
  18. *Bengal District Gazetteer, Manbhum*
  19. J. C. Jha, *The Bhumij Revolt (1832-33): Ganga Narayan's Hangama or Turmoil, With a Foreword by Ram Sharan Sharma*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967, reviewed by Martin Orans, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, May, 1969, p. 631. ; W.W. Hunter, *Bengal MS Records*, Vol. i, p.89, London, 1894, edited with an introduction by Ananda Bhattacharyya, New Delhi: Manohar, 2018.
-



## **The Adivasis of Bengal in the mMid- nineteenth Century with special reference to Bhumiz**

---

---