

## Facing the wildness: British Travelling and Administrative accounts on the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-Century Jharkhand



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**Abstract-** This paper deals with the early British interactions with the dense forest of Jharkhand in colonial time. British had their notion of the forest which circulates around the ideas of Romanticism and danger. As this forest was the biggest hindrance in the expansion of British authority among the unruly inhabitants of Chota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana, the Adivasis living there had greater freedom. With time, the British had overcome this obstacle by appropriating the landscape in many ways.

**Keywords-** Forest, Chota Nagpur, Adivasi, British, Santhal Pargana, dense

**Introduction-** “The aspect of the forest is never gloomy; though umbrageous enough, it is yet cheerful under the Indian sun, and almost invariably gladdens the heart of the beholder. The undergrowth, though sometimes dense, is seldom rank or noxious, except, of course, in the deltaic regions. Everyone likes marching in the forest districts in most seasons, save in the autumn, when the malaria rises and when the sylvan beauty becomes treacherous. To him who listens at night or in any calm noon-day hour, the infinitude of sounds, loud or low, soft or shrill, is marvelous, when nought is visible of the creatures, feathered or four-footed, big or minute, who are living in the arms, the bosom, the lap of the jungle, as their voices betray their presence.” - Richard Temple. (Temple 1898, 53-54)

The modern state of Jharkhand is made of Chota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana. Under the British rule, Chota Nagpur was a division and Santhal Pargana was a sub-division under the Bhagalpur division. Chota Nagpur had an area of 27,089 square miles while Santhal Pargana had 5,469 square miles of the area under it. Though British had succeeded this region in 1765 with the Diwani rights they got for Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, they first came in direct contact with it in 1772 when Captain Camac had arrived at the Satbarwa forts and Raja Dripnath Sahi Raja acknowledged himself a vassal of the Company. He was ready to help British against the Marathas and agreed to pay twelve thousand rupees

tribute very year. (Bradley-Birt 1910, 17) British had penetrated on the other side of the land. In 1763, a British force had tried to penetrate deep into the Rajmahal hills. The former capital of Bengal and then ruined city of Rajmahal was situated there. Their main aim was to suppress the hill men or Paharias and secure the main way that leads to Delhi. In the south of the region, British relation with Singbhum had started in 1767 when they had to march against the Raja of Dhalbhum.

In the beginning, this region was not very important to the company as its revenue-generating power was very limited. But diplomatically it was important to stop the Marathas from invading Bengal. So they had tried to win the cooperation and acknowledgement from the native rulers. Strategically they were creating a buffer state. Another major factor that had stopped British from a large scale invasion or subordination was the nature and landscape of this land. Chota Nagpur was a land that according to authors like Bradley-Birt had- “never become famous or forced itself into history, and, holding out no gaudy advertisement to attract the passer by, it escapes, in the land of great sights and historic memories, the notice that it well deserve...” (Bradley-Birt 1910, 1). This may show the lack of knowledge of history from the authors’ part but the British attitude was more or less the same. They had constructed the notion of an ahistorical primitive society with a wildness attributed to it. This wildness does not specify its people only who were repeatedly mentioned as ‘savage’, ‘the lowest type of humanity’ (Dalton 1872, 124) and anthropometrically were placed in a lower racial category with- “platyrrhine, mesopic or nearly platyopic, dolichocephalic type, of low structure, thick set, with very dark complexion, broad face, and usually low facial angle” (Beddoe November 1895, 193) but also to the landscape they had to face, mainly the dense and inaccessible forest areas.

**British in the wild: Struggles against the forest-** The climate in Chota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana stands in between the Western Bengal and Central India with rain averaging about 50 inches which favours the growth of a dense forest. Historically the name ‘Jharkhand’ means land of forest in Indo-Aryan language. This area has repeated mentions from the time of Mahajanapada to the time of Mughals. The density of forest and inaccessibility had always been associated with it. The pilgrims of medieval time found it extremely difficult to travel to Jagannath Temple of Puri as they had to deal with not only the tribes and thugs but also with the forest wildness. The famous French traveller Tavernier during his journey from Rohtasgarh to Sambalpur had said- “All these thirty leagues you travel through woods is a very dangerous passage, as being very much pestered with robbers”. (Roy 1912 , 208) More the mainland people and powers attempted to penetrate deep into the region, they had to face the Adivasi people living there. These Adivasis were not completely cut off from the mainland civilization but had a profound dislike towards the outsiders.

Not only in travel and administrative accounts but their oral sources and songs have a strong reflection of it. In one of the Munda song, it has been said-

**Some boundless contiguity of shade  
Where rumour of oppression and deceit,  
Of unsuccessful or successful war,  
Might never reach them more.” (Roy 1912 , 61)**

This clearly shows their intentions to be left alone from all the wars and exploitations out in the mainland. This attitude was reflected in the Rajmahal hill also. When Man Singh made Rajmahal the capital of Bengal in 1592, the tribes living in the hills started raiding the surrounding areas. (Biet 1905, 46) These raids continued for centuries and took an able statesman like Augustus Cleveland to neutralize them. The struggle of Mughals in dealing with the forest and the Adivasis of Kokrah (as Chota Nagpur was known during the Mughal times) continued in the next century. According to Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi, Sher Shah had sent one of his best general Khawas Khan to cut down the jungle and suppress a local chief of Palamau named Maharta Chero. The event was so important both politically and economically that it was mentioned as one of the three great works of Sher Shah in Wakiat-i-Mushtaki. (O'Malley 1907, 18) Around a century later, Shaista-Khan, the Governor of Bihar had invaded the Chero rajas in 1641-42. He had employed a large party to cut down the forest and make a road to reach there. (O'Malley 1907, 20) Again in 1666, the Governor of Bihar Daud Khan had led an invasion to suppress the local chief for once and for all. To cover a distance of 14 miles, his army took a month to reach Kunda hill fort as the whole area was covered in a dense forest and it was a gigantic work to both make roads and ensure the supply. (O'Malley 1907, 22-24) In the Mughal war of succession, Mir Jumla from the side of Aurangzeb had taken a new narrow and steep road to Sherghati through the mountains and jungles of Jharkhand instead of the usual Ganga route and arrived behind Munger, the stronghold of Shah Shuja. (Lister 1917, 61)

The first trouble British faced in this region was in 1768. Captain Morgan was leading an expedition to restore the raja of Dhalbhum in British favour. But instead of fighting any frontline war, the rebels fought a Guerrilla war and in need took shelter in the deep jungle. Unfamiliarity with the land made the work nearly impossible for Captain Morgan. In frustration, he wrote- “It is all a joke to talk of licking these jungle fellows... they endeavor to sting you with their arrows and then fly off. It is impossible almost to kill any of them, as they always keep at a great distance...” (O'Malley, Bengal District Gazetteer: Singbhum, Saraikela and Kharsawan. 1901, 38) On the top of that, more than sixty of his men get fever in the unfamiliar hostile climate.

On the north, Captain Brooke had raised a light infantry corps with special ability to fight in the hills. The main objective of this force was to deal with the Paharias. But after arriving in Rajmahal, they found no visible roads. So the corps had to march by making their way which took a considerable time. Similar to Dhalbhum before, they had to face all three major hindrances- the hostile enemy, dense forest and unfamiliar climate. Many of the corps had died due to the unhealthy climate of the Rajmahal. At last, the mission was abandoned. (Biet 1905, 72-74)

After few decades of their first expedition, in 1819 Major Roughsedge, the Political Agent tried to gather details about the country and "especially of the extraordinary race called Larkas" but failed to enter in the deep forest or to make any proper contact with them. (O'Malley, Bengal District Gazetteer: Singbhum, Saraikela and Kharsawan. 1901, 32) In a letter to the government, he wrote- "A traveller would as soon think of venturing into a tiger's den as traversing any part of Lurka Kols" (Roughsedge 1820) South Singbhum had the densest forest of the whole region. The jungle according to Bradley-Birt was so dense that it was hard for a man to walk alone. A lack of knowledge of the locality had made the task even harder. (Bradley-Birt 1910, 93) As before, the climate was a major obstacle. The climate in Singbhum was very malarial and it was not safe to visit before November. (Haines 1910, 16) Mughals or British were not the only powers who had to struggle to penetrate inside Chota Nagpur. The native powers, such as the rulers of Singbhum and Chota Nagpur also had to face much humiliation. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Maharaja of Chota Nagpur Dripnath Sahi with twenty thousand men advanced against the Hos in Kolhan to help the Raja of Singbhum. On their way, many of the local rulers had joined him. But this large force under the most powerful ruler of the region had the same fate as Captain Morgan. As they penetrated deep inside the jungle, they were cut off from any help from outside. A large number of the soldiers died in the hands of the Hos. (Bradley-Birt 1910, 90)

Travellers from the late eighteenth century had started grazing this area. Their travels were mostly limited to the Rajmahal area which they had to cross on their way to Delhi. These travel accounts are categorically different as unlike the Administrators or Army Officers, their notion of forest circulates in between the beauty and danger. William Hodges had crossed Rajmahal in between 1780-83. His description of the jungle territory is a perfect example of this dichotomy. He had found the hills and jungle "covered with woods, and from the summits of several had beautiful and extensive, mostly diversified by the meandering of the Ganges" but the way through which he had travelled was "not great, the serpentine road, the closeness of the woods, and, in many places, the extreme steepness of the hills occasioned considerable heat and fatigue." (Hodges 1793, 90-91) Augusta Deane also had a very similar approach. While travelling in Rajmahal, the former capital of Bengal and a magnificent city of past, she only found a woody appearance with a very few numbers of small hamlets. (Deane 1823, 32) The roads

and surroundings were covered with thick grass jungle and Underwood. The path through the jungle was full of tigers. In 1824-25, the ruins of Rajmahal were visited by another traveller Rev. Reginald Heber. Like the travellers before and after him, he had to cross through the same thick jungle from where he hardly had any view of the land except the blue summits. (Heber 1829, 189) All over he found the hills beautiful and naturally fertile but the climate and the thick jungle has been mentioned as very unhealthy for the Europeans, especially during the rains.

In most of the administrator's accounts, the jungle had been associated with lawlessness and diseases. Their major concern was to imply the law and order, the Victorian sense of justice among the wildly Adivasis living here. The presence of an unfamiliar dense forest had not only created an obstacle in penetration and establishing the authority but also had provided a safe haven for all those who had defied the law and escaped from justice by taking shelter deep in the forest. The commanding officer of Ramgarh Battalion Captain Roughsedge in a letter written to Mr. C. T. Sealy, magistrate of Ramgarh in May 1809, had said- "Scarcely an individual in the whole country has remained unchargeable with some act of arbitrary violence, the origin of which is to be found in the notion, only now destroyed, of peculiar privileges and exemptions from the usual course of justice." (Bradley-Birt 1910, 18) Bradley-Birt in his book published in 1910 had mentioned that the enforcement of law and order had not become possible until 'the latest possible moment'. (Bradley-Birt 1910, 226) This shows that the British took more than a century to establish their 'Justice' in the most possible corners of the region. The major reason behind it was the very nature of the landscape and the presence of dense forest which had left a strong influence on the Adivasis living there and had provided them a space to continue with their freedom.

**Conclusion-** So in conclusion we can see that the British had to struggle to penetrate and establish its rule in Chota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana. The consecutive rebellions, from Kol rebellion (1829-1839) to Munda rebellion (1899-1900) had made their task harder. Not only the reasons and the way of rebellion but there was also a lot of similarities in the way the rebellious forces had used the forest. So forest was not merely a landscape to the British. They had objectified it and tried to overcome it through various appropriations, sometimes through Regulations and creations of protected or reserved forests, sometimes through the extension of communication and government agencies. With the Grand Trunk road in 1838, loop line of the East Indian Railway and Bengal-Nagpur Railway in the 1890s, the whole area was opened up for further interventions from the British side and "the long arm of the British law reaches everywhere, even to the smallest village in the most remote recesses of the jungle, and the people go in fear and awe of this all-knowing power that not the smallest incident escapes". (Bradley-Birt 1910, 8) All these were seen as a part of the civilizing mission, 'The White man's Burden'. Adivasis were judged on the scale of civilization through the availability of these appropriations. Senior

Administrators like E.T. Dalton had said that the Hos of Kolhan under the direct British government rule for thirty-seven years had become “less suspicious, less revengeful, less blood-thirsty, less contumacious, and in all respect more amenable to the laws of the realm and the advice of their office”. (Dalton 1872, 205) Thus a sharp distinction was made not only among the mainlanders and the Adivasis but within the Adivasi groups also. Obedience and appropriation of the landscape had become a standard scale for civilization.

In appropriation of this wildness, the Observational or Travel Modality discussed by Bernard S. Cohn had played an important role. (Cohn 1996, 6). The travellers, administrators, Army Officers or topographers had written extensively on the areas they had travelled. This helped them in codification or documentation and classification, and ultimately in the creation of a large array of knowledge which alongside a policy of co-operation with local powers had given them an opening to extend their rule. Thus an unknown land which was an ‘object of colonial fear and desire, utility and aesthetics’ was subjected or reformed as argued by David Arnold. (Arnold 2005, 29)

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