

The Anti Colonial Tribal Uprising of Boud (Odisha) and Role of Kahnar Family

Dr. Krushna Chandra Das, Lect. in History, KIIT School of Social Sciences, Bhubaneswar, KIIT University.

Dr. Janmejay Choudhury, Lect. in History, Sri Jagannath College, Kaipadar, Khurda, Utkal University.

The uprisings in the hills of the Southern Orissa constitute an interesting part of the history of the modern Orissa. The Kandhs lived in the vast hill tracts under the jurisdictions of the presidencies of Madras and Bengal and also of the central provinces. The aboriginals, who lived for ages without any external disturbance were exposed to new ideas and experiences. The rising of Kondhs was anti- British in nature. It continued for about twenty years from 1837 to 1856, in which the majority of Kondh population of south Orissa actively participated. The Kondhs were too conservative to tolerate any innovation in their socio-religious life. The Mariah sacrifice was prevalent in their communities from time immemorial and it was a part of their socio-religious system. In 1837, G.E. Russell, Special Commissioner for the Affairs of Ghumsar, discovered it and then the British authorities devised steps to abolish this Mariah sacrifice. When they began coercive measures, Kondhs started serious resistance and it led to prolonged insurrection in the Kondh areas.

The Kondh territories were divided into a number of Muthas. A number of Muthas formed a Maliah. In each Mutha there was a Muthadar or Patro or Bisoi. The Muthadar (Muthahead) is an Oriya or Savara, Pano or Kondh. The title identifies the caste. Oriyas are called as Bisoi or Beher-Dalai. Gonds are called as Patro or Dal-behera. Mallicks or Majhis are purely Kondh title.1In each Maliah there was a Maliah Sardar. Those local men who assisted the Muthadars were generally Oriyas and they were styled as 'Bisoi' in Ghumsar and 'Khonro' in Boudh. The Kondhs were generally divided into two classes according to their religious outlook, such as, Bora Kandhs and Tari Kandhs. There were several sub-tribes within the Kandh community. They were Dongaria or Jungle Kondhs, the Desia or Benia Kondhs, the Kutia kondhs, and the Jatapu Kondhs.2The kondhs as a whole were a militant tribe and were generally armed with a tangi, a sort of battle axe, or bows and arrows or even swords.3As a tribal, they were virtually independent in their mountainous habitats. At the same time they were intimately connected by alliance and bound by various ties of interest with the ruling chiefs. But, when the rulers of the plains tried to exert their political influence over them, the Kondhs resisted violently and never acknowledged their supremacy. They had "a passionate love of liberty and unconquerable resolution,"4 and that spirit was at the root of their prolonged conflict with the British authorities.

In February 1836 the British force, for the first time, came to know about the existence of human sacrifice among the Kondhs of the hills tracts. The British authorities decided to abolish the inhuman practice known as Meriah. But this practice was the foundation of their socio-religious life.⁵ “The religion of Kondhs is essentially one of blood.”⁶ Their pantheon consists of eighty-four deities of whom ‘Thad’ or ‘Tari penu’, the Earth-Goddess, is supreme. “She is the Supreme deity of the race, the solemn symbol of the productivity of Nature and her worship united the whole Kondhs race by a nexus of blood into a race.” The Kondhs were united in a ceremony in the worship of this deity. The earth was originally a crude and unstable mass, unfit for cultivation and for the convenient habitation of man. According to the legends, the Earth-Goddess said, “Let human blood be split before me”. A child was then sacrificed. The soil became firm and productive. Then deity ordered that “man should repeat the rite and live.” Thus, the human sacrifice began among the Kondhs. Such a practice was termed by the British as Meriah, a derivation of the Kondh word Mervi.⁷ This inhuman sacrifice was performed both publicly and privately. In course of time this was also permitted by Hindu kings.⁸ G.E. Russell, of the Madras Civil service, was first person who reported the prevalence of system to the Madras Government in 1836. The effort to suppress the practice were first made separately by Government of Bengal and Madras when the futility of partial efforts was realized, the Kondh tracts were brought under a single jurisdiction by the supreme government.⁹

Russell’s report proved true and Ricketts discovered the Meriah system in the tributary Mahal of Boud and rescued several victims.¹⁰ Ricketts proposed to send a strong party of British troops once a year from Cuttack to march through the Kondh territories with an officer empowered to penalize any person proved guilty of the crime. Boud was transferred to the jurisdiction of the superintendent to facilitate the suppression of the crime. When the British authorities failed to persuade the Kondhs to give up the Meriah sacrifice, they decided to use force against them. But due to the topography of the territories and the nature of the Kondhs, it was not feasible to success in a short time.¹¹ Mills, the successor of Ricketts, pushed ahead the scheme of suppression of Meriah system vigorously. He reported 2nd June 1843 that by sending a trustworthy native office to the Kondh area of Boud, he liberated 8 children. Mills suggestion for the posting of a special officer was accepted and captain Hucks was appointed as an assistant to the superintendent of tributary Mahals of Boud for suppression of Meriah practice. In 1844 Captain Hicks proceeded to the territories of Boud with necessary instructions from Mill to liberate Meriah victims.¹² In July 1845 the matter was fully reviewed by the Governor General in Council and certain important decisions were taken. Caption Macpherson was selected to become the Agent of the Government of India in the special Meriah Agency. Boud was placed under the Jurisdiction and superintendence of

Macpherson.¹³The Meriah Agency worked with unabated success till its abolition in December 1661. In fact, the British interference in their socio-religious ties led to a prolonged state of warfare.

Another main factor associated with the socio-religious susceptibilities of the Kondh was the economic grievance of the hill tribes against the new alien masters. Like other hill area, economic distress also prevailed in Boud. The king of Boud levied a number of taxes on the people. After the transfer of Boud from the South-West Frontier Agency to the superintendent of Tributary Mahals, Cuttack, in April 1837, the latter imposed some more taxes on the people. The government demanded arrears of amounts from the Kondh inhabitants. But the Kondhs considered themselves the owners of the soil and they would not part with their lands on any ground whatsoever.¹⁴During the period from 1837 to 1845, there was no improvement in the land revenue system or in the economic condition of the people. The Kondhs apprehended that their land would be appropriated by the British. They were also very much vexed with exaction of forced labor and undue imposition of taxes.¹⁵ Further, the king of Boud made attempt “to subject certain lands hitherto held by the Kondhs rent-free, to assessment.”¹⁶ But the universal complaint of the Kondhs was against the imposition of any land revenue or taxes which they and their ancestors have not been in the habits of paying. Besides the oppressions from the British authorities and the king, the people of Boud suffered miserably from the oppression of the native agents who were employed in the Kondh Maliahs. These officers, the paid servants of the British, imposed illegal taxes on the Kondhs. In order to extract money from them, even their cooking utensils were carried away forcibly. The king himself was also humiliated by times. The king of Boud had only a nominal authority over the Kondhs. On the other hand, “the Kondh chiefs glorified themselves in a turbulent independence did not mind the orders of the authorities. While the British authorities imposed maximum taxation on the Kondhs, their condition gradually worsened. The establishment of military posts in different places in their areas was a further source of irritation and suspicion. They found the presence of “the Red Guards and the Red Shirts in their midst repulsive. Consequently, when the oppression rule was no longer tolerable, the Kondhs violently revolted against the British authorities.

Other vital cause of rising of Boud Kondh was political in nature. The Kondhs of Boud were not prepared to regard their king. Whenever the king intended to levy taxes, the people had resisted it and refused to pay. It was due to the dispute between the king and Kondh leaders of the Kahnar family. None of them could have decisive sway over the people had consequently the British tried to impose their authority on them. The Kondh could not tolerate the oppressive and exacting nature of the British agents. It led to a political unrest in Boud. The British could neither establish the king in his former authoritative position, not could they succeed in maintaining peace and tranquility in Boud. The rebel Kondh chief, Nabaghana

Kahnar, was also unable to establish a revolutionary government. Boud practically remained in a state of anarchy. In such a situation, it was placed under the Meriah Agency in December 1845. It created further confusion in Boud. As a result, the Kondhs rose violently against the local agents of Captain S.C. Macpherson, the Meriah Agent. Thus, it could be seen that the major grievances of the Kondhs were against the local agents or the officers of the British government.¹⁷ Their activities were so much intolerable to the Kondhs that in course of time they took resort to insurrection in order to drive them away from the hill tracts and to establish their popular sway over the areas. The Kondh rising spread over about two decades from 1837 to 1856; two distinct phases were noticeable in the rising. The first phase covered the period from 1837 to 1846 in which the smouldering discontent of the Kondhs was in real turn against British interference, specially, for the suppression of human sacrifice.

When the British discovered that human sacrifice was prevalent in the hill tracts of Boud, they chalked out a systematic plan to abolish the inhuman practice. It required a sustained effort for a number of years to root out the socio-religious evils which prevailed in the hill tracts from time immemorial. The king of Boud was directed to take steps in this regard. But he conveyed his inability since he had no power over his Kondh subjects who on the other hand, were completely under the influence of Kondh chief, Nabaghana Kahnar, and were actively supported by the king of Angul. Rather the king of Boud sought full protection from the British.¹⁸ The communications between them in this regard created alarm and suspicion among the Kondh chiefs. The council of Konds met at different places and decided to cut off all communication with S.C. Macpherson, Assistant Agent to the Governor, Fort St. George, in Ganjam. The Kandhs under the leadership of Kahnar families made all preparations to resist the British action. The Kondhs of Daspalla and Banpur came forward to help the insurgents of Boud. Moreover, the fugitive konds of Ghumsar had long since taken shelter in Boud and were under the direct protection of the Kahnar families.¹⁹

The king of Boud, however, out of fear of the Kahnar family, retreated from active cooperation with the British authorities in the suppression of the inhuman rites. Therefore, Henry Ricketts decided to induce the Kandh chiefs to surrender. He summoned some of them and said, "if they continue such a mode of life the government would at length be called upon to interfere and destroy them".²⁰ Such a warning had a good effect on the Kandh leaders. Madhab Kahnar and two sons of Nabaghana Kahnar submitted to the king of Boud. But Nabaghana Kahnar himself did not surrender. Most of the insurgents were still active and human sacrifices continued as before. In the meantime, Somanath Singh of Angul, was prepared to render all sorts of assistance to the Kondh chief Nabaghana Kahnar. It acted as an immense moral booster to the tribal chief who now decided to fight against the British to establish his authorities. Dasapalla, one

of the neighbouring tributary Mahals of Boud, also rose in revolt. Thus, the attempts of the government to abolish human sacrifice both in Boud and Dasapalla utterly failed in the first stage.²¹ The initial failure of the British authorities posed a great problem for them. The policy of human sacrifice suppression by force was abandoned.

G.E. Russell was authorized to adopt the new policy. Accordingly his principal Assistant, John Campbell, commenced his first operation against the Meriah sacrifice in December 1837. He was accompanied by some troops as well as some influential chiefs of upper Ghumsar. For four consecutive years he continued his visit to the disturbed areas. A road was constructed in the hearts of the Kondh territories to facilitate his operations. The prolonged operations in suppressing the Meriah sacrifice and subjugating the Kondh in the extensive hill tracts became a matter of grave concern to the British authorities. In fact, the physical nature of the territory combined with the character of the Kondhs frustrated every attempt of the British to suppress the inhuman rite. Moreover, the British regulations were not fully enforced in the hill Zamindaris with whom the Kondhs were deeply attached. Administrative inconveniences were due to different administration under which the Kondh territories were placed. In order to mitigate all these difficulties and to expedite the suppression of the Meriah system, the Governor- General-in-council finally decided to establish a cohesive agency including all Kondh area under an Agent directly responsible to the central government. It was known as the Meriah Agency which was established in July 1845. Its chief administrator was named as the Agent for the Meriah operation. Captain Macpherson was the first Agent, and took over the charge of the Agency in December 1845.²²

Captain Macpherson preceded to the interior of the Kondh territories and rescued some Meriahs by force. When the Kondhs came to know about it, they immediately decided to revolt. Their aim was to rescue Meriah and also to bring back the king of Boud under their clutches. Twice the Kondhs attacked the camp of Agent and were successful in rescuing some Meriahs. The success of Kondhs of Boud prompted and inspired them to invite the Kondhs of Ghumsar to join with them in open revolt against the British authorities. The call at once heeded and the Kondhs of Ghumsar joined in large number in open revolt against the government.²³ Then the second phase of Tribal uprising started which continued for ten years.

A notable feature of freedom movement in Orissa was the participation of tribal people. Tribals provided the backbone of the resistance movement against British authorities in Orissa. In tolerable oppression of the tribal people consequent upon the colonial administration found expression in a series of tribal outbreaks in Orissa during the British rule.

Reference:

Thiady, Sashibhusan – The Kondh Land, Berhampur, 1965, pp.16-17

Kaye, J.W- The Administration of the East India Company, 1966, p.497

Also in Pattnaik, Nihar Ranjan- the Kondhs, THRT, Bhubaneswer, 1989, p.31

Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. xv. Oxord, 1908, p.283

Macpherson, S.C- Report on Kondhs, 14 Sept 1841, p.59

Campbell, John- The Wild Tribes of Kondistan, London, 1864 p.51

Hunter, W.W- Orissa , vol. II, London, 1872, p.92

Maltby, T.J- The Ganjam District Manual, p.67

Dalton, E.T- Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, p.290

Selections from Records of Government (India), no. v. (1854), Operation for Suppression of Human Sacrifice, P.1

Ibid, p.72

Das, M.N-Studies in the Economic and Social Development of Modern India. 1848-56, Calcutta, 1959, p.368

Bengal Judicial Proceedings, no.75 and 76 of 11 March 1844, Mills to Government, 24 Feb 1844

Ibd, No-211 of 18th March 1846 Government to Macpherson, 24th Dec 1845

Campbell, John- op cit. p.14

O'Malley, L.S.S-Bengal District Gazetteers, Angul, Calcutta, 1908, p.29

Orissa Revenue Records, vol.105, F.Gouldsbury to Government of Bengal, No.2225, 7th October 1850

Ibid

Maltby, T.J- the Ganjam District Manual, p.67

Report on Kondhs, Op cit, p.83

ORR, vol.62, H.Ricketts to Government of Bengal, no.396, 23rd Feb 1837 Ibid.

Das, M.N. Op.cit. p.368

John Cambell, Op cit. pp.80-90