



# Bhumij Revolt and the Formation of Manbhum District Centered on the Issue of Inheritance of Barabhum

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## **Abstract**

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 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.

**Keywords:** Diwani, Chuar, Parganas, Jungle Mahal, Hungama, Bhumij, Barabhum.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Manbhum region belonged to the district of Midnapore. At that time, Midnapore district meant the southern part of the present Purulia district, Bankura district (excluding Bishnupur), Jhargram and the present two Midnapore districts. Mirqasim, son-in-law of Mirjafar was given the post of Nawab of Bengal by the English Company in 1760 AD. As a reward, Mirqasim handed over the three districts

of Midnapore, Burdwan and Chittagong to the Company in 1760 AD. (Firminger 1917) Since then, there had been a growing trend of financial exploitation and revenue growth by the English Company's in these areas. In protest, the Zamindars of Manbhum, Bankura and Dhalbhum called for an armed struggle against the English Company. They were usually identified by the English authorities of 'Jungle Zamindars'. (Mukhopadhyay 2010) From the time of Nawab Alivardi Khan, the Zamindars of Manbhum and Dhalbhum refrained from paying any kind of revenue. So, they denied the dominance of the English Company. As a result, from 1767 AD, the English Company sent various expeditions to suppress these Zamindars. Expeditions were originally sent against Panchakot, Barabhum, Manbhum, Dhalbhum, Koilapal, Chatna, Supur, Raipur and Ambikanagar. Although some of these Zamindars bowed their heads, it was not possible for the Company to bring the entire region under its control. Panchakot and Raipur Zamindari were acquired by the company under the 'Sunset Act', when they did not accept the Permanent settlement. As a result, the deposed Zamindars did not limit their movement to the local level but attacked the district headquarters Midnapore. The boundaries of their so called Chuar rebellion (1767- 1797) were Panchakot in the north, Mayurbhang in the south, Singhbhum in the west and Bogree Rajya (Garbeta) in the east. However, from 1798 AD, the revolt spread over a large area of Midnapore. (Price 1876)

In 1799 AD, the Chuar rebellion was brought under control by deploying police forces at various places in Midnapore, but it was not entirely possible for the Company to suppress the rebellion in Panchakot, Manbhum, Barabhum, Dhalbhum and Raipur. As a result, the Company had no choice but to compromise with all these landlords. As a result, the Zamindari of Panchakot was returned to Raja Gorur Narayan and the Zamindari of Raipur was also returned to one of their descendants. The English Company passed the regulation XVIII in 1805 AD to maintain Law and Order in the region, to smooth the way for revenue collection and to bring the whole region under its control. According to this law, a new troubled district called Jungle Mahal was formed with 23 Parganas or Mahals of Birbhum, Burdwan and Midnapore. The administration of this new district was entrusted to a new Magistrate. (O'Malley 1908)

With the formation of this new district, the English Company insisted on the Police System to maintain law and order in the district. This is the system they thought was appropriate there. As Panchakot was the largest Zamindari in the district, the need for a Police Station was felt here. Exactly with the financial support of the Zamindari, these Police Stations had been set up there. (Coupland 1911) Thus, the Police System established in the Jungle Mahal district from 1805 AD was much reassured by the English authorities. The English officers highly praised the efficiency of the Ghatwali Police. However, it was not possible to restore order in the tribal areas by ordinary Police. The decision to establish the Ghatwali Police System in 1805 AD led the Government to get deviated from that system in just a few years, and new ethnic groups began to be appointed. As a result, the skills of the Ghatwals were not recognized here. In the wake of Ganga Narayan's revolt in Barabhum in 1832 AD, the Ghatwali group took up arms against the British Government as major supporters of Ganga Narayan.

At the time of granting diwani to the English Company in 1765 AD, Vivek Narayan was the king of Barabhum. He refused to pay revenue to the English Company. As a result, in 1770 AD, King Vivek Narayan of Barabhum was deposed by the English Company. At that time Vivek Narayan had two children. Lachman Singh, son of the first wife or Patrani and Raghunath Narayan, son of the second wife. Although Raghunath Narayan was the son of the second wife of Vivek Narayan, he was older. According to the local law, Lachman Singh had more rights to receive Zamindari because he was the son of Patrani. But the English Company denied his claim and gave Zamindari to Raghunath Narayan. Arrangements were made to give a monthly allowance to Lachman Singh. But after a while it stopped. As a result, Lachman Singh rejected the decision of the English Company and started an armed struggle with the tribal chiefs. After a short battle he was defeated and was taken prisoner at Midnapore jail. He died there. (Jha 1967)

Meanwhile, with the death of Raja Raghunath Narayan in 1798 AD, the problem of inheritance arose again centering on the Barabhum Zamindari. A dispute arose between Madhab Singh (15 years old in 1800 AD), the son of Raja Raghunath Narayan's first wife and Ganga Govind Singh (16 years old in 1800 AD), the son of his second wife. As Madhab Singh was the son of Patrani, various tribal chiefs supported him. Moreover, the Zamindars of Manbhum, Supur and Dhalbhum also gave priority to the demand of Patrani's son and expressed their opinion in favor of giving zamindari to Madhab Singh. But the main objective of the British Government was to collect maximum revenue. So, this time too they supported Ganga Govind Singh instead of Patrani's son Madhab Singh. (Hunter 1894) Madhab Singh appealed to the district court against this unethical decision of the English Company. The district court pronounced its verdict in favor of Madhab Singh. But the Sadar diwani Adalat decided, "otherwise the estate was the right of the eldest son born in wedlock, no matter whether his mother was first or second wife." (Letter 1833) Thus Ganga Govind Singh acquired the Zamindari with the help of the British military. At the same time, with the approval of the Government, a man named Krishna Das was appointed as the diwan of the Zamindari.

Meanwhile, arrangements were made to give monthly allowance to Madhab Singh, but his anger did not subside. Various tribal chiefs and local Zamindars continued to support Madhab Singh as a legitimate Zamindar. The result was a chaotic situation. In this situation, Raja Ganga Gobind Singh informed the British Government in a letter in 1805 AD that the Chuars were accepting Madhab Singh as their leader and were continuing to plunder in various villages of Barabhum. On the other hand, the police inspector of Radhanagar Police Station also submitted a similar report to the Government. (p.119) Considering the situation, Madhab Singh settled the dispute with his brother Ganga Gobind Singh. As a result, Ganga Gobind appointed Madhab Singh as the diwan instead of Krishna Das.

But soon Madhab Singh became unpopular with the people as diwan. He imposed additional taxes on the people and started his own money lending business. He also deprived Ganga Narayan, the son of Lachman Singh, of the 'Panchasardari'. Ganga Narayan had been enjoying this Panchasardari system for very long. For all these reasons, a direct battle broke out between Ganga Narayan and Madhab Singh. Ganga Narayan attacked Madhab Singh with a huge Ghatwali army. They abducted Madhab Singh and took him to the nearby Bamni hill, where he was killed. Moreover, along with these Ghatwals, Ganga Narayan also burnt down the Munshiff Court of Barabazar. Finding no way out, King Ganga Gobind Singh accepted all the demands of Ganga Narayan and returned the ownership of Panchasardari to him. (pp. 62-63)

The Local English troops did not have the capability to deal with such an armed conflict. The Ghatwals were the main supporters of Ganga Narayan. On the other hand, the tenants of the tribal groups were not satisfied with the Pro-government Zamindars. At this time the Kol rebellion at Chota Nagpur was a great calamity for the British. Moreover, Ganga Narayan's revolt started at a time when there was a possibility of monsoon rains at any time. As British forces advanced to quell the rebellion, the struggle took the form of an anti-British war rather than a centralized conflict. The local English authorities were protesting the compromise rather than fighting the rebels. So, Jungle Mahal Magistrate Russell was the first to favour a settlement with the rebels by negotiation. Accordingly, he appealed for a ceasefire for the Ghatwals. But if there was no response from the rebels, direct fighting became inevitable. (pp.160-162)

In this battle, Lieutenant Macdonald claimed that he had defeated a large force of landowners with only three hundred troops. But even that did not hurt the rebels. Ganga Narayan himself able to convince the supporters that he was invincible. Russell also realized that Ganga Narayan's influence was strongest among the tribes. So, without delay, he declared Ganga Narayan as a 'rebel' and announced a reward of Rupees One thousand if he could be brought alive or dead. (Letter 1832) With this, he again announced that if the Ghatwals support themselves, they would be pardoned. But his appeal was in vain.

Under such circumstances, the English Company sent a group of troops led by colonel Cooper from Barrackpore military camp to the troubled area of Jungle Mahal. This army was instructed to work under Russell. On 23<sup>rd</sup> may 1832 AD, these forces reached Bankura and they started advancing towards Barabazar. On hearing of the British army expedition, Ganga Narayan contacted Thakur Chetan Singh of Kharswan, a neighbouring Zamindar of Barabhum. Moreover, Ganga Narayan also appealed to Russell to support his right to the Barabhum Zamindar. Russell reiterated that the Ghatwals would be pardoned if they expressed a desire for peace and surrendered. But the Ghatwal chiefs who were the main supporters of Ganga Narayan never decided to surrender. At this time, when the sepoy of the Company fell ill, the Bangladesh Government ordered the Burdwan Commissioner to withdraw troops from Barabazar. Moreover, the Magistrate of Jungle Mahal also said that the troops would be withdrawn as the rainy season was approaching. (pp.78-79)

Meanwhile, by the end of July, Ganga Narayan resumed his attack. With about 3000 rebel forces, he set fire to the Ambikanagar Police station and looted the market, killing several people. The Zamindar of Manbhum became frightened when Ganga Narayan took possession of a village called Akro. But at that time there was a family dispute over the Manbhum Zamindari and they could not afford to face the Ganga Narayan attack. So, the Manbhum Zamindar surrendered to Ganga Narayan. On the other hand, the zamindar of Supur also surrendered to Ganga Narayan. When the Zamindar of Raipur was attacked, he too accepted the terms of Ganga Narayan and relinquished the rights of Fulkusma and Shyamsundarpur. At this time the Bhumijis of Silda and Koilapal joined the forces of Ganga Narayan and continued looting over a wide area. The Zamindars of all these places joined Ganga Narayan's party. They did not have the strength to stop the Ganga Narayan attack. (p. 83)

As a result of the weakness and mismanagement of the British forces, Ganga Narayan's power and spirituality gradually increased. When Ganga Narayan entered the Midnapore district, there was panic in Silda, Balarampur and neighboring Parganas. At this time Ganga Narayan again attacked Panchakot

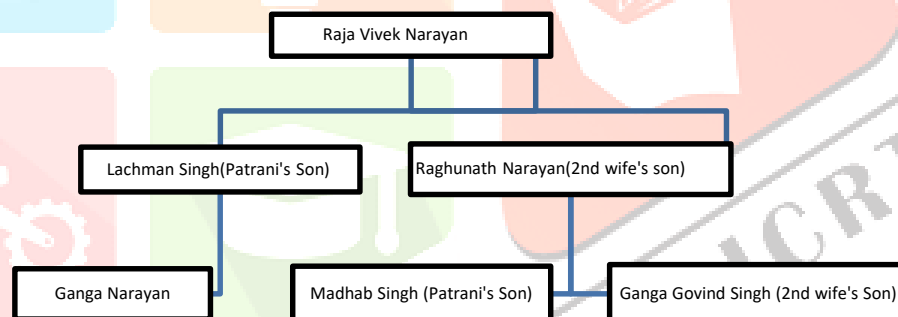
Zamindari, located north of Barabhum. The Panchakot Zamindari family dispute helped him achieve his goal. The rebel forces created panic by looting various places of Panchakot Zamindar. However, from mid-August, the Burdwan commissioner tried to calm the troubled area by sending troops. Some troops were deployed at Manbhum and Raipur. But on the other hand, Bahadur Shah of Koilapal and Raghunath Singh of Dhalbhum continued to loot and set fire to Silda and Ghatshila. In this situation Braddon fell ill. Instead Dent and Wilkinson were sent to the area with the powers of Magistrate and Police Super, respectively. Russell and Martin were hired to help them. (Letter Oct 1832)

In such a situation, the English Company with a huge army was ready to suppress the rebels. The Bangladesh Government also ordered the rebel leaders to surrender. But if the rebels did not surrender, the British forces led by Dent set out to capture the rebel leaders. In the first instance, they attacked Jirpa Naya, the main supporter and rebel leader of Ganga Narayan. The village of Berada, the main stronghold of the rebels, was set on fire. The next day the village of Band-dihi was also attacked. Sujat Ali, an aid of the British, attacked and destroyed the village. Here Ganga Narayan's property was looted and his house was burnt down. Moreover, the village of two Bhumij rebels, Tulsi Digwar and Berah Singh, a resident of Patkum, was also destroyed. Therefore, it can be seen that in a very short period of time, the British forces destroyed the centers of power of the Bhumij. When Dent fell ill at the time, the responsibility fell to Joint Commissioner Captain Wilkinson. (pp. 86-90)

According to his plan to attack the rebels, Captain Wilkinson divided the English army into three parts. Colonel Fast, the hero of the 24<sup>th</sup> regiment, was assigned charge of these three regiments. The invasion of these forces killed several Bhumij rebel leaders by 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1833 AD and destroyed the rebel's source of power. Captain Wilkinson's thought and experience helped the English forces. He continued to seduce the Bhumij with bribes. Among them were Bikal Singh and Gambhir Singh. But before that Bahadur Singh had been co-operating with the British forces in various matters and he became Wilkinson's favourite. (Letter 1833)

In the midst of such armaments and successive victories of the English forces, the news of Ganga Narayan's death reached Wilkinson. They learnt that when various rebel leaders and supporters abandoned Ganga Narayan, he fled to Singhbhum in the hope of getting the help he needed. But on the way he was killed by the people of Thakur Chetan Singh of Kharswan. However, another opinion is available. As soon as some of Ganga Narayan's army abandoned him and some of his troops were captured by the British, he went to Singhbhum to get help from the Kols. But the Kols refused to accept him as a leader and wanted proof of whether he was qualified to lead them. They wanted to get proof by defeating Thakur Chetan Singh of Kharswan. As a result, Ganga Narayan fought with Thakur Chetan Singh's army and when Ganga Narayan was defeated in the battle, the enemy cut off his head. Thakur Chetan Singh sent several people to identify Ganga Narayan's body. Moreover, Ganga Narayan's son-in-law and his relatives were shown his severed head. When the identification was thus completed, Thakur Chetan Singh appealed to the English for the prize announced by them and for the protection of his property. On the other hand, the news of Ganga Narayan's death left his supporters frustrated and discouraged, making it easier to suppress them and many rebels surrendered. (pp. 101-102)

However, the beginning of this mass revolt centered on the issue of Barabhum's family inheritance, but it goes without saying that the protests of the Jungle Mahal tribal groups were also behind it. When the English Companies introduced various measures in this region, these tribal groups could not accept it. They were deprived of authority in their own territory. As a result, they had no other option but to wage armed struggle. So, the British started thinking about starting a new separate division with this large area. The purpose was to declare the area a troubled zone and to make it an administrative and judicial system similar to military rule. For this purpose, a separate administrative division called the South-West Frontier Agency was formed. The administration of the newly formed division was entrusted to a Principal Assistant. (p. 12-13) At the suggestion of Joint Commissioner Dent, the Jungle Mahal district was disbanded and the civil court there was also abolished. In 1833 AD, the regulation *XIII* was passed by which Senpahari, Shergarh and Bishnupur area were annexed to Burdwan and a new district called Manbhum was formed with Manbazar as its headquarters. The town of Bankura also belonged to the plateau at the time of formation of this district. But a year later, in 1834 AD the City of Bankura was annexed to Burdwan. (p. 6) As the Political representative of the South-West Frontier Agency, Captain Wilkinson was appointed, bestowing military powers. A few years later, the name of this agency was changed to Chotanagpur division and its director was named as Deputy Commissioner. In 1838 AD, the headquarter of Manbhum was shifted from Manbazar to Purulia. (p. 353) Although it emerged as a division of Bangladesh, the system of Governance of the Chotanagpur division was in some respects different from other divisions of Bengal.



(Descendants of Raja Vivek Narayan, Reproduced from J.C. Jha, 1967, p.116)

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