



Navigating Sovereignty: The British Approach to the Sambalpur Princely States, Odisha

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Abstract

This paper focus into the intricate dynamics of sovereignty within the context of the Sambalpur Princely States during the British colonial era. Focusing on the nuanced interactions between the British colonial administration and the indigenous rulers of Sambalpur, it explores the mechanisms through which sovereignty was negotiated, maintained, and sometimes contested. Drawing upon archival sources, official records, and historical accounts, the study unveils the multifaceted strategies employed by both parties to navigate the complex terrain of governance, diplomacy, and power dynamics. It sheds light on the strategies of collaboration, coercion, and adaptation utilized by the British authorities to assert control while accommodating local customs and structures. Moreover, it examines the responses of the Sambalpur rulers, ranging from acquiescence to resistance, as they grappled with the challenges posed by colonial intervention. By analysing this historical case study, the paper offers insights into broader questions of sovereignty, colonial governance, and indigenous agency, enriching our understanding of the complex legacies of British imperialism in India

Keywords: *Mughalbandi, Sambalpur, Zamindar, Talukdar, Jamabandi, Quabuliyat, Maharaja.*

Introduction

The history of colonial India is a diverse narrative of sovereignty, power dynamics, and cultural interplays. Among the intricate threads of this historical narrative lies the intriguing tale of the Sambalpur Princely States in Odisha and the approach adopted by the British colonial administration towards them. Situated in the heart of eastern India, the Sambalpur region bore witness to a complex interplay of local governance, princely authority, and British imperial ambitions. From the

early encounters between the British East India Company and the native rulers of Sambalpur to the eventual integration of the princely states into the British Raj, this narrative traverses the realms of diplomacy, coercion, and negotiation. It sheds light on the strategies employed by both the British administrators and the indigenous rulers to navigate the shifting sands of power and sovereignty in a rapidly changing political landscape.

Moreover, the case of Sambalpur offers to examine broader themes of colonialism, resistance, and identity formation in Odisha. By analysing archival records, official correspondence, and local chronicles, we endeavour to unravel the complexities of this historical relationship and its enduring legacy in contemporary Odisha. In essence, the story of the Sambalpur Princely States serves as a compelling lens through which to explore the intricate dynamics of sovereignty and colonialism in India's past. By examining the British approach to governance in this region, we gain valuable insights into the complexities of imperial rule and its impact on indigenous societies

During the Second Anglo-Maratha War, the East India Company's troops only one month in 1803 from the middle of September to the middle of October to occupy the Coastal Orissa (*Mughalbandi*) after breaking down the feeble Maratha resistance. Such an easy conquest could be possible because of the active help and co-operation rendered by the local *Garjat* Chiefs who being extremely tired off with the Maratha Paramountcy that was responsible in prevailing lawlessness, mal-administration, arbitrary imposition of taxes and tributes and counter wide gang robbery welcomed the British Paramountcy and secretly entered into Treaty Engagements with the East India Company's Government through its Joint Commissioner George Harcourt and John Melville.¹ In the Engagements the Chiefs professed perpetual friendship with and loyalty to the East India Company and agreed to pay to the Company's Government fixed annual tributes in specified instalments.² Their secret engagements were confirmed by Raghuji Bhonsla III of Nagpur in the 10th article of the Treaty of Deogaon, signed on 17th December 1803; which he agreed to confirm certain treaties concluded, incourse of the war, between his feudatories and the company.³

While such events were taking place in succession Majro Forbes marched to the Barmul pass, the key to Western Orissa, which he successfully occupied by 2nd November 1803. Actually, Sambalpur was the most important state between Chhatisgarh and the Subah of Cuttack. Sonepur, Bamra, Gangpur and few small principalities were treated as dependencies of Sambalpur. "The Raja of Sambalpur was nominally a subject of the (Maratha) Government, but did almost maintain its independence, and only paid small tributes irregularly."⁴

In 1797, Vyankaji Bhonsla Nana Sahib, a relative of the Bhonsla Raja, passed through the *Garhjats* on his way to Puri on pilgrimage. He was attacked by the people of Sambalpur and Sonepur. During his return journey he brought Maratha troops from Cuttack and made the Raja of Sonepur a prisoner. Sambalpur was stormed after a siege of 5 months. Jayant Singh, the Raja of Sambalpur and his son Maharaj Sai, were removed to Nagpur 33 prisoners. Sambalpur was made a Khas Tahsil of the Maratha.

After the battle of Barmul Pass, the Raja of Baud sent his Vakil to the camp of Major Forbes seeking British protection. Major Forbes sent the Raja's Arsee to the Chief authority at Cuttack. The Commissioner at Cuttack sent Vakils to Sambalpur, Sonepur and Baud, offering the Rajas, Britain protection and friendship in token of which, and to show their

esteem for the company, they were required to pay five gold mohurs annually. They were assured that the Honourable Company would not require any *Peshkush* from them.

So when Major Broughton circulated identical copies of agreement to the Rajas of Sambalpur in 13th December 1803 in which they were persuaded to enter into an alliance of friendship with the East India Company on the condition of payment of five gold Mohurs annually which would desist them from paying tributes to the Maratha, Rani Ratna Kumari of Sambalpur, Rani Laxmi Priya of Sonapur and Jagadiswar Rao, a relative of the Raja of Baud, signed the agreement of subordination with the East India Company. accordingly Major Broughton took over the possession of Sambalpur on 2nd January 1804 by driving out the Maratha Governor Tantia Pharnavis. so he concluded the treaty of friendship with the local Queen Ratna Kumari and also with the chiefs of Raigarh, Sarangarh, Rairakhol, Gangpur, Bamra, Bonai, Sakti and Bargarh.

This occupation of Sambalpur created a tremendous problem for the East India Company in possessing it because it could not be included in the provisions of the Treaty of Deogaon that was signed on 27th December 1803. Major Broughton was ignorant about the treaty of Deogaon concluded between Raghuji Bhonsla III and the East India Company bringing the Maratha War to an end. According to the second article of the treaty, Raghuji Bhonsla ceded to the East India Company “in perpetual sovereignty, the province of Cuttack, including the port and district of Balasore.”⁵ By the partition treaty of Poona with the Peshwa Baji Rao II, ratified by the Governor-General, the cession of Orissa confirmed.⁶ It appears that the small states or zamindaris of Sambalpur and Patna were also ceded to the British though there is no explicit reference to them in the treaty of Deogaon. Article 10 of this treaty says: “Certain treaties have been made by the British Government with feudatories of Senah Saheb Soubah. These treaties are to be confirmed lists of the persons with whom such treaties have been made will be given to Senah Saheb Soubah, when their treaty will be ratified by his Excellency the Governor-General in Council. But Raghuji Bhonsla was not at all prepared to surrender those territories to the British control. The Commissioner and the invading general Major Broughton were not prepared on political and moral grounds to make over them to the Raja of Nagpur. Observing these developments Rani Ratna Kumari along with Rani Laxmi Priya of Sonapur, Raja Jayant Singh of Raigarh, Raja Biswanath Sai of Sarangarh, Raja Veer Buddha Jena of Rairakhol, Raja Indra Sur Dev of Gangpur, Raja Tribhuban Deva of Bamra, Raja Indra Deva of Bonai and Raja Thakur Ranjit Singh of Sakti, petitioned to Major Broughton on 26th March 1804 that during the Maratha rule their families, honour and property were in danger and were not willing to return to their authority; rather were “sincerely and from their souls wished to remain under the British protection and were willing to pay any sum of amount the Government (East India Company) would fix upon them.

This prompted the imperialistic Governor-General Wellesley to direct the Resident at Nagpur on 18th May 1804 to inform Raghuji Bhonsle to rectify the treaty of Deogaon by incorporating the Sambalpur Group of States to the 10th Article of the treaty within twenty-four hours, failing which war would be renewed against him. The Company's Government accordingly, took all possible care in stationing and mobilising forces to Sambalpur against any violent design of the Bhonsle. However, Wellesley was withdrawn to England in July 1805 and George Barlow remained in charge of the office who under the instruction of the Home Government pursued a policy of peace and non-intervention. He instructed Captain Roughsedge of Ramgarh Battalion to find out ways and means for peacefully transferring Sambalpur and Patna territories for the jurisdiction of the Bhonsle. Captain Roughsedge with much difficulty succeeded in convincing the

unwilling Rani Ratna Kumari for the restoration on the condition of the release of her husband and son from Maratha confinement. Accordingly, the transfer agreement was signed and executed on 24th August 1804. G.H. Barlow, the Governor-General, restored the territories of Sambalpur and Patna with the exception of Raigarh to Raghuji in 1806. Keshava Govind, the Subahdar of Ratanpur, came to occupy Sambalpur on behalf of the Bhonsla. But he was opposed by the Chieftains under the leadership of Joujar Singh of Raigarh and Bhagat Bariha of Borasambar. The Maratha at first decided to proceed through negotiation. The Rani of Sambalpur demanded that the internal administration of her territories should be left to her in lieu of an annual tribute to the Marathas. Her husband, Raja Jayanta Singh and their son should be released immediately from the Maratha prison. The Marathas were not satisfied but they lulled her suspicion by an agreement and all of a sudden occupied the fort by use of troop. When the Maratha occupied Sambalpur, Rani Ratna Kumari fled away to the British protection and she was granted a pension of six hundred rupees per month.⁷ of the 18 states of Sambalpur, Baud and Athmallick were retained by British Government because of their strategical location. The Barmul Pass being situated there they were included in the list of Cuttack Tributary Mahals. Raigarh was also retained because of the extreme anti-Maratha attitude of its ruler Jaujar Singh, and the states of Surguja was annexed to the Maratha province of Ratanpur. The Sambalpur group of states remained under the Marathas suzerainty of Nagpur for another 9 years till 1817, when in course of the Third Anglo-Maratha War, the Nagpur army was completely defeated by the East India Company at the battle of Sitabaid on 27th November 1817. In this recent acquisition of the British Government categorised the non-feudal supremacy of Sambalpur over the neighbouring states and in 1821 granted separate Sanads to the chiefs defining their respective status, position and jurisdictions. In 1819 an administrative division known as 'The South Bihar and Chotanagpur Mahals' was constituted and the Sambalpur Group of States were included within it. After the suppression of the Kol insurrection of 1831-32 further administrative changes took place. By Regulation III of 1833, the South West Frontier Agency was established under an Agent to the Governor-General who was stationed at Ranchi and the Sambalpur Group of States were kept under its jurisdiction. By Act XX of 1854 the South-West Frontier was abolished⁸, and Sambalpur Group of States were placed under the administrative Superintendent of the Commissioner of Chotanagpur, Patna, Sonapur, Bamra, Rairakhol and Kalahandi were subsequently placed under the Central Province in 1862 when it was created in 1861 leaving Gangpur and Bonai under the jurisdiction of Chotanagpur Division.⁹

The British authorities concluded engagements with Bhopal Deb of Patna and Maharaj Sai of Sambalpur, the two most important chiefs of the Sambalpur Group of States in 1818. The Raja of Patna was released from captivity in which he had been kept for 14 years by the Marathas and placed in possession of his state by Major Roughsedge.¹⁰ Unlike the Cuttack States the Sambalpur states had no fixed tributes in perpetuity. The tributes varied after four or five years.¹¹

The Raja of Sambalpur after release from prison was replaced on the gaddi and all other states over which he claims suzerainty were now regarded as separate states.¹² Specimens of the engagements submitted by Maharaja Bhupal Deva of Patna, dated 17th February 1827 and Maharaja Sai of Sambalpur dated 22nd February 1827 show that at the time of British conquest they were not feudatory chiefs with a fixed Peshkash or tribute but Zamindars or *Taluqdars* whose *Jamabandi* varied from year to year. The *Qabuliyat* executed by Maharaj Bhupal Deva of Patna on the 17th February 1827 shows that he agreed to pay a Jama of Rs. 562-8 annually for five years from 1826-27 to 1830-31. He was therefore exactly on the same footing as the *Taluqdar* of Oudh. The revenue was to be paid at Sambalpur. The *Qabuliyat* executed by Maharaj

Sai of Sambalpur on the 22nd February was of a different nature. There is no mention of *Peshkash* and that chief simply binds himself to the right discharge of police and judicial duties.¹³ Narayan Singh the last Raja of Sambalpur, died without issue and his state lapsed to the British in 1850.¹⁴ Patna and Sonapur remained to be recognised as feudatory states in April 1865.¹⁵ While Patna was formerly the chief of the Pseudo-Chauhan¹⁶ Chiefs, later on it had to cede its supremacy to Sambalpur. The small state of Sonapur was along a feudatory of Patna or Sambalpur and never independent. It was a pure British creation and is subject to *Nazarana* rules.¹⁷ yet these petty chiefs, all of whom were British creations, represented to the late Sir Andrew Fraser that “Their powers and status as Feudatory Chiefs were higher than those of the Feudatory States of Orissa and they feared that they might be reduced to the same level.” The easy pliability of the late Sir Andrew Fraser, at one time Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces and Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, is now well known and it was natural for him to assure them that as to their first difficulty their powers and privileges and status would be clearly and fully defined and recorded and that no diminution in any of them would occur. The raising of the Patna and Sonapur Teluqdars for the States of Feudatory Chiefs and their claims to total independence are subjects too voluminous to be treated in full in a general narrative of the history of Orissa. After 1827 came the first important administrative measures in Orissa. The Oriya States of Sambalpur, Sonapur and Patna remained attached to the Chhatisgarh Division of the Central Provinces.

In 1857 the Sepoy Mutiny broke out. In Cuttack, Puri and Balasore there was no disturbance during the Mutiny of 1857. But there was a considerable disturbance in Sambalpur, which had lapsed to the British Government upon the failure of the direct line in 1850. Upto 1857 Sambalpur remained attached to the South-West Frontier Agency of Bengal. Before the death of Narayan Singh, the last Raja of Sambalpur, his relation, Surendra Sai, was kept in prison at the instance of the Raja himself in the jail at Hazaribagh. He was released by Mutineer Sepoys in August 1856 and came back to Sambalpur. During the Mutiny he claimed the gaddi of Sambalpur and failing to recover it, he rebelled and was joined by most of the chiefs and landholders of the surrounding country. A military detachment sent from Cuttack failed to subdue the rebellion, on account of the hilly and thickly wooded nature of the country. Even after the proclamation of the Royal Amnesty at the close of 1858 the Sambalpur rebels did not surrender. The British authority was confined to the headquarters only, while the rebels plundered the cultivated tracts and inhabited areas from their strongholds in the forests. The Sambalpur rebellion continued till 1861 when additional troops were sent and further concessions promised to the rebels by the Government of Bengal. The leader surrendered one by one and Surendra Sai, the chief leader surrendered in May 1862 and was pardoned.

The chiefs are under the political control of British authority. In the management of their territories, they are practically independent under ordinary circumstances, except as regards the administration of criminal justice. In that department they stand virtually towards the British officer in the relation of Magistrates towards the Session Judge; and they have always administered the criminal laws of the British Government. It has now been recommended that the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Act should be extended to the *Garjat* Tributary States, and the chiefs should be gazetted as Magistrates.”¹⁸

However, the chiefs of Sambalpur *Garhjat* states were below the premier chiefs of the Orissa *Garhjat* in rank is proved by the fact that income tax was collected from them. By Act XXV of 1861 some of them were recognised as Magistrate. The Sambalpur *Garhjat* Chiefs were held like ordinary people, to be “As amenable as others to the nearest

Government courts, whether for the commission of crime, or when sued in petty matters of dispute, by, it may be, their own people. Till the treaty of 1829, Mayurbhanj certainly possessed the right of leaving transit duties through its territories, as perhaps did all other *Garhjat* Chiefs of Orissa unlike the Zamindars of Sambalpur, Sonepur and Patna.

The first special report on the *Garhjat* states of Sambalpur was submitted by Major J.B. Impey, Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur on the 11th June 1863. Impey held the origin of the Sambalpur *Garhjat* chiefs to be not clearly known, but that it was alleged with certainty that it was very ancient. Originally these states were administered from Ranchi. The first settlement made with them in 1819 was renewed in 1827 and though this settlement purported to be for five years only, they were never renewed. "In practice the powers (Judicial and Police) were limited to the infliction of seven years, afterwards reduced to six months, imprisonment. In the Civil and Revenue Departments, the chiefs were nominally possessed of absolute powers, but they seem nevertheless to have been controlled non-interference is said to have been the prevailing policy but in practice, interference was the principle followed. This practice, however does not seem to have been carried out to any material extent. Virtually perhaps the chief did decide all cases without much risk of reversal on appeal to the Agent of the Governor-General, South-West Frontier.¹⁹ The management of the Sambalpur *Garhjat* chiefs was transferred to the Superintendent of Tributary Mahals, Cuttack, and it was ordered that, "Matters should be conducted in precisely the same way as when the estates of these chieftains formed a part of the Chotanagpur Division." But in 1862 Sambalpur was transferred to the Central Provinces and the powers of the *Grhj*at chiefs were reduced "to those conferred by Act XXV of 1861 on Magistrates and Subordinate Magistrates and each chief was fully invested, according to his position and ability." After an analysis of the entire situation regarding the present and the past status of the Sambalpur *Gurhjat* chiefs Sir Richard Temple decided that "The present status of these *Gurhjat* chiefs of Sambalpur... is not different from the status of the Nagpur Zamindars... Both the Sambalpur *Garhjat* chiefs... and the Nagpur Zamindars pay a variable money tribute." In a note on the same page the same authority states that "This remark does not of course apply to the two *Gurhjat*s of the Sambalpur and Patna groups, which have always been under the Superintendent of the Cuttack Tributary Mahals. It is presumed that these *Garhjats* have been treated on the same footing as the Cuttack Mahals. And from Messrs Rickett's and Mill's Reports, published in No. 111 of Bengal Selection for 1861, also Mr. J.H. Crawford's Report, dated 12th June 1852, published in No. XX of the Bangal Selections, the policy perused towards those Chieftainships would seem to have been more systematic and definite than that which have been persued to those of the original Sambalpur and Patna *Gurhjats* which were Superintendent from Chotanagpur."

Some further changes remain to be noticed. In 1833, Bargarh was confiscated in consequence of the rebellion of the Chief. In 1837, Baud and Athmallik were transferred from the South-West Frontier Agency to the jurisdiction of the Superintendent of the Cuttack Tributary Mahals. In 1849 the Sambalpur states lapsed to the British Government. According to an Act of 1850, the Penal Code was declared applicable to the Sambalpur Group of States, which were administered from Ranchi. The Chieftainship of Kalahandi passed under the Commissioner of Nagpur, when the Nagpur states lapsed to the British Government in 1853. At the transfer of 1861, Gangpur and Bonai remained with Chotanagpur. After the creation of Central Provinces in November 1861, Bamra, Rairakhol, Kalahandi, Patna, Sonepur and the district of Sambalpur were included within the jurisdiction of the newly constituted province. In 1863, Patna, Kalahandi,

Sonepur, Bamra and Rairakhol were declared to be Feudatory States. In 1867, *Sanads* were granted to those states, giving the rulers powers of life and death over their subject to the confirmation by a Senior Officer of the British Government

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