



## The causes of discontent among the Bhils of Southern Rajputana (1818-1900)

Pratyusha Das Gupta

Research Scholar, Department of History and Indian culture, Faculty of Social Science, Banasthali Vidyapith, P.O. Banasthali Vidyapith, District Tonk, Rajasthan, India

### Abstract

After the establishment of British Supremacy in Southern Rajputana the Bhils of Mewar and other states of Rajputana expressed their discontent by offering resistance to the administration of the state. The tribals of Rajputana were dissatisfied with the policies of the British. They became the real master and always try to exploit the tribal people. Among the tribals, the Bhils were the first to revolt against the semi feudal and colonial order in Rajputana. The objective of this research paper is bringing the several factors of discontent among the Bhils of Southern Rajputana.

**Keywords:** bhil tribe, revolt, causes of discontent

### Introduction

The Bhils were the first to raise a rebellion against the feudalism and British imperialism in Rajputana. The majority of the Bhils reside in the formerly states of Mewar (Udaipur), Dungarpur, Banswara, and Sirohi of Rajasthan. The Bhil tribe was a peaceful community but some changes made them turbulent against the British and feudal order. Before the British rule they were enjoying the undisturbed forest rights. In 1818 all the states of Mewar, Dungarpur, and Banswara and in 1824 Sirohi concluded the treaties with the British. Due to this treaty with the British all external affairs were handed over them. The British were also empowered to intervene in the internal affairs of the state in certain cases. Practically the British became the real master. Thus in the nineteenth century the tribal population of India was dissatisfied to a great extent with the policies of the British. Consequently there were frequent revolts, uprisings or severe disturbances against the British by the tribals. The policy towards the tribals residing in the states more or less framed by the rulers in accordance with the direction of the British. On the advice of Colonel James Tod certain measures were adopted by the Maharana of Mewar for keeping the Bhils of his state in control. But it led to serious discontentment among the Bhils living in the Hilly tracts of Mewar<sup>[1]</sup>.

After the establishment of British supremacy in Southern Rajputana, the Bhils of Mewar and other states of Rajputana expressed their discontent to the administration of the state. A study of the causes of discontent was multi dimensional. The exploitation of the feudal chiefs and Britishers were responsible for this. From 1818 the Bhils of Mewar revolted due to several factors. These are follows:

Whenever the Bhils are not able to make their both ends meet they generally take recourse to theft and plunder. Committing a crime does not affect their social status adversely<sup>[2]</sup>. They did not have any inhabitation to resort to such kind of activity. The feudal chiefs realised various kind of levies from their subjects including the Bhils. This created an economic

problem for them. These levies were as follows- prior to the cutting of the crop one fourth of the estimated produce was collected, at the time of harvesting five seers out of each maund were taken for the servants employed in the collection, five seers each maund for the 'Patel' and 'patwari' and two annas per rupees paid as a price of the grain was realised in cash, In the case of fine exaction of tribute or military charges realised from the chief by the king, subjects were asked to contribute for them, all expanses of repairing the chiefs' house wells, gardens etc and the marriage or death in his family were borne by them. Each village in proportion of its size furnished food to one two or more horses at the following rate for each horse and syce daily. In the event of death of the chief's horses, camels, bullocks or other cattle these were replaced by a levy realised from them. During the Kharif season the horses were supplied with green maize and in the 'rabi' season with green wheat or barley. At the close of each year a fee was realised from each house in proportion to the number of their flocks and herds maintained there. For each plough 2 seers 4 chataks per maund of grain was realised. A tax on ghee in proportion to herd was levied. A fine was levied on all marriages performed by the subject<sup>[3]</sup>.

Beside this following dues other levies like Massa-a tax on all produce taken from one village to another within the territories of the chief were collected. Bolai-a levy called 'Bolai' was realized by the Bhils from travellers passing through their areas. The amount of 'Bolai' was calculated in proportion to the wealth of the traveller or travelling party. Incase the chief was able to control them; he was paid twenty percent of the same. This share of the chief was known as 'Biswali'<sup>[4]</sup>. Rakhwali-a quantity of grain or cattle was realised by in the non Bhil villages situated in the neighbourhood of 'pals' for providing protection to them from the ravages of the Bhils. The chiefs did not appoint persons to watch and protect villages but they realised separation from the Bhils incase the villages who paid 'Rakhwali' were plundered by them. In some cases this right was mortgaged by

one 'pal' to another, a practices which led to disputes as to which 'pal' was to be held responsible <sup>[5]</sup>. In order raise the state revenue col. Tod abolished these taxes collected by the Bhils and also to established strict control over the Bhils decided to snatch the right of these taxes from them <sup>[6]</sup>. This became the one of the important cause of the Bhil revolt, because they refused to surrender their rights and stood against the British power.

Those Bhils who lived in the Vicinity of the fort of chief paid every two or three years a portion of the cattle which they had lifted from the adjoining areas. Whenever the chief attacked the 'pal' the cattle, women and children of the Bhils were seized. These were generally restored on payment of a sum of money amounting to rupees five per head <sup>[7]</sup>.

A share of all property viz. money, jewels, clothes etc plunders by the Bhils was claimed by the chief, who in some cases accompanied the plundering expeditions of the Bhils with some of their followers. Through these activities were not legal, the Bhils now considered themselves entitled to such activities by perspective rights which they had been enjoying for a long period <sup>[8]</sup>.

In Malwa, the Britishers troops undertook large scale operations to subdue the Bhils. According to Malcolm the paramount influence which the results of the war of 1817-18 gave to the British Government over several princely states in India was the principal cause of the success. The campaigns from 1817 to 1821 were directed against anarchy and they established peace in the region <sup>[9]</sup>.

In 1823 the political agent of Mewar, Cobbe concluded an agreement with the 'gametis' it was stipulated that they would pay one fourth of their agricultural produce as revenue to the state <sup>[10]</sup>.

After the formation of the Mewar Bhil Corps in 1841 Maharana of Mewar in order increase the income of the state for paying the share of Mewar towards the maintenance of the corps increased the rate of 'null burar' and 'koonta'. The gameti of the pal represented that on the construction of a road from Udaipur to Kherawara in 1850 these two levies were realised at an increased rate of rupees sixty per year. In 1855 rupees two hundred and fifty and in 1856, rupees three hundred were demanded on account of 'null burar' from them only. Similar things happen with the Bhils. The Bhils of Piplee village paid rupees two hundred fifty annually on account of these two levies <sup>[11]</sup>.

- i. These two levies at an increased rate an additional levy known as 'trisala' was realised from the Bhils. Its rate was subsequently increased <sup>[12]</sup>.
- ii. A tax on road from the inhabitants of the 'pals' living on its borders were realised <sup>[13]</sup>.
- iii. In 1861, Brookes, the political agent of Mewar requested the agent of the Governor General in Rajputana to advice the Maharana to stop the realisation of such levies <sup>[14]</sup>.
- iv. In 1871, the land in the hilly areas of Mewar was measured and land revenue was fixed according to the produce. In 1874, these orders were cancelled due to the strong expression resentment by the Bhils. The settlement conducted by win gate from 1878 onwards also raised doubts among the Bhils about the possibility of an increase in revenue.

Establishment of posts and realising custom duties in 1880

was resented by the Bhils. Although the Bhils were exempted from payments of such duties, but they remained apprehensive of these duties being levied on them in the future <sup>[15]</sup>. Restrictions were placed on the free manufacture of salt by the people, including the Bhils, due to agreements concluded by the states with the British <sup>[16]</sup>.

The excessive burden of taxes and levies the Bhils were deprived of the free use of products of forests for their domestic consumption and for sale in the nearby 'hats' or villages in the plains. This policy of deprivation was practised in the areas inhabited by the tribals under British administration, the culmination of which can be seen in the Forest Act of 1875. In Mewar to the contractors prevented the Bhils from cutting mango and Malwa trees, collecting grass and wood from the forests gathering other articles like honey and gum. This policy of deprivation of forest products increased for the same <sup>[17]</sup>.

The Bhils were also deprived of their right of distilling liquor freely in their homes or villages because the Rajput states gave contracts to traders for the same <sup>[18]</sup>.

The British were given exclusive rights of trade in opium. The British introduced a new system of weighing this article. Consequently the price of opium, an article of general consumption among the Bhils, was increased <sup>[19]</sup>.

The area of southern Rajputana suffered from sacrists and famines. Among these the famines of 1803, 1812, 1813, 1848, 1868-70, and 1878 were severe. The rulers of these areas were not able to provide adequate relief to the famine stricken people <sup>[20]</sup>. This situation made worst for the tribals life.

The feudal chiefs and officials exacted the 'begar' from them whenever they required it. This age old practice continued even after the revolt of 1881. The state officials and their subordinates were more or less corrupt. They were removed from their post on the charges of corruption and harassment to the people. A large number of outsiders had settled in the areas of inhabited by the Bhils. Hindu moneylenders also exploited the Bhils and grabbed their land of non payment of loans given to them of high rates of interests. Their activities annoyed the Bhils so much that in 1879 they killed some of them. Although Maharana punished some of the guilty <sup>[21]</sup>. Even some traders also purchased wood, honey and other goods from the Bhils at a very low price and sold them at a higher price. They tried to exploit them economically.

The tribals punished their defaulter and culprits according their customs and traditions. They maintained their social stability. But the British policy bringing them under their jurisdiction and tried to interfere in their internal autonomy. That hurt the sentiments of the Bhils. British officers regarded them as a degraded people and referred them as a 'Haramkhor' and 'Badmash'. Their mode of life was also severely criticised. This type of behaviour towards the tribes in general provided a fertile ground for rebellion. <sup>[22]</sup>

The British officers of the political department were keen to eradicate some of the social practices of the tribals. They suggested that the Bhil women should be prevented from the being sati. In the agreement with the Bhil gameti in 1823 a clause for stopping the killing of the infant daughters was inserted by the cobbe <sup>[23]</sup>. From 1848 onwards the rulers of the states were constantly advice the officer to punish those who took active part in the cases of punishment to women

suspected of being witch. According to Malcolm the British officers should not interfere in cases of 'sati' and infanticide beyond the exercise of their influence which they possessed from personal character. The active interest taken by some of the British officers in eradicating social practices, which they considered harmful, was resented by the Bhils.

The British officers were keen to maintain peace and order in the areas inhabited by the Bhils for ensuring smooth passage of traders to the ports of Bombay and Surat and for the speedy movement of armies. For this purpose it was necessary to build roads in the area. The construction of a road from Udaipur to Kherawara was completed in 1866. In 1861- 65 a road from Udaipur to Mangalwar was constructed. A Road was also build from Udaipur to Kotra. The process of deforestation in southern Rajputana, Malwa and Gujrat also began in the nineteenth century. Contracts for cutting of trees in forests were given to traders from outsiders <sup>[24]</sup>. It was hurt the sentiments of the Bhils.

This became the immediate causes of the Bhil discontent as they refused to surrender their rights and stood against the British. The exploitation of the tribals reached to point where there was no other path except to rise against their oppressive laws. This political consciousness encouraged them to organise and demands their rights. This was reflected in a number of tribal uprisings in southern Rajputana in between 1818-1900. The above revolts were spontaneous and generated in reaction of the new system established under the British rule. The tribal revolts of Rajasthan during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were not isolated but they shared common features with the revolts of tribals in other part of India. The tribal revolt gradually became a source of inspiration for the common people.

## Reference

1. Mathur LP. *Resistance Movement of Tribals of India*. Udaipur: Himanshu Publication. 1988, 30.
2. Malcolm, *Memoirs of Central India*, Vol.III, London: Parbury, Allen & co. 1824, 260.
3. Doshi SL. *Bhils Between social self Awareness and cultural Synthesis*. New Delhi: Sterling Publication. 1971, 17.
4. Foreign Political Department Proceedings. 1827, 18.
5. Malcolm, *Memoirs of Central India*. London: Parbury & Allen &co. 1824; 2:244.
6. Brooke JC. *History of Mewar*. London. 1859, 72.
7. Mathur LP. *Protest Movement of Bhils under the British Raj*. Jaipur: Publication Scheme. 2000, 59.
8. Foreign Political Department Proceedings, Secret. 1818; 7:103-106.
9. Foreign Department Proceedings, Secret. 1818; 24, 89.
10. Foreign Political Department. 1831, 25-39.
11. Mewar Précis, Chapter III, Para 85.
12. Foreign, Political, A, August. 1881, 313-334.
13. Mewar Residency, File no.18, 1865.262.
14. Letter of Brookes to the Agent of the Governor General in Rajputana, 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1861.
15. Mathur LP. *Protest Movements of Bhils under the British Raj*. Jaipur: Publication Scheme. 2000, 60-61
16. Foreign Political, A, August. 1881, 334.

17. Mathur LP. *Protest Movements of the Bhils under the British Raj*, Jaipur: Publication Scheme. 2000, 60-61.
18. Foreign Political, A, August. 1879, 175-86.
19. Foreign Political, A, August. 1881, 313-334.
20. Ibid.
21. Foreign Political, A, August. 1879, 175-86.
22. Fuchs, Stephen. *Rebellious Prophets*, New York: Asia Publishing House. 1965, 238-39.
23. Mewar Précis, Chapter III, 85.
24. Mathur LP. *Protest Movement of the Bhils under the British Raj*, Jaipur: Publication Scheme. 2000, 65.