CHAPTER 8

IMPACT OF THE BRITISH RULE
IN KEONJHAR
The feudatory State of Keonjhar remained under the British from 16th. December 1804 upto the merger of the State with the Indian Union. By the treaty engagement signed between the Raja, Janardan Bhanja, and George Harcourt and John Melville, it passed to the control of the British. For nearly a century and a half, it remained in their control. It could not, therefore, be completely devoid of the impacts of their rule. There appeared some long lasting impact of the British Rule on Keonjhar. These impacts may be found in varying degrees, the administrative, social and economic systems of the State. It is seen that the impact on the administrative system and economic life of the people was at best marginal. On the other hand, the impact on the social field is extensive and important. Upper Keonjhar viz., the Sadar and Champua subdivisions of the State were mostly inhabited by tribal people. Their societies were full of ignorance and superstitions, and were far removed from education and other civilising influences. Many evil practices, prevailed in their society. Some of these were abolished through the policy of intervention by the British in the social life of the people of the feudal State of Keonjhar. Hence, the impact on the
administrative system, the social and economic system, needs a vivid discussion.

Administrative Impact

The administrative impact upon the Feudatory State of Keonjhar was insignificant. After the British occupation the Feudatory States, it was mostly on grounds of expediency that it was not considered prudent to indiscriminately introduce British laws and regulations into the States. The British applied the policy of nonintervention in the administrative system of the Feudatory State. The Raja was left free to rule in accordance with tradition enjoying internal autonomy as long as it did not hamper British interests. The Raja of Keonjhar preferred the Maratha method of administration. Further, the British Government realized that keeping such states under their direct control was not only difficult but could well lead to undesirable consequences. Hence, internal autonomy was given to the State. The Raja of Keonjhar enjoyed a status subordinate to the British Government i.e., the East India Company and subsequently to the crown. Beyond this, and subsequently to the Crown all matters concerning the internal administration, such as maintenance of law and order, revenue and judiciary etc. were vested in the hands of the Rajas. The British kept a supervising eye on the Tributary Mahal. Under Regulation 14 of 1805 the Judge-cum-Magistrate of Cuttack was entrusted with the supervision of the administration of the
Tributary Mahals. British Regulations regarding the administration of revenue criminal and civil justice, however, were not applicable to Keonjhar. The terms and conditions of the treaty engagements signed by the East India Company and the Raja established a different type of relationship between the British Government and the Raja.

To the extent possible the British avoided intervening in the internal affairs of the administration. The Government only claimed an annual tribute from the State. But certain circumstances compelled the Government to make special arrangements for the administration of the tributary mahals. This was for the purpose of the proper management and supervision of tributary Mahals, and the supervision of the conduct of the Tributary Rajas and officers.

The British applied a policy of nonintervention towards the Feudatory State of Keonjhar. On the whole the Feudatory State was exempted from the purview of British Regulations. The Raja was left free to administer within his territory. On the one hand the British Government forced the Raja to pay the tribute or peshkash in time. On the other hand, the Chief was requested to extend good administration for the betterment of the subjects. They expected the Raja to maintain peace and order, and deal evenhanded justice.
With the passage of time, the Raja of Keonjhar started misusing absolute powers vested in him. With absolute powers the Raja enjoyed a life of luxury and ease. He, as most others in similar circumstances, forgot their duties. The Rajas mostly depended upon the Bebarthas or Diwans or Managers etc. The State administration went on according to their advices. Sometimes the Bebarthas took advantage of the Raja’s indifference to serve their own interests. In time the Bebartha’s misrule proved oppressive. Sometimes he extended inappropriate or wrong advice to the Raja. To drive the point home, a few examples of ill-advice given to the Raja may be noted. During the construction of Raipur-Midnapur highway, the Raja of Keonjhar gave his willingness to supply labour on payment of the wages by the Company. It was afterwards reported that the Bebartha of Keonjhar did not supply the ‘coolies’ as required. The Bebartha apprehended that if the road passed too near to the Raja’s residence, the Palace could no longer be surrounded by impenetrable jungle. With such non-cooperation by the Bebartha the work could not proceed according to schedule. On the contrary impediments had been created in the construction work. However the Raja at that time was a minor, and the State administration was run on the advice of the Bebartha. A ‘Parwana’ was issued to his mother and guardian to accept either of two conditions, attachment or displacement of the Bebartha.
Again, in the time of Maharaja Dhanurjaya Narayan Bhanja, Bichitrananda Das tendered certain wrong advice to the Raja. He oppressed the subjects and sometimes punished them also. As a result, of the subjects rebelled against the Maharaja under the leadership of Dharanidhar Naik in 1891 A.D. At that time it was reported that Fakir Mohan Senapati, who was in charge of Anandapur subdivision, extended sound advice. Again Chandra Sekhara Dhala and Debananda Dhala were reported to be the ill advisers of the Raja. Due to his misdeeds the rebels assassinated Chandra Sekhara in the insurrection of 1868 A.D.

Government applied a policy of nonintervention in the Feudatory States. At critical junctures, however, the British intervened in the internal affairs of the State. The Superintendents of the Tributary Mahals of Orissa like T.E Ravenshaw & George Toynbee followed the same policy. Again the British Government took a serious view of the lapses in the exercise of powers and in the execution of duties of the Rajas. For the purpose of supervision of the administration and justice the Government appointed 'Political Agents' in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar. Mr. H.Wylly, Mr. D.A.Macmillan, Mr. J.H.Price, Mr. N.J.Kolley etc. worked as Superintendents and Political Agents of the State. The British, thus, helped in improving the administrative system in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar. To a large extent it mitigated the suffering of the subjects caused by oppression.
The British Government made all arrangements to educate the Rajas of the Feudatory States of Orissa. The Feudatory State of Keonjhar was no exception to this rule. The Government could feel that the ignorance of the Rajas was a major cause of maladministration in the State. It was believed that, only by educating the Rajas could this problem be solved. Consequently, G.F. Cockburn made all efforts to impart education to the Rajas. The Rajkumar Pathasalas were opened. The Rajkumars were sent to this institution at an early age, and subsequently the Rajkumar College was established at Raipur to impart qualitative higher education to the Rajas. Sometimes they were sent to Cuttack for higher studies. It was reported that when Dhanurjaya Narayan Bhanja was a minor, he was sent to Cuttack for education. In a nutshell, the British Government wanted to impart education to the Rajas, as a result of which, they could be better administrators. However, the British Government soon realised that the Rajas had very little inclination towards education. This effort benefited the Feudatory States as the Rajas got good education, thereby improving functioning of the Government.

In certain cases, with a view to maintaining peace and tranquillity in the State the British Government appointed Political Agents, for a temporary period. Political Agents were appointed during the period of disturbance and internal dangers. However, he had to supervise the State administration
and to extend valuable suggestions also. The appointment of Political Agents limited the powers exercised by Rajas.

British Laws and Regulations were not introduced into the Feudatory States but the Rajas were not empowered to exercise capital punishment over their subjects. The Rajas, however, and often his men ignoring him, were found to have exercised the power of life and death in the state. Even punishments like mutilation were awarded by the Raja and his men. Often punishments were awarded on flimsy matters. During the tenure of the Henry Ricketts a penal rule was proposed by which if the Rajas exercised the power of life and death they could be subjected to penalty. Secondly, Rajas found guilty of murder, were liable to punishment. Again, any Raja found guilty of homicide or cruelty or engaging in hostilities with another Raja, was liable to such punishment. So, Henry Rickett's recommendations restricted the powers of the Rajas. Of course in Keonjhar sometimes capital punishment were awarded by the Raja's men without the knowledge of the Raja. In the year 1840 AD A.J.M.Mills reiterated the rules restricting the powers of the Raja in the matter of awarding capital punishment. According to The Rule of 1840 introduced by A.J.M.Mills, the Rajas of Tributary Mahal, Cuttack were not authorized to exercise the power of life and death. According to the Clause VIII of the same rule "Should the crime of murder, or being accessory to murder be proved against a Raja of the Garhjat
Mahal shall be liable to such punishment". The sentence of death and imprisonment for terms exceeding seven years were required to be confirmed by the appropriate British authorities. Again the Rajas were prohibited for subjecting any offender to barbarous and cruel punishments like torture mutilation and punishment opposed to the principles of British Law. As a result of which the rajas were found to have been more balanced in the field of civil administration and judicial administration.

But it was reported that a number of cases of capital punishment being awarded, were not by the Raja but by his men. In other words, the subjects were awarded capital punishments by the Raja's men for their interest only, without the knowledge of the Raja. During the time of Maharaja Dhanurjaya Narayan Bhanja persons like Bichitrananda Das the Assistant Manager of the State, Chandra Sekhar Dhal the Manager of the State oppressed the people without the Raja knowing. Other persons and officials like Zamindar, Garhnaiks, Paiks, Amins, Sarbarakara etc. also oppressed the subjects.

The British Government, thus, took some necessary measures in the field of administration. However the Government had two purposes, one to save the people from feudal oppression and second, to check the Rajas misrule in the State and guide him. A number of Political agents were appointed to guide the Raja and to supervise the State
administration. Thus the impact on the civil administration was no doubt there. At least it softened the despotic tone of administration in the State and put a check on the tyrannical rule of the Raja.

Impact on the Revenue Administration

The impact of British rule was felt on the Revenue administration. In former days there were no land settlements in the region, now comprising the district of Keonjhar. The Revenue System was simple, by making certain demands upon the village headmen who were left to distribute the burden of the demand upon the cultivator's in their villages in any manner they considered suitable. Each village was called upon to pay as much as it could bear and agree to pay. But in those days cultivators were few, and land available for cultivation was plenty. However, there were extremely few agriculture landowners and the artisans who formed a part of the village organization were almost entirely maintained for their services by the cultivators of the villages. Thus, the old method of revenue administration was in practice in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar. The Mughals, who came to occupy Keonjhar sometime in the later part of the seventeenth century, made settlements of the zamindari type, in large parts of the territory.

With the occupation of the British the first Revenue Settlement was made by Bebartha Chintamani Mahapatra. Again in 1858 AD a new settlement was made by the Bebartha or Minister Rai Chandra Sekhar Dhal Bahadur. This settlement was popularly called as the "Bebartha Settlement". The Settlement was based upon measurement of land. This settlement lasted till 1862 A.D.

The third settlement of the Feudatory State of Keonjhar was made by Captain Johnstone after the Rebellion of 1868 A.D. The lands of a great number of paikas were resumed and Paikali rents were increased all round from 5 annas to 7 annas.

Maharaja Dhanurjaya Narayan Bhanja (1861-1905) commenced a fresh settlement by Dandapat (A group of villages formed a Dandapat) in Upper Keonjhar with occasional revision known as 'rafa' from 1870. His Minister Bichitransandu Das settled lower Keonjhar in 1878 A.D. But the Settlement Officer omitted to specify the total area brought under assessment or the land revenue fixed at these settlement.

An elaborate settlement was started in 1892 and completed in August 1900 A.D. It was correct till 1913-14. The survey was taken up under the Bengal Tenancy Act. At this settlement regular survey was made only those portions of the villages actually brought under cultivation. The unit of measurement was a 'padika' or bamboo pole of a given length which variec
from place to place and the area extracted was in ‘Manas’ & ‘Gunthas’. The land was classified into six categories viz. Jala, Kola, Gora, Dahi, Pal and Dalua.

Again a regular settlement was made in 1914-15. It was actually commenced in Nov. 1911 after CWE Connolly joined as the Settlement Officer in the ex-state. The settlement operations were completed in 1915. This was suppose to be the first regular land revenue settlement in the ex-state as in it a regular chain and plane table survey was made for the first time. Record of rights and village maps were prepared in accordance with the Bengal Tenancy Act. Assessment also was made under the Bengal Tenancy Act, land being classified into two kinds wet land and upland. The survey did not cover the areas inhabited by the Bhuyans and the Juanga tribes.

Thus the occupation of the British put tremendous impact on the Feudatory State of Keonjhar. After the British occupation new system of land revenue administrations were introduced replacing the old pattern. The settlements were made in different times to make the revenue administration more organized and systematic. In a nutshell it is observed that the land revenue administration was not free from British impacts.
Impact on Judicial Administration & Police Administration

The Judicial administration in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar was not free from the British impact. Prior to the British occupation the tenants defended upon the village headman and village priest to get Justice. In extreme condition the tenant could go to the Raja. The Raja's court was treated as the highest civil and criminal court. But after the occupation of the British the Judicial system was organized in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar.

For administrative convenience in the field of justice the state was divided in the three part viz. (1) Nijgarh, (2) Nayagarh, (3) Athagarh. Nilgarh comprised of the Dandapats of Upper Keonjhar except Kalikaprasad, Chamakpur, Nayagarh, Nayakot and Bhuyan pith which comprised of Nijgarh subdivision. The Raja himself administered affairs of Justice in Nijgarh with the help of the Manager. The Superintendent of Police of the State was in charge of Nayagarh. D.A. Macmillan Esq. exercised second class criminal powers in addition to that of a Munsif and Revenue Court. However, upto 11th September 1940 the functions of the highest civil and criminal courts continued to be performed by the Raja.

The Judicial system, thus, was organized in the feudatory state of Keonjhar. But it was noted that in Lower Keonjhar the
tenants were much inclined to litigation and the case file was comparatively very high. In a nutshell it is said that the court of village headmen was abolished and the tenants took the help of the organized judicial system to get justice.

**Impact on the Forest Administration**

The British, for the first time, introduced a new department for the management and administration of forest. Prior to the British Government, no steps were taken to save and conserve forest. During the British period the forest department was created with a view to protecting, managing and conserving forest and supplying forest products to the public. Besides realization of forest revenue, afforestation, reservation of new forest blocks etc. were also done by the department.

The administration of forest put a great impact. At least the department protected and conserved the forest. The department stopped deforestation and earned revenue for the State.

**Impact on Social System**

Impact of the British on the Feudatory states of Orissa soon gave birth to a new era. The impact on the social system was no doubt remarkable. The British conquest and administration exposed the weakness and decadence of the
society in the 19th century. However, the British rule was marked by a number of social reforms in the later half of the nineteenth century A.D. They tried to reform Hindu Society by the abolition of cruel rites of Suttee and suppression of infanticide. They checked the gangs of assassins called Thugs and made peaceful living possible.

The Suttee system, an evil practice, was most rampant in the 19th century A.D. It was widely prevalent in the Raj families of Orissa. The Feudatory State of Keonjhar was no exception to it.

The term Sutee was derived from the word 'Sat' meaning good, chaste and pure. It applied to a devoted wife, who contemplated perpetual and uninterrupted conjugal union with her husband, life after life, and as proof thereof, immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. They believed that the dead needed company and victuals, on their sojourn to far off paradise.

The practice of Suttee was widely prevalent in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar, came to the notice of the British authorities. It was very much popular in the families of the Rajas and among the well-to-do Hindus. That this practice was deep-rooted in the Raj families is known from the reply given by Raja Janardan Bhanja to the Superintendent Tributary Mahal, Cuttack in 1814. The reply to a question addressed to the Raja
of Keonjhar stated "After the death it is useful for all Ranees to be Satee.....". The foreign travellers like Bernier and Tavernier referred to the practice of Satee in their accounts. Again A.J.M. Mills reported that, "It was the family custom in the Tributary States for the Ranees who were childless to become Suttee"\(^2\). However, it was not always true. In 1861 Maharaja Gadadhara Narayan Bhanja died at Triveni. His Rani Bishnupriya Patamahadei did not become Suttee though she was issueless. Rather, it had been the practice for the eldest with a minor son and the youngest not to become Suttee. Sometimes, the slave girls used to immolate themselves on the occasion of the Raja’s death. “The reason behind it was solely to enhance the status celebrity of the dead in the eyes of countrymen by the number of victims immolated”. Along with the Raj families the Hindus in the Feudatory States of Orissa practised Suttee. However this practice was very common in the Raj families and in the families of their subjects. Captain Johnstone’s report of 1870 also refers to this practice of Suttee in families other than those of the Rajas. Again it was found to have existed mostly in the families of the Brahmans, Karanas and Kshatriyas. However the Feudatory State of Keonjhar was no exception to it.

Origin of the Custom of Suttee

The custom had a long tradition in India. The practice of Suttee in Orissa was the same as elsewhere in India. In olden days the widows considered it glorious to sacrifice their lives on their own accord on the funeral pyre of their husbands. It originated as voluntary sacrifice of a widow who resolved to accompany her deceased husband. Again due to the extraordinary love she could not bear the flame of the pyre parting her from her husband. The torture of the widowed life was one of the causes of the practice of Suttee. The practice of Suttee in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar was treated as glorious and necessary. In this connection in 1839 A.J.M.Mills Superintendent Tributary Mahal reported that, "If the females of the Raja’s family do not burn themselves with the body of the husband a great sin is committed ....... such a duty is enjoyed by our religion..... and custom. They do it for the benefit of visiting the heaven". It is observed that polygamy was one of the vital causes of the practice of Suttee. Tâe Raja of Keonjhar in 1814 reported to the British that "Raja can marry more than one and it may be seven also". According to tradition the eldest son of the lawful wives used to ascend the Gadi and as such the other Ranees were not looked after as

³ James Reggs, India’s cries to British numerate (London 1832, p.214).
graciously as the Rajamata. This painful matter might have 
induced the other Ranees to commit Suttee.

In its origin the practice was voluntary. Women, devoted 
to their husbands, used to sacrifice their lives on the 
funeral pyre of their husband of their own accord. But 
gradually this type of devotion was found no more, and widows 
hesitated to throw themselves alive onto the funeral pyre of 
their husbands. But with the passing of times the custom of 
Suttee became involuntary and mandatory in the Raj families in 
the Feudatory States of Orissa. The feudatory State of 
Keonjhar was no exception to it.

**Manner of Committing Suttee**

The manner and custom of committing Suttee was not 
uniform in all the Feudatory States of Orissa. Somehow or 
other it differed from place to place. It was more popular in 
the Raj family of Keonjhar than in other families. According 
to this custom the widows used to put on their valuable 
ornaments before entering the funeral pyre. In this auspicious 
moment the Brahmin priests used to chant holy mantras at the 
top of their voices. Then after they were completely burnt, 
the Brahmin purohita (priest) used to gather their ornaments 
from the ashes. The ornaments were treated as the property of
the *Purohitas*. Thus, it was a highly profitable business for the *purohitas*.

The practice of *Suttee* unlike in other Feudatory States of Orissa, was very rampant in Keonjhar. In the early part of the 19th century the Raja of Keonjhar reported that "After the death it is useful for the *Ranees* to be *Suttee.....". It was reported that in August 1839 the Second *Rani* of the deceased Raja of Keonjhar Bisweswar Bhanja (1832-39) performed *Suttee*. The mother and guardian of the minor Raja Gadadhar Narayan Bhanja (1839-1861) replied to A.J.M.Mills the Superintenden Tributary Mahal that "Many *Ranis* of the former Rajas have burnt themselves with the bodies of their husband with a view to gain merit......". Thus it is to be observed that the custom of *Suttee* was widely prevalent in the Raj families of the Feudatory State of Keonjhar.

**Abolition of Suttee**

With a view to putting an end to the practice of *Suttee* the British Government intervened in the internal matter of the Feudatory State. The British Government wanted to bring to a full stop this inhuman practice. Regulation XVII of December 1829 first declared the practice of *Suttee* or of burning or burying alive of widows illegal, and punishable by the

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4 * The facts were collected from Manoj Manjari Devi Rajamata of Keonjhar (wife of Raja Balabhadra Narayan Bhanja).
5 OHCP 1878 P.106
criminal courts as culpable homicide. It promulgated further
that all persons convicted of aiding and abetting in the
sacrifice of a Hindu widow, whether the sacrifice be voluntary
on her part or not, shall be guilty of culpable homicide and
shall be liable to punishment by fine or by imprisonment or by
both at the discretion of the Court of Circuit, according to
the nature and circumstances of the case degree of the guilty
established against the offender".6

The Regulation XVII 1829 was applicable to the Bengal
Presidency, but in 1830 was extended to parts of British
territory. In spite of the Regulation 1829 some incidents of
Suttee occurred in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar when Raja
Bisweswara Bhanja (died in 1839 his second Rani committed
Suttee7. When the news reached A.J.M.Mills, the Superintendent
Tributary Mahals, he addressed a 'parwana' to the minor Raja
of Keonjhar. However, on behalf of the Minor Raja Gadadhara
Narayan Bhanja his mother and guardian replied over the
matter. Lastly A.J.M.Mills suggested to the Government to
declare Suttee illegal and punishable first in the Tributary
States8.

In the year 1842 a treaty engagement was executed between
the Raja and the Government to bring an abrupt end to the

6 James Reggs Op.cit, pp.262-264
7 Bd. Procd. Rev.OSA ACC No. 87 AJM Millas to Sec.to Govt. of Bengal January 11 1840.
8 Ibid.
practice of Suttee. With the passing of time after its abolition the practice of Suttee gradually declined.

Thus, it may be observed that the British Policy of intervention in Keonjhar brought about some social reforms in the State.

On the whole it is observed that the British rule in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar had a number of merits and demerits. On the one hand it brought in its train some merits for the State. The administrative system introduced by the Government checked the Raja’s, and his men’s, despotism. They could not become authoritarian in the State. As a result the interests of the common men were protected. British officers, with the help of the Raja and his officers, endeavoured to civilise the tribal people of the State. The expansion of education was one of their creditable activities. The British administration in the Feudatory State of Keonjhar brought an abrupt end to the ignorance and superstition that then prevailed in the Society. Although behind such constructive works the undertones of selfish interests cannot be ruled out undoubtedly it has to be admitted that the British Government tried to civilise the people of Keonjhar. Thus there appeared a new light on the political and social horizon of the State.

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