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HRUSSO(Akas) OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH AND THE BRITISH: THE LEGACY OF THAGI RAJA AND MEDHI RAJA IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Hrusso (Akas) are settled in both East Kameng and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The total population of the Hrusso (Akas) according to the 2011 census of India is 8167. This paper traces the impact of two unsung leaders of the Hrusso (Akas) tribe Thagi Raja, and his son Medhi Raja. Due to the lack of literature written by the tribe, colonial records are used as the primary sources. The paper studies the chronological occurrence of events from the capturing of Thagi Raja by the Britishers in 1829 to the surrender of Medhi Raja to the Britishers in 1888. The paper explores the grievances that led to the confrontation and the nature of the revolt that the Hrusso (Akas) initiated. It tries to understand the Hrusso (Akas) defiance against the British in the larger national context, and critically analyse the dynamics of a tribal revolt against the colonial authorities. This study finds that issues such as boundary, Tax, and sovereignty led to the conflict with the colonial authorities.

KEYWORDS: *Hrusso (Akas), Arunachal Pradesh, British, Unsung hero, Tribal revolt.*

INTRODUCTION

Arunachal Pradesh is a state in India at latitude 28°01′31.08″ North, longitude 94°28′44.04″ East, it is home to around 26 major tribes and numerous minor tribes. Hrusso (Akas) are considered to be one of the major tribes of the state. According to the 2011 census, the population of Hrusso stood at 8167, which saw a steady rise from 3531 as given in the census of 1991. The tribe mostly resides in the West Kameng and East Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh, with the majority population residing in West Kameng. There has been confusion with the nomenclature of the tribe, Hrusso is also known as "Akas", the first record about Akas, is used as "Onka" by Dr. J.P. Wade in his book *Account of Assam* (1800) as records showed they were called Akas which meant painting or drawings in Assamese, they referred to themselves as Hrusso which simply meant the people. Historically Hrusso are divided into two main clans, the Hazarikhowa (Kutsun) and Kapaschor (Kovatsun), a third clan or a subdivision of the tribe known as Miri-Aka (Sinha,1962). Nimasow (2011) categories Akas territorially as two sub-tribes Hrusso and korous and sates that there are numerous clans within that. The Hrusso has been mentioned in historical records because of the Posa system which was availed by the tribe, they were even entitled to *paiks* during the Ahom rule. The political scenario changed with the British coming into power, David Scott instructed that the hill tribes which were recipients of *posa* should continue to get the allotted privileges and fixed an amount of Rs 175 per annum for the Hrusso M. Bose (1997). They had to show a handmade receipt *Hathchita* only after that they were allowed to access the allotted amount (Chakraborty, 1973). Hill tribes naturally had to come down to plains as the resources available to the hill tribes were minimal, Hrusso also followed the practice which at times led to violent incidents on the other hand there were instances of plain people coming to the Hrusso lands for procuring Rubber. Hrusso even though less in numbers they gained control over the other tribes such as Sherdupkens, Mijis, and Monpas and the Sherdupkens used to pay taxes to the Hrusso (Sinha, 1959). The Hrusso were supported by Mijis in most of their endeavor and both the tribes had very close relations as Inter-Marriage was common between the tribes, even during the confrontation with the British, Mijis supported the Hrusso by directly providing man power. The tribe lacks literature and epigraphical sources, the colonial sources are used as primary sources, the tribe has a rich Oral tradition and archaeological remains which has not been systematically researched which has the potential to throw light on the tribe and help us to have a better understanding of the tribe. The study tries to place Taghi raja and Medhi raja in the space of history and analyse the causes and the effects of the confrontation that the two leaders had on the region's political structure. It also analyses the British's perspective of the confrontation and the approach taken by the British in dealing with both of the leaders. This study focuses on the resistance of the Hrusso (Aka) tribe against British colonial rule by examining the roles of key leaders such as Thagi Raja and Medhi Raja. It aims to understand their contributions and analyze the broader tribal struggle against colonial authority in Arunachal Pradesh.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on Qualitative research tools. Both primary and secondary data have been used to create an understanding of the theme. Official documents have been the primary sources, including colonial records and missionary reports. Document analysis of various colonial reports has been carried out to supplement the research activities.

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Thagi Raja



Figure 1. Thagi Raja (Right) with his brother.

Source: Butler, J. (n.d.-b). A Sketch of Assam, with Some Account of the Hill Tribes: By an Officer; with Illustrations from Sketches by the Author. Studio Orientalia, 2013.

Thagi Raja was mentioned as Taggee by John Butler, and Tagi by C.H Hesselmeyer in their works, he was first mentioned in the year 1829 when he was jailed in the Guwahati jail. (Muir, 1885). Thagi Raja and Kuvatsun were banned due to their killing of an official and were forced to cut off their ties with the plains by the order of David Scott, then commissioner of Assam; Thagi Raja was in hiding in Assam due to his conflict with the Kutsun. In 1829 the British apprehended him and lodged him in Guwahati jail and kept him captive for 4 years and was released in 1932 after being later pardoned (Bose, 1996). As the British did not consider him a threat during that time and he also came under the influence of a religious leader, which helped his cause of being pardoned. However, this resulted in the long years of confrontation with the British, after getting pardoned his first act was to punish those of who were responsible for his captivity in jail (Bose, 1996). Hessemeyer (1867) states, this man succeeded in obtaining the hegemony over all the Kapachor akas, influence over Mijis and became the head of Hrusso. This showed the position of Taghi Raja who was just the chief of the Dususow clan became the de-facto leader for the entire Hrusso tribe and had influence over Mijis which helped him in his endeavour against the British as he could maintain a proper supply of manpower through the Mijis. The first major confrontation with the British took place in the year 1835 when Thagi raja raided the 42nd regiment of Assam Light Infantry outpost at Balipara, Assam where 7 sepoys with their family were killed (Muir, 1885). Mackenzie states the number of deaths were 17. Thagi Raja and the tribe was condemned the Kuvutsun clan was outlawed by David Scott and Kutsun clan's *posa* amount was stopped and their entry to the plains was forbade because of the incidents (M. L. Bose, 1996). It was followed by the capturing of 3 natives of Balipara in the year 1835, however, the message by the Thagi raja was that the retribution was due to the deprivation of the Hrusso to collect their ancient right of tapping the rubber as the increase in the forest reserves by the colonial authorities (Chakravorty, 1964). The Hrusso were self-reliant in maintaining their livelihood, the grievances provided them the urge to confront the colonial authorities, which they knew could result in grave circumstances. As expected, a reward of Rs 500 award was put on Thagi Raja, Rs 200 for information, and by 1842 they were treated as outlaws; however, in the year 1842 Thagi Raja surrendered his free will and maintained that the massacre of the guard in 1835 was the response against the tyranny of the sepoys towards the tribe (Butler, 2013). The British approached the tribal revolt situation usually with the policy of non-interference and their response was usually reactive not provoking, the reason may be their lack of information on the tribes and their lack of incentives they were expecting to earn in return. Butler, 2013 states that Thagi raja was pardoned since there was no means at hand of summarily punishing the outrage that had been committed, and the influence of the Raja was requisite to curb future irregularities. This resonates with the philosophy of British interaction with the hill tribes, they were opting for freer intercourse with the people of the Plain.

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Medhi Raja



Figure 1 Unverified photo of Medhi Raja
Source: HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE HRUSSOS(AKAS) OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH by B.N Jha

We see a different approach during the reign of Medhi Raja son of Thagi raja, Medhi Raja was mentioned as 'Midhi' by Alexander Mackenzie, Macgregor mentions him to be the son of Thagi Raja and his first reference is made in the year 1872 with the boundary demarcation of the Darrang and the Hrusso (Mackenzie, 2012). It is interesting to note that after the valiant efforts and surrender of Thagi raja there was peace in the following years from both sides but things took a turn after the official confirmation that the Hrussso possessed a valuable and Marketable commodity Rubber in the year 1868 (Muir, 1885). The first disagreement started when Lt Col. Graham in 1872-73 started the demarcation of the foothills bringing them into the Darrang district, Medhi raja raised his concerns over the issue he demanded a grant of 200 puras of land, and the British gave 36 puras of land and went with the demarcation of the land by 1874-75, Medhi raja agreed to the new boundary (M. L. Bose, 1996). Medhi raja was discontent with the new boundary as it restricted the movement and freedom of the tribe and the signs of strains could be seen in the small incidents where the tribe during their annual visit to the plain started to enact upon the plains. In 1878 Medhi raja people had some trouble on their visit to the plains and the authorities had the tribesman whipped (Mackenzie, 2012). A sense of dissatisfaction and discontentment was brewing within Medhi raja and the tribe and the boundary issues and re-enhancement of *posa* were some of the reasons for their discomfort. The deputy commissioner of Darrang instructed Lakhidhar Muouzadar (a revenue official of Balipara) to go the Hrusso territory and get some tribesmen with their traditional attires for the Calcutta Exhibition, the Hrusso narration was that Lakhidar has asked The Raja and Rani to come to Calcutta with all their ornaments (Chakravorty, 1964). This angered the Hrusso to such an extent that they held Lakhidar captive, where he died in captivity and hence started the direct challenge to the British. Nov 10, 1883 marked the start of the Hrusso-British was also called Aka-British war, Medhi Raja attacked the Balipara forest range office abducted the forest ranger and the forest clerk and took away 2 guns and some money (Chakravorty, 1964). This act directly challenged the British power in the region. As the British grew anxious regarding the current turn of events, they started to mobilise several counter attacks against Medhi raja. In the meantime, on dec 10th, 1883 Medhi Raja sent their message that they will return the captive, 4 letters were sent which we in Bengali must have been translated and written by the Forest ranger which mentioned the reason for the attack as the settlement of the boundary issues and a compensation of 1 lakh rupees, it also stated that the death of Lakhidar was due to fever which clarified their role in the death (Chakravorty, 1964). This letter seemed like a decoy as not only the captives were not returned, but Medhi raja even plotted various other frontal attacks to weaken the British stronghold. On 23rd December 1883 Medhi Raja attacked an advance camp and it resulted in killing of one sepoy and wounding 7. The British who were mobilizing their troops under the political officer P.Maxwell, Deputy commissioner of Garo hills, with a force of 290 frontier police, 571 officers and men of43rd native Infantry drawn from Shillong, 210 of the Khelati Ghizais from the Cachar, 2 mountain guns, etc, a flying column of 150 rifles, the 43rd Light infantry and 50 of Dibrugarh corps started for Medhi raja's Village (M. L. Bose, 1996). The British led their charge with mechanical guns of that time and a large soldier on the other side it was Medhi Rajas and their people were equipped with poisonous arrows and spears, the British had number as well as technology on their side. Medhi raja retreated back to their strongly stockaded village which was stormed on 8th January 1884, the Hrusso could not deal with the strong artillery of the British as they were surrounded by all sides; the Hrusso tried to fight back but the poisonous arrows were no match for the superior guns (Chakravorty, 1964). Medhi Raja by then however managed to escape beforehand but the entire village was burned and Capt. Maxwell received a fine of 10 *Mithuns*, after an outbreak of fever in his camp he had to return and

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Medhi Raja could not be captured. The chief commissioner after getting the reports was not satisfied with the state of Medhi Raja still being free and instructed to continue blocking of the hills so that Medhi Raja would surrender and negotiations could be carried out (Bose, 1996). The British always maintained that they did not wish to overthrow the hill rulers and instead opted for subjugation control over the tribes, even after Medhi Raja's endeavour they insisted on negotiations instead of capital punishment. After a couple of years of blocking, Medhi raja seemed it fit to surrender for the betterment of the tribe and on 1888, he along with the other chief surrendered and accepted the foothills as their boundary with the British territory, it was stated that instead of good behaviour *posa* could be restored in two years (Bose, 1996). This was the end of the Hrusso (Akas)-British war, which officially placed the tribe in the shadow of the British we don't see any further interventions of the Hrusso into the British territories.

FINDINGS

1. Thagi Raja and Medhi Raja played pivotal role in the struggle against the colonial authorities and emerged as the leader of the tribe.
2. The causes of altercation between the tribe and the colonial authorities were due to the interference of the colonial authorities into the tribes' affairs.
3. The colonial authorities were more interested in serving their benefit which resulted in harsh treatment of the tribal leaders.

CONCLUSION

Indian history has been illustrated with struggles against the British, we have personalities who are household names all over India but many names go unnoticed and in time can be erased from the pages of struggle against the British. Thagi raja and Medhi raja are two unsung heroes of Hrusso (Akas) tribe who stood against the might of the British, and with basic tactics such as guerilla attacks and used poisonous arrows, spears to fight against the British. It is fascinating to trace the transition of British approach, the policy of interfering very less during the reign of Thagi Raja and the aggressive approach after the official findings of rubber tapping and demarcation of British territory. As compared to Thagi raja, Medhi raja saw the intrusion of the British in the Hrusso lands which marked the importance of that region from the British perspective. The official records show a tone of benevolence in their writings claiming their way for providing help to the tribes, whom they mention as "Savage". As sources other than colonial records are unavailable oral history can be used to re-construct and understand the history through the Hrusso lens. The defiance shown by Thagi and Medhi Raja provides the descriptive roles played by tribes in the National Movement, even though their idea of freedom and the nature of revolt were different their struggle against the British was the same.

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