

The Revolts of the Waghers of Okhamandal in the 19th Century: A Review

*Dr. Vibhuti Parikh

*Associate Professor, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda,
Vadodara, Gujarat (India)*

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 31 December 2017

Keywords

Waghers
1857 revolt
Kalas
Okhamandal
Gaekwads

*Corresponding Author

Email: vibhutiparikh@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

Among the various uprisings against the British in the nineteenth century, the revolts of Waghers of Okhamandal stand out significantly as these mark opposition from a long standing sea faring predacious fringe component against the ascendant authority the British-Gaekwad combine which eventually paved way for their transformation, drawing them into the mainstream. The events in the larger context of the 1857 revolt and its aftermath are insightful and have been examined in this paper.

The nineteenth century in Indian history is marked by numerous uprisings against British rule across the country. These were on various counts: political reconfigurations amounting to either displacement, loss of either autonomy or independence, administrative innovations, enhanced revenue demands impact of which were seriously aggravated in situations of famine, economic dislocation, natural calamities etc. The factors underlying resentment were manifold and thus the belligerent posture.

It is significant to note that numerous of these revolts predated 1857. While the latter half of the eighteenth century is primarily characterized by revolts led by elements drawn from traditional ruling components, viz. dispossessed local chiefs, zamindars and the religious order, the nineteenth century movements were protests emanating largely from the lower rungs of society. Explanation to this shift is in view of the increasing pervasiveness of British rule, the ramifications of which in certain instances pushed the fringe categories to the brink thereby engendering revolts which were marked by great violence and militancy. It is pertinent to mention that insurgency has been aptly described as the necessary antithesis of colonialism.¹

It is also important to note that early nineteenth century uprisings were not consciously nationalist in character though subsequently they paved the way and contributed towards the growth of national consciousness. To a larger extent these were scattered events driven basically by strictly local concerns wherein the only common factor was resentment against the larger authority structure and thus protests against British policies in view of pervasive consolidation of colonial rule. The first relatively concerted expression of dissatisfaction was the revolt of 1857. A recent study by William Dalrymple stresses the significance of this event in

view of its being the largest armed uprising occurring in any European empire or any part of the world wherein nearly 1,67,000 sepoys of the East India Company revolted.² These figures are impressively revealing and call for a review of the uprising and more importantly events related to it in different parts of the country which is the primary theme of this seminar.

The concern of my paper is a review of the revolts of the Waghers, seafaring predacious clan groupings inhabiting the Okhamandal peninsula in Saurashtra, Gujarat. These may be described as fringe elements in the region's power relations. During the course of the nineteenth century numerous instances of their insurgency against the constituted authority- the Gaekwad British combine are graphically recorded. While these events are discussed in the context of the Gaekwads of Baroda, the most prominent among the native states in Gujarat, they call for greater attention in view of these revolts being protests led by somewhat lesser or fringe categories whose antecedents go way back to antiquity. This dimension is indeed fascinating and calls for serious attention as they are reflective of subtleties in the larger reconfigurations that were occurring. In fact it is essentially pertinent to examine the nature and working of power relations in the region wherein despite shifts and changes of political authority at the larger level at different points of time such predacious components survive till they are drawn into the mainstream during the course of the twentieth century. In this paper an effort has been made to examine and explain the long drawn presence of this component in the peninsula and more importantly review the reasons underlying their revolts both before and after 1857. Before proceeding further, a brief survey of the antecedents of the Waghers may be worthwhile.

¹ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1999, p. 2

² William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, Oxford, 2006, p. 10

The early history of the Waghers is fragmentary. Details of these seafaring people are provided in Campbell's 'The Bombay Gazetteer'³ which is largely drawn from local folklore wherein the origins are traced way back to the epic era. Accordingly, tradition holds that Okhamandal was originally inhabited by three tribes namely: Kaba, Moda and Kalas and the Waghers were descendents of the Kalas.⁴ In early times the Kalas were undermined by the Yadavas under Krishna who conquered Okhamandal and established their authority.⁵ Sometime during the second century A.D, the Kalas re-conquered these areas and remained dominant in the region with brief phases of disruption until the sixth century A.D. Around this time the Kalas now classed as Waghers came to be displaced by the Chavadas. Possibly this occurred during the Ksatrapa or early Maitraka phase.⁶ Thereafter till the eleventh century the Waghers survived with piratical activities being their mainstay. Their earlier history hereon seems to have passed into oblivion. In all likelihood they were reduced to the stature of lesser autonomous or semi autonomous clans constituting a somewhat fringe category.

Meanwhile around this time, political authority in Okhamandal was wielded by two intermittently conflicting clans- the Chavadas and the Heroles. In the thirteenth century these quarrels provided an opportune situation for certain banished clansmen of the Rathod clan of Marwar to migrate to Okhamandal and establish their authority in the region. They treacherously attacked the Chavada and Herole clansmen many of whom were slain. Those who survived sought refuge and merged with the Waghers. The rathod clansmen came to be classed as 'Wadhet'- the slayers. Subsequently this clan was called the Wadhels and they dominated in the region and probably maintained authority over the waghers.⁷

During the rule of the Delhi and subsequently Gujarat sultans' internecine feuds between the Waghers and the Wadhels were frequent and inevitable as interests clashed. Piracy was common to both and constituted their main preoccupation. It is significant that they often attacked Haj Pilgrims which invited the wrath of the powerful Gujarat sultan Mahmud Begada who conquered Okhamandal and destroyed the temples at Dwarka or Jagat and Bet or Shankhodhar.⁸ Realizing the futility of internal feuds and the vulnerability it engendered against the larger and more formidable forces these clans came to an agreement. Accordingly, the Waghers conceded to recognize the primacy

of the Wadhels in Okhamandal. Further, both decided to unite their forces against external aggression which interestingly remained steadfast. It is quite likely that with the passage of time the distinction between the Waghers and the Wadhels got somewhat blurred though each maintained their distinct spheres of influence: Armada, positra and Dwarka and Vasai.⁹ It is significant to mention that these clans remained supportive to the last Gujarat sultan Muzaffar Shah III in his wars for recovering his kingdom from the Mughals. During the Mughal period this components were subject to frequent chastisement by faujdars.

It is noteworthy to mention that the nature of the topography and climate of region inhabited by the Waghers made piracy, plunder and petty thefts their mainstay and defined the turbulence in their character.¹⁰ Okhamandal located on the extreme north-west tip of Saurashtra is a triangular island. It is bounded by the sea on three sides and a salt marsh or Rann on the fourth side which separates it from Nawanagar. With a scanty rainfall of 10 to 12 inches the region comprises vast expanses of sandbanks and 'Thor' cactus jungles.¹¹ Scarcity of sweet water makes famines common phenomena. It is interesting to mention that this place derives its name from the term 'Okha' which in local traditions means difficult or formidable. A popular saying is 'Okho te jeevne jokho which means that Okha is dangerous to life possibly alluding to the difficult terrain, predaciousness and aggressive formidability of its inhabitants.¹²

The picture which emerges from these scattered references suggests that at some stage the Waghers might have enjoyed certain level of political authority in the region. During the course of the early medieval and medieval times they came to be displaced and survived as subjugated clan groupings often serving as inevitable subordinate allies to reigning clans like the Chavdas, Herols, Wadhels etc. The harsh nature of the lands they inhabited defined their predatory character. It is quite likely that these clan groupings were subject to frequent chastisement but were never decisively undermined. In fact this is a general pattern discernible for Saurashtra and Kutch in view of its complex clan based polity, topography distance and communications. Probably the long standing presence of certain clans could be explained in terms of spaces and certain level of autonomy that was accorded to such peripheral components within the larger structure of power relations in peninsular Gujarat. An insight to their formidability is noticeable when a combined offensive of Porbandar, Nawanagar and Gondal was sent against them for chastisement 1715-18 A.D.¹³ This dimension is remarkably explicit during the course of the nineteenth

³ James Campbell, ed. Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Vol. IX Part I, Gujarat Population: Hindus, Bombay 1901, 2nd ed. 1988, p. 522-29

⁴ The Kabas were known as the savage people of Saurashtra. Both the Kabas and the Modas subsequently went in oblivion. However the Kalas survived and it is from this component the Waghers are said to be descended. The name Wagher is derived from *vi* or without and *gher* or smell, meaning a tiger who is devoid of the sense of smell. Over time the term was applied to the Kalas who were as cruel and sanguinary as tigers. Another tradition is that Waghers were so called because they cooled the gods on a visit to hot Okhamandal by *gher* or enclosing of *wa* or wing and thus refreshed. Ibid, p. 522

⁵ While the Kabas and the modas went into oblivion, the kalas survived and it is from this tribe that the present Waghers are said to have descended. Ibid, n, p. 523

⁶ Gazetteer of India, Gujarat State, Jamnagar District, Ahmedabad, 1970, p. 92

⁷ Ibid

⁸ M. S. Commissariat, A History of Gujarat, Vol. I Bombay, 1938, pp. 173-175

⁹ Important details on the Badhels or Wadhels, their sphere of influence and holdings is furnished in A. R. Khan, Chieftains in the Mughal Empire during the reign of Akbar, Simla, 1977, p. 82. Also see Ali Muhammad Khan, The Supplement to the Mirat i Ahmadi, Eng, tr. Syed Nawab Ali and Charles Norman Seddon, Baroda, 1924, p. 203

¹⁰ Col. J. Briggs writing in 1829 comments on the waghers: 'The pirates of Jagat (Dwarka) and Bet have been notorious for many ages, and they are a little less infamous, I fear in the present day than they were several centuries ago. Local circumstances account for their propensity and for their success'. Ibid, p. 173

¹¹ Vijay Singh Chavda, Modern Gujarat, Ahmedabad, 1983, p.219. Also see S. B. Rajyagor, History of Gujarat, Delhi 1982, p.4

¹² Vijay Singh Chavda, op cit. p.220

¹³ Gazetteer of India, Jamnagar District, op. cit. p. 93

century when they became a menace for the Gaekwads and the British authorities. Determined attempts to undermine them decisively saw a spate to insurgent activities.

In 1804 the Waghers seized and plundered a vessel belonging to a Surat merchant and flung overboard its crew along with two English passengers who were on board. The Bombay government immediately responded with an offensive demanding compensation which remained ineffective. Other important preoccupations left the matter unsettled till 1807. In this year Colonel Walker and Vithalrao Diwanji representing the Gaekwads led a combined force against the Wagher which proved to be unsuccessful. The next year in 1809 their efforts yielded only partial response. The insurgents were forced to agree to pay Rs. 1, 10,000 as compensation and abstain from such excesses.¹⁴ The commitment remained irrelevant. While plundering activities continued the fine was not paid.¹⁵ A year later, at the intervention of Captain Ballantine, Assistant Resident at Amreli, a third portion of the fine was finally remitted. However, predatory activities nonetheless remained unabated.

This was a phase when efforts were being made both by the Gaekwads and the British government to extend and consolidate their authority in Kathiawad. The British were generally interested in maintaining law and order in these parts and more particularly suppressing piracy. The presence of insurgent elements such as the Waghers naturally was least desirable. In 1816 the district of Okhamandal was subdued by Colonel East.¹⁶ A portion of the 1809 fine was also extracted. However, the British soon realized that possession of Okhamandal was not easy. Dwarka and Bet were important pilgrim centers for Hindus. On the other hand the Gaekwads anxiously sought the prestige of being custodians of these temple towns. In view of these considerations Okhamandal was ceded to the Gaekwads in 1817 wherein they agreed to pay the balance compensation due from the Waghers.¹⁷ Governance and order of the region hereafter became the concern of the Gaekwads. However peace and stability were short-lived and disturbances continued.¹⁸

In 1833 enhancement of piratical activities drew the attention of the Bombay government and naval interventions commenced. Simultaneous to this was insurgency on land which enhanced concern of the English. When Bet was occupied by the Waghers, the Gaekwad regime was implicated of weak governance and scheming. The Bombay political Agent reported that the Baroda government was fomenting private quarrels and inciting acts of violence in order to subject the Waghers to the penalty of criminals and deprive them of their hereditary rights and holdings.¹⁹ While no immediate measures were taken, murders, piracy and disorders continued.

Between the years 1845-47 insurgent activities are again recorded.²⁰ Though British intervention restored order.

However this was a fleeting affair as the Waghers resumed their activities. The Gaekwads were forced to seek assistance of the British. The situation was somewhat anomalous.²¹ While the British intervention was proven inevitable, the Gaekwads were not able to hold on their own. Further, the regions involved- Dwarka and Bet were prominent Hindu pilgrim centers.

The next decade saw the outbreak of the 1857 mutiny which provided an opportune moment for the rebels to make gains. Chiefs of different clans- Jodho Manek, Babu Manek, Deva Chhabani, Ghadu Mayani besides other Wagher leaders resumed rebellion against the authorities in 1857-58.²² The British deputed Lieut. Barton to intervene and neutralize the rebels. His efforts however were unsuccessful.

The Waghers of Vasai compelled the Gaekwad thanadar to flee the place. Meanwhile the mixed garrison of Arabs, Sindhis and local sepoys joined hands with the rebels. They acquired control of the fort and island of Bet. Next they took control of Dwarka. By August 1859 the whole of Okhamandal was captured by them. Emboldened by the 1857 mutiny and the reverses suffered by the British, they assumed a bolder demeanor and their leader styled themselves as the "Raja of Okhamandal"²³.

The Gaekwads were forced to turn to the British. In view of the turbulent character of the region, the British deemed it essential that their complete authority was important if order was to be established in these parts. A combined sea and land offensive was launched under the command of Colonel Donovan with a strong force of 1350 soldiers and four warships.²⁴ The Waghers put up strong resistance but were forced to evacuate the fort after a week's bombardment along with their women and children and treasure. It is significant to mention that these operations also caused severe damage to temples located close to the fort which raised a huge outcry.

Meanwhile the fugitives occupied Dwarka which was subjected to bombardment. After some resistance the rebels were once again forced to flee. However this time they were pursued and nearly about 700 were made captive. Yet others got scattered seeking refuge in the haven of the Gir forests and the Barda hills. Though on a much lower scale, these outlaws continued with their insurgent activities singly or in bands of two or three in the region for several years till the late nineteenth century. It is significant that in one of the desultory skirmishes two lieutenants La Touche and Hebbert were killed.²⁵

Following the military operations, dual authority (1861-1920) was instituted for Okhamandal wherein the Gaekwad's government delegated jurisdiction over the Waghers to the British Assistant Resident. This phase is marked by the pacification and comprehensively wholesome measures to

¹⁴ Stanley Rice, Life of Sayajirao III Maharaja of Baroda, Vol. II, Oxford, pp.88-89

¹⁵ Gazetteer of India, Jamnagar, op. cit p.93-94

¹⁶ Stanley Rice, op. cit, p.89

¹⁷ Ibid Also see, Chavada, op. cit, p.222

¹⁸ Gazetteer of India, Jamnagar, p. 94

¹⁹ Stanley Rice, op. cit, p. 90

²⁰ Gazetteer of India, Jamnagar, p.94

²¹ This is evident in the correspondence between both the sides See Selections from the Records of the Baroda Government, Okhamandal, Part I, Baroda, 1906 pp. 80, 82 and Part II, pp. 175-176

²² Rajyagor, op. cit, p.429

²³ Gazetteer of India, Jamnagar, p. 94

²⁴ James. M. Campbell ed. Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Vol. I Part I, History of Gujarat, Bombay, 1896, pp. 446-447

²⁵ Ibid, p. 448

establish greater 'order' in the region and draw the Waghers into the mainstream. The Jungles which served as havens for insurgents were cleared. The policy of the British in dealing with these elements was primarily of protectors whereby they sought to provide alternatives to piracy and predatory activities. Nonetheless the inherent traits were too deep-rooted which made their transformation very gradual. For instance, a Wagher corp was raised to maintain order. The experiment was however unsuccessful as these people showed little enthusiasm for discipline besides being unduly partial to their people. Nonetheless the colonial experience in these parts became a reason for the emergence of greater order at least for these components. During the tenure of Syajirao III earnest measures were undertaken to ameliorate the conditions of the Waghers and draw them away from their traditional lawlessness. Thus at a very gentle pace traditionally predacious and rebellious fringe elements eventually underwent transformation.