

# Rebellion – The Choice of the Deprived

Dr. Ashok Kumar

M.A. PhD. (History) Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara, Bihar

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

### Article History

Published Online: 07 August 2018

### Keywords

British government, Local leader

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## ABSTRACT

The cause caught between the colonial British government and the local leader they had eventually two alternatives, of rebellion or migration. This paper discusses which path the tribal people choose and why. Revolt is by its very nature an open and public event, and is indeed a collective enterprise. Throughout this work the term revolt is used to describe the 1879-80 Rampa Uprising. Rampa and its adjacent hills assumed to describe the historical significance for being the site of a major tribal revolt that occurred during 1922-24 under the leadership of Alluri Seetaramaraju. Rampa at present in East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh state, came under British in 1766 and formed part of the then Godavari district in Madras presidency. Absence of roads, unhealthy tracts, and oppressive temperature prevented the penetration of people from plains, and ensured the inhabitants of these areas relative diverse tribal groups.

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## 1. Introduction

Generally the form of government is either democracy, aristocracy or limited monarchy, "but the concept of freeman is almost universal in the society". Though the polity in the hills society was heirarchical<sup>13</sup> with manasabdar<sup>14</sup> at the apex, followed by muttadar and the rest consisting of tribal villagers, the mansabdar exercised only "theoretical supremacy over the muttadars and villagers". Scarcity of communication, nature of the region, general antipathy of the people on plains for centuries led to the perpetuation of their tribal identity and their traditional mode of life. But isolation gave way with the arrival of Britishers at the opening of 19th century "for whom such rational practices appeared totally inconsistent at it affected their forest resources", Britishers did not lose the sight of rich wealth of the forest and started interfering in the internal affairs of the tribals. Amongst these wild tribes justice is amply vindicated on such occasion by the punishment of the headman, under whose influence common people turn out to fight with the Sirkar (Government). Mass insurrections are characterized by sudden and dramatic revolts relying on a spirit of solidarity and open resistance against established authority. This is exemplified in the annals of almost every peasant revolt.

In the wake of intrusion of alien powers, the social and economic organization of the hill people of Rampa region was completely shattered. The Mansabdar, who was supposed to protect them, on the other hand was acting detrimental to their very day to day life. Thus cause caught between the colonial British government and the local leader they had eventually two alternatives, of rebellion or migration. This paper discusses which path the tribal people choose and why.

Revolt is by its very nature an open and public event, and is indeed a collective enterprise. Throughout this work the term revolt is used to describe the 1879-80 Rampa Uprising. British records refer to this uprising as a „fituri“. Fituri is a telugu word used to denote an intrigue, plot, treason and conspiracy.<sup>1</sup> Fituri means treacherous act against the State (Rajadroham) or a duel (Kalahamu) or

conspiracy (Kutra) 2. This being the dictionary meaning, not even a single act of the tribals can be attributed as Fituri.

Rampa and its adjacent hills assumed historical significance for being the site of a major tribal revolt that occurred during 1922-24 under the leadership of Alluri Seetaramaraju.<sup>3</sup> This paper is concerned with an earlier uprising that occurred in the same place and which has received little attention from scholars. These hilly tracts with thick forests inhabited by tribals witnessed a series of disturbances in the 19th century, which culminated in a major rebellion in 1879-80 highlighting the fact that the tribals were not doomed as they so often appear.<sup>4</sup>

Rampa at present in East Godavari District came under British in 1766 and formed part of the then Godavari district in Madras presidency.<sup>5</sup> Rampa and the adjoining regions of Rekatpally, Gudem, Madugula, Dustarti and Pachipenta consisted of hills, thick forests and broad valleys witnessed a violent revolt in 1879-80. Absence of roads, unhealthy tracts, oppressive temperature prevented the penetration of people from plains,<sup>6</sup> and ensured the inhabitants of these areas relative diverse tribal groups, of hill Reddies,<sup>7</sup> Koyas,<sup>8</sup> Konda Bhaktas<sup>9</sup> and Janga,<sup>10</sup> the geography and terrain provided a cohesiveness of society and economy, that can perhaps explain the united action of the tribals against intruders into their world; manifesting a deep-rooted characteristic of opposition to outsiders who were perceived as threatening their territory and customary way of life.<sup>11</sup>

Generally the form of government is either democracy, aristocracy or limited monarchy, "but the concept of freeman is almost universal in the society".<sup>12</sup> Though the polity in the hill society was heirarchical<sup>13</sup> with manasabdar<sup>14</sup> at the apex, followed by muttadar<sup>15</sup> and the rest consisting of tribal villagers, the mansabdar exercised only "theoretical supremacy over the muttadars and villagers".<sup>16</sup> Further the average muttadar, too, was not "tyrant and interfered very little with his subjects freedom of action".<sup>17</sup> The muttadari system was firmly established on the eve of British occupation. Before the advent of muttadari system there was compact and coherent social organization in Rampa country in form of village communities, "the most important territorial

unit, 18 and clan relationship, which cut across the system of social organization based on locality. The muttadari system and village communities united various village communities into compact groups.<sup>19</sup>

Simple economic system, in turn strengthened this cordial and coherent social organization. They survived on the primitive methods of agriculture, as the tangle of wooden hills offered little scope for stable forms of agriculture other than shifting (of podu) cultivation which was being practiced from time immemorial. Toddy drawn from date, palmyra and sago trees was favourite drink for Rampa tribals. From March to June, when the fields had been cleared and food stocks were low, they survived on this drinks.

Their religion and rituals too, were more an economic factor than as a spiritual or emotional factor. They "prayed for good crops, seasons and health"<sup>20</sup>, rather "than aiming at a closer union with the Gods or at transcendental bliss".<sup>21</sup>

Scarcity of communication, nature of the region, general antipathy of the people on plains for centuries led to the perpetuation of their tribal identity and their traditional mode of life. But isolation gave way with the arrival of Britishers at the opening of 19th century "for whom such rational practices appeared totally inconsistent at it affected their forest resources", <sup>22</sup> Britishers did not lose the sight of rich wealth of the forest and started interfering in the internal affairs of the tribals. In 1813 the government in coalition with the local mansabdar, increased the rate of revenue which was to be collected from tribals. Civil laws were introduced, which only brought hardships to them. Police system was introduced in 1859, which multiplied the difficulties. "They insulted and worried the people by violence, extortion, drunk less and lechery"<sup>23</sup> and "insisted on being supplied with grain, fowls and sundries at quarter rates".<sup>24</sup> Mansabdar, with the help of the police annexed a number of muttas. Added to these grievances was the imposition of toddy tax by the Government on the tribals in 1874.<sup>25</sup> Though at first tolerated it was increased year after year and by 1879, "it was 100 to 150 percent in excess to that imposed in 1878".<sup>26</sup> At the same time mansabdar announced his decision of imposition of an additional tax called Modalupannu on the existing tax.<sup>27</sup> At once, on the 13th march 1879, the Rampa rebellion began. The adjoining areas, including Rekapalli, which were suffering under similar conditions, responded and reacted to the uprisings that broke out in the Rampa region.<sup>28</sup>

The revolt was violent and in the form of a guerilla war. The revolt which started in March 1879 came to an end by October 1880 with the death or capture of more turbulent hillmen. Police stations were the main targets. The principal leaders in this uprising were Jangam Pulicanti Sambaiah, Karu Tammana Dora, Kakur Reddy, Neduluri Rami Reddy, Amal Reddy, Bhim Reddy, Chandrayya, Jaggaiah and Veerayya Dora. It become much harder for the government to control the rebellion as it spread like a wild-fire covering Rampa, Rekapalli, Gudem, Dustarti, Pachipenta and Madgole.

As the blaze continued unabated, with the flame of rebellion spreading and smoke of discontent billowing, Mr. Sullivan, the first member of the Board of Revenue, was ordered by the government of Madras to enquire into the cause and ascertain remedies to put an end to the rebellion.

"In August 1879, Manasabdar was arrested", blaming his rule as a principle cause of the disturbances. "Tax on toddy was removed" and the tribals were permitted to draw toddy for consumption for free of cost. "Muttas annexed by the Mansabdar were reinstated" to the original owners. "One consolidated tax was imposed and all other taxes were abolished". Operation of civil law was withdrawn. "In Rekapalli, all the new rules and taxes that were imposed were withdraw". <sup>29</sup> With this settlement and along with enforcement of additional forces, insurgency started receding. One by one all the leaders were either killed or captured and by October, 1880, the revolt was completely suppressed. Thus the revolt that had lasted for 20 months and spread over 5000 sq. miles, came to an end and quietrestored.

By characterizing this uprising as a „fituri“, British officials tried to pass it off as mere banditry and the rebels as criminals.<sup>30</sup> Placing this event within a broad historical perspective, one can say it was the revolt of aggrieved people, who collectively came together to fight against exploitation and fought for the restoration of their rights.

Restoration of autonomy both social and economic has been the hall mark of a large number of tribal movements. Insurgency and violence can be analysed in terms of this very nation of autonomy and independence enshrined in the lives of tribal people. The 1879-80 revolt is an example of just such a fight for restoration of autonomy.

Revolts during the 19th century in India have been classified into five types, viz., (i) restorative movements to drive out the intruders and restore earlier rulers, social relations and economic order (ii) religious millenarian movements for the liberation of a region or an ethnic group under a new form of Government (iii) Social banditry (iv) terrorist vengeance with ideals of meeting out collective justice and (v) mass insurrection for the redress of particulargrievances.<sup>31</sup>

The aims of the rebels and the result of the 1879-80 revolt clearly prove that it was a revolt of the first type cited above, i.e., a restorative revolt. Paradoxically, however, it resulted in establishing firmly British authority. The aim of the tribals was to restore their old social relations and economic order which were eroded with the encroachment of the Mansabdar and traders under the aegis of British rules and regulations. The Muttadari system was firmly established, tax on toddy and other illegal taxes were abolished, old rules were re-established in Rekapalli and the major change for the Rampa tribals was that the place of the Manasabdar was now taken by the British Government. The tribal was totally unaware of the serious implications of this change. In fact, their intention was not to drive away the British but to end exploitation. The fact that they accepted British authority in place of the Manasabdar underscores this fact. The new sanads laid down the condition that the Muttadar should conduct himself loyally and peacefully and should assist in maintaining law and order. Followers of the muttadars were not blind loyalists and the tension stemming from their own grievances was reduced only after their grievances were redressed. The replacement of mansabdar by the British administration as the overlord did not obviously impinge on the life of the tribals as long as the British administration remaining aloof from the day to day life of the tribals. Though

complete restoration of age old organization was not possible, yet the restoration that the revolt achieved was not a mean achievement.

Human sacrifices were offered during the revolt. They believed in Gods and Goddesses and other supernatural powers. They had their own religion and rituals but the 1879-80 revolt was not a millenarian movement. It did not possess the five characteristics cited by Cohn<sup>32</sup> nor did the features state by Fuchs.<sup>33</sup> When they sacrificed human beings to Goddess, they did not look forward to a reign of bliss on this earth nor did they believe that the transformation from the present evil age was to be total. Neither Tammana Dora nor Veerayya Dora was divine nor prophetic leaders who were believed to possess supernatural powers.<sup>34</sup> The victims of the sacrifices appeared to be only policemen and other plains men or the opponents of the tribals. These measures only expressed the hillman's frustration against the oppressors. It is appropriate to mention here that when the muttadars met major Morris and Mr. Johnson on 13th March 1879, they stated that "as they could not live, they might as well as kill the constables and die".<sup>35</sup> Apart from taking revenge however, the sacrifices did give additional advantage that it committed the rebels to the continuing their revolt. It gave them courage and forged solidarity and infused enthusiasm. In fact, it was a tactical strategy on part of the rebel leaders to keep up the momentum. They never felt it was impossible to continue in the old traditional way of living as long as they were not forced to accept the new principles and rules of life which a superior form of culture would impose on them.<sup>36</sup> Thus they neither longed for a paradise on earth nor were they afraid of an alien culture. The 1879-80 revolt did not attempt to adopt various cultural traits of a superior civilization and any process of assimilation that took place was only gradual and peaceful. They believed and relied on their own strength and resources and did not expect the redressal for their grievances, through world-wide catastrophic revolutions and upheavals. Their only goal was to preserve their way of life.

Social banditry is another form of expressing frustration and disgust against the enemy. These groups form only a small portion of the large number of peasants, tribesmen, disinherited landlords and disbanded soldiers who turn to part-time or full-time banditry when they are deprived of their livelihood, evicted from their homelands or squeezed in their tribal territories.<sup>37</sup> They adopt tactics of Robin hood with a genius for swift assassination. Plunder the easiest form of revolt and the most difficult for the state to counter act. This form of social banditry is easily resorted to in a mountainous region and where police are thinly employed.<sup>38</sup> Delumeau puts it saying that "banditry was often the insurrection of the country against the city" and "involvement in banditry seems to be highly correlated with moments of grain shortage".<sup>39</sup> Hobsman stresses that, only some of them probably a minority were social bandits, i.e., "engaged in class struggle and concurred with the interests of the poor from whom they sought protection and with whom they shared their loot."<sup>40</sup> He says that banditry is a pre-political phenomenon and defines pre-political people as those who have not yet found, or have only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspiration about the world. George Rude counters this theory to the effect that

many militant undertakings quickly developed the nucleus of a local organization.<sup>41</sup> Wallerstein in turn has argued that it was the consequence of the inadequate growth of state authority.<sup>42</sup> Many of the characteristics cited above did appear in the 1879- 80 revolt. But these features appeared only during the last days of the revolt. After most of the region returned to normalcy few principal leaders with a small contingent of followers did indulge in plunder of grain from other villages for survival. However, at the end of the revolt, the nature of this banditry changed with the emergency of few notorious characters after the death or capture of principal leaders and now the villages themselves turned against such persons and handed over to the authorities.<sup>43</sup>

Imposition of toddy tax preceded by a series of oppressive assessments and encroachments affected the tribals and there was no need for only a few persons to indulge in banditry for the cause of the other. The absence of effective police and military forces and the general grievances that affected all the tribals explains the mass popular participation. It was only after Mr. Sullivan settled the grievances and large contingents of army were deployed did the elements of banditry creep into the event. When they attacked police stations, it was for arms and ammunition. It was a clear-cut strategy to express their frustration and anger and they had definite goals. Non-payment of taxes, stopping of toddy production, assembling and attacking in hundreds and the revolt spreading over a vast stretch of land cannot be characterized merely as social banditry. And yet, the British Government wrote off the 1879- 80 revolt as a crime<sup>44</sup> and decoity<sup>45</sup> seldom understanding it as a fight for social and economic justice.<sup>46</sup>

In this restorative movement killing or terrorizing in pursuit of goals was a general feature.<sup>47</sup> "Peasant terrorism has been a common phenomenon throughout the history of peasant movements in India".<sup>48</sup> The simplest form of revolt, is that, in which people rise up and kill or maim the oppressor. They engage in endemic assassination of key elements or burn buildings and other property. Sometimes, the individual kills and risks his life for his community in vengeance and with a sense of group pride and natural justice. In Rampa too, there were killings and burnings by the tribals either individually or collectively. The British correctly estimated the element of collective justice, for they levied heavy fines on then tire village of those who died fighting after they had assassinated the government servant, <sup>49</sup> and almost all the rebel leaders carried huge fines on their heads.

Amongs these wild tribes justice is amply vindicated on such occasion by the punishment of the headman, under whose influence common people turn out to fight with the Sirkar (Government).<sup>50</sup> This was extensively the understated policy of the 1879-80 revolt. There were a number of killings both by groups and individuals to strike terror in the hearts of their enemies. The rebels burnt villages which supported the police, attacked police stations which were looked upon as prime sources of exploitation. These attacks also served as instruments for mobilization, which inspired the tribals.<sup>51</sup> The Government, which accused the insurgents of committing excesses tried to cover-up the havoc caused by the police and army on the rebels, by trotting out the excuse of maintaining law and order. In its

efforts to establish its political control and enhance new forms of economic exploitation, the Government resorted to violence as a principal means to control and subjugate the discontented tribals.<sup>52</sup> They not only levied heavy fines, but reduced the enemy villages into ashes, drove away the tribal cattle and seized their women. There were huge casualties on the rebel side. Thus, the terrorist element was conspicuous by its presence throughout the revolt.

Mass insurrections are characterized by sudden and dramatic revolts relying on a spirit of solidarity and open resistance against established authority. This is exemplified in the annals of almost every peasant revolt. The 1879-80 revolt was indeed a mass insurrection against Mansabdar, police and military, a reactive violence, the result of continued state interference against the interests of the tribals.

## References

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3. Fituri = Treacherous act against the State (Rajadroham), duel (Kalahamu), Conspiracy(Kutra)
4. For a detailed study read, J. Mangamma, AlluriSitaramaraju,A.P. State Archives, Hyderabad, 1983.
5. David Arnold, Gramsci and peasant subalternity inIndia, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, No.4, July, 1984.
6. DetailedmentionofRampaimadeinNo.755,3rdApril,1879,Judicial Department Proceedings (Hereafter Jdl.)
7. From the earliest times upto the present day the country has retained a most unavailable reputation for its unhealthiness– F.R. Hemingway, *Gazetteer of the Godavari District*, Vol.I, Madras, 1915, p.148.
8. The hill Reddis in these parts are by no means the only population known as Reddies. For Reddies also the name of a section of cultivators of the Telugu country, below the Ghats. The hill Reddies form a strictly endogamous group and a distinct cultural unit far from low land Reddies, but the fact that they are called as hill Reddies however suggests that the low land culture seems to have gradually filtered into theinterior.
9. Koyas, the southern most branch of the Gondi race, surrounded Reddies on all sides in Rampa and Rekapalli except in extreme north. Their origin included the Satpura PlateauandsectionofNagpurplainsandNerhuddavalley,R.V. Russel and R.B., Hiralal, *Tribes and castes of the central provinces of India*. Vol.III. Cosmo publications, Delhi, 1975, p.41
10. Konda Begtalas consisted a separate tribe in the Gudem hills. It appears that the group speak Telugu and belong to freshwater fishermen and cultivators, Edgar Thurston, *Castes and tribes of South India*, vol. I, Madras, 1909, pp.128-130.
11. Jangams constitute a set of worshippers in Rampa region, for detailed study read, T.V. Russel and R.B. Hiralal, *Op.cit.*, pp. 222-224.Traditionally, three factors linked these hill-communities together into a single albeit loosely articulated peasant society – a largely self-sufficient economy basedon shifting cultivation, shared religious belief and the over reaching muttadari system, David Arnold, „The rebellions Hillmen : The Gudem Rampa risings 1839-1924“, in Ranagit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies*, vol.I, OUP, Delhi, 1982,p.95.
12. Jayanta Bhusan Bhattacharjee, *Indian History congree Proceedings*, Aligarh, 1975,p.401.
13. Rampa area was divided in 24 muttas or territorial units, Rampa being the headquarters of entireregion.
14. The earliest records describe the Rampa Mansabdar as independent ruler and though he was himself not a Reddi or Koya, the hereditary chieftain or muttadars recognized him as their overlord. The term Mansabdar was a late arrival which was familiar withMughals.
15. Muttadar is the chief of muttal, which in turn is a union of villages of a sub-division of a country, C.P. Brown dictionary, dialects, p.95, cited in J. Mangamma, Alluri Seetharamaraju, *Op.cit*,p.5.
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23. No. 111-C, No. 109, 16th Jan, 1880, JDL.
24. Minute by Hon. D.F. Carmichael, Nov, 1st 1880, p.24
25. No. 2115, 8th August, 1875, Board of RevenueProceedings,
26. No.661, 25th March, 1879, JDL.
27. Modulupannu was a farm rent levied on trees in certain districts irrespective of the Abkari arrangements made by the Government, but which was admittedly contrary to customs inRampa.
28. N.N. Vyas, R.S. Mann, *Indian Tribes in Transition*, Rawat Pub. Jaipur, 1980,p.21.
29. For a complete and detailed study of the settlement, read Sullivan"s report, No.109, 16thJan, 1880,Jdl.
30. Suranjan Chatterjee. „New Reflections of the Sanyasi, Fakir and Peasants war“, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.XIX,

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31. Kathleen Gough, „Peasant resistance and revolt in South India“, in A.R. Desai (ed), Peasant Struggles in India, OUP, Bombay, 1979,pp.719-742.
  32. Cohn cites five characteristics : Such movements are collective, they look forward to a reign of bliss on this earth, the transformation from the present evil age is to be total, it is imminent, its followers waiting in tense expectation of the millenniumanditwillcomeaboutbysuper-naturalmeans.
  33. A.R. Desai (ed), Op. cit, p.99.
  34. Fuchs notes 14 characteristics of the movements he calls messianic. They are i) intense dissatisfaction with socio-economic conditions, ii) emotional unrest with historical symptoms, iii) a charismatic leader, iv) the leader’s demand for implicit faith and obedience, v) his demand for a radical change of life and for destruction of property, vi) rejection of established authority and a call for rebellion, vii) threat of severe punishment of traitors and opponents, viii) the remembrance of a „golden Age“ at the beginning of mankind’s career, ix) revivalism or renewed interest in traditional religion, x) „Nativism“ i.e., the attempt of a backward people to restore selected parts of its pristine culture and to reject certain alien elements adopted from foreign cultures, xi) „vitalism“, i.e., the desire of the member in the movement for alien goods, especially spiritual ones, from heaven though the indiscriminate adoption of various cultural traits of a superior civilization by a backwardpeople,
    - i. „Eschatologims“, i.e., the expectation of a world renewal through world-wide catastrophic revolution andupehavaals,
    - ii. „Millenarianism“ or „Chilliasm“ i.e., the hope or expectation of a paradise on earth for a thousand years or some such long periods of time. Stephen Fuchs, Rebellious Prophets – A study of messianic movements in Indian Religions, Asian Publishing House, Bombay, 1965,pp.1-2.
  35. A.R. Desai (ed), Op.cit,p.100
  36. 36. No. 311 25th March, 1879, Jdl,
  37. Stephen fuchs, Op.cit,p.290
  38. A.R. Desai (ed), Op.cit,p.104
  39. Immanuel Wallerstein, Modern World System, Vol.I, Academic Press, New York, 1980,p.141.
  40. 40. Ibid, P.143.
  41. A.R. Deasi (ed) Op.cit,p.106.
  42. Immanuel Wallerstein, Oop. Cit,p.143.
  43. Ranjit Guha, Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India, OUP, Bombay, 1983,pp.5-6.
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    - a. The increasing appropriation by the State was legitimized by law, the rights of the villagers, to the extent that they were considered a „burden“ and when denied they were defined as „crime“. Neeladri Bhattacharya, „Colonial State and Agrarian Society“. in S. Bhattacharya and Romila Thappar (ed), Situating Indian History of Sarvepalli Gopal, OUP, Delhi, 1986,pp.1342.
    - b. „To the colonial regime crime and politics were almost inseparable, serious crime was an implicit defiance of State authority and a possible resistance was either a „crime“ or the likely occasion for it“. David Arnold, police power and colonial rule, Madras, 1859 – 1947, OUP, Delhi, 1986, P.3
  45. Ranajit Guha states that a reference to any „dacoity village“ could indicate the entire population of a village united in resistance to the armed forces of the State. „Ranajit Guha, op.cit p.16.
  46. Ibid, 1st flap.
  47. The term „terrorism, is not used in the sense whi9ch is being used in the present context, where even great nations are not able to reach to an understanding regarding the definition of the term. This „word“ in this thesis is used to mean that : a cause of intense fear, as, to be a terror to evil doers, intense fear causing for the purpose of coercing or subduing any programme.
  48. Bholanath Bandyopadhyay, „A note on peasant movements in India 1920-1950“, social perspective, vol.13, No.1-2, Jan-sept, 1985,p.62.
  49. A.R. Desai, op.cit,p.108.
  50. No. 544 17th March, 1879, Jdl, Minute by D.F. Carmichael, 16th March, 1879,
  51. SumantaBannerjee,„peasantconsciousness“EPW,votl.XIX, No.24 and 25, June 16-23, 1984,p.943.
  52. N.N. Vyas, R.S. Mann, Indian Tribes in Transition, Rawat Pub.Jaipur,1980,p.67.