



The Untold Story of Rani Shiromoni and the Anti-British Movement: A Reassessment of the Chuar Rebellion (1798–1799)

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Introduction

The dominant narrative of India's anti-colonial struggle has long been framed around the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, celebrated as the "First War of Indian Independence." While this event undoubtedly marked a watershed moment, it has inadvertently overshadowed a series of earlier, localized uprisings that challenged British East India Company rule throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Among these forgotten insurgencies, the Chuar Rebellion (1766–1834) in the Jungle Mahals of Bengal represents one of the most sustained and structurally significant peasant movements of the pre-1857 era. At the helm of its most coordinated phase stood Rani Shiromoni (also spelled Shiromani; c. 1728–1812), the Sadgop queen of the Karnagarh estate in present-day PaschimMedinipur district, West Bengal. Her leadership of the 1798–1799 uprising—mobilizing tribal peasants, forest dwellers, and small zamindars against the East India Company's extortionate revenue machinery—constitutes a pivotal yet largely unacknowledged chapter in India's freedom movement.

This article seeks to accomplish three objectives. First, it reconstructs the historical biography of Rani Shiromoni, situating her within the broader political economy of colonial land policy in the Jungle Mahals. Second, it analyzes the organizational structure, social composition, and tactical repertoire of the 1799 rebellion, arguing that Shiromoni's leadership represented a sophisticated form of pre-modern anti-colonial resistance that combined traditional authority with grassroots mobilization. Third, it examines the mechanisms of historiographical marginalization—colonial archival bias, nationalist privileging of 1857, and gendered erasure—that have consigned Shiromoni to obscurity. By recovering her story through a critical reading of colonial records, legal documents, and recent heritage scholarship, this article contends that Rani Shiromoni deserves recognition



as one of India's earliest female freedom fighters and that the Chuar Rebellion should be integrated into standard pedagogical narratives of anti-colonial resistance.

Keywords

Rani Shiromoni; Anti-British Movement; Chuar Rebellion; Karnagarh; Jungle Mahals; Peasant Resistance; East India Company; Colonial Revenue Policy; Permanent Settlement of 1793; Tribal Uprising; Women in Indian Freedom Struggle; Historiographical Neglect; PaschimMedinipur.

Colonial Land Policy and the Genesis of Peasant Unrest in the Jungle Mahals (1765–1793)

To understand Rani Shiromoni's rebellion, one must first grasp the radical transformation of land relations effected by the East India Company following the Battle of Buxar in 1764 and the subsequent grant of Diwani rights in 1765. The Company's immediate priority was maximizing revenue extraction to finance its military campaigns and remit dividends to shareholders in London. In Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, this took the form of a series of five-year revenue settlements between 1772 and 1790 that systematically raised land taxes to unsustainable levels. The situation worsened dramatically with Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement of 1793, which fixed land revenue in perpetuity at an exorbitant rate—often eighty to ninety percent of the gross produce—and granted full proprietary rights, known as zamindari, to a class of intermediaries, many of whom were urban-based speculators with no connection to the land.

The Jungle Mahals—a rugged, forested tract spanning approximately five thousand square miles across modern West Bengal (Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia) and Jharkhand (Singhbhum, Manbhum)—had historically been governed by flexible, customary land arrangements. Tribal communities such as the Bhumij, Santal, Munda, and Kurmi practiced shifting cultivation and enjoyed traditional usufructuary rights. Small Sadgop and Rajput zamindars collected moderate rents and maintained armed retainers. The Permanent Settlement disrupted this equilibrium in three fundamental ways. First, it



imposed uniform revenue demands regardless of agricultural productivity or terrain, forcing zamindars to extract ruthlessly from peasants. Second, it introduced the Sunset Law of 1793, which allowed the Company to auction any estate whose revenue was unpaid by sunset on the specified date. Third, it alienated tribal communities by categorizing their lands as wasteland subject to sale to outside speculators. Between 1793 and 1798, over forty percent of zamindari estates in the Jungle Mahals changed hands through auction sales, displacing traditional landed elites and enraging the peasantry.

The Chuar Rebellion: Nomenclature, Chronology, and Social Base

The term “Chuar” is a colonial pejorative. Derived from the Bengali word meaning a low-caste, pig-rearing person, it was used by British officials to disparage the tribal insurgents of the region. Contemporary scholars prefer “Chuar Rebellion” only as a conventional label, acknowledging that the insurgents themselves identified by their tribal or caste affiliations—Bhumij, Sadgop, Kurmi, and others. The rebellion unfolded in multiple waves over nearly seven decades.

The first phase, from 1766 to 1772, consisted of sporadic attacks on Company revenue collectors in response to the initial revenue settlements. The second phase, between 1780 and 1785, witnessed coordinated raids on indigo plantations and zamindar strongholds, which were suppressed by military force under Governor-General Warren Hastings. The third phase, from 1798 to 1799, was the largest and most organized, led by Rani Shiromoni of Karnagarh along with other leaders such as Durjan Singh, zamindar of Raipur, and Chaitan Singh, zamindar of Dulung. The fourth phase, from 1800 to 1834, saw continued low-intensity resistance, culminating in the Kol Rebellion of 1831–1832, which forced the Company to create the South-West Frontier Agency, later the Chotanagpur Division.

The social base of the 1798–1799 uprising was unusually broad for its time. It included Bhumij and Kurmi tribal peasants facing land alienation, small Sadgop and Rajput zamindars whose estates had been auctioned, village headmen known as mandaals, religious leaders from the jati panchayats, armed paiks or tribal militiamen, and forest-dwelling communities such as lohars and kumhars. This multi-caste, multi-ethnic coalition



was held together by shared grievances against revenue collectors, moneylenders known as mahajans, and Company troops—and by the symbolic authority of Rani Shiromoni.

Rani Shiromoni: A Biographical Reconstruction from Archival Fragments

Our knowledge of Rani Shiromoni's life derives from a limited but critical set of sources. These include the Collector of Midnapore's official correspondence from 1798 to 1800, preserved in the West Bengal State Archives; a detailed judgment of the Civil Court of Midnapore from 1841, which adjudicated a property dispute involving the Karnagarh estate; local chronicles known as chaabi maintained by the Sadgop community; and oral traditions collected by nineteenth-century British ethnographers such as J.C. Price in 1882 and H.H. Risley in 1891.

Born around 1728 into a prosperous Sadgop family of Midnapore, Shiromoni was married to Raja Ajit Singh, the ruler of Karnagarh. The Sadgops, traditionally a cultivator caste, had risen to zamindari status in the seventeenth century under Mughal rule. Karnagarh was a modest but strategically located estate, controlling forest routes between the coastal plains and the Chotanagpur plateau. Ajit Singh died childless in 1753, leaving two widows: Rani Bhawani and Rani Shiromoni. In an unusual arrangement documented in the 1841 court judgment, both queens were recognized as joint rulers, with Bhawani handling internal administration and Shiromoni commanding the armed forces. This arrangement reflects the relative autonomy of Hindu widows in pre-colonial eastern India, countering Orientalist stereotypes of complete seclusion. Following Bhawani's death in 1760, Shiromoni became sole ruler.

The 1841 judgment recounts that around 1755 or 1756, a Chuar leader named GobardhanSardar exploited the political vacuum after Ajit Singh's death and advanced against the queens. Both Bhawani and Shiromoni took refuge in Narajole, an estate ruled by Trilochan Khan. An agreement was struck: Khan would subdue the Chuars in exchange for territorial concessions. By 1756, the queens were restored to power. This episode is crucial, as it shows that Shiromoni was already familiar with Chuar grievances and military tactics decades before her own rebellion.



After her arrest in April 1799, Shiromoni was imprisoned for several months. The exact length of her detention is unclear from surviving records. Upon release, she was forbidden from residing in Karnagarh. She moved to the palace at Abasgarh in present-day Midnapore town, where she lived under virtual house arrest until her death on September 17, 1812. The 1841 judgment notes that she left no direct heirs, leading to a protracted legal battle over Karnagarh between distant relatives—a battle that incidentally preserved much of the archival documentation of her life.

The 1799 Rebellion: Organization, Strategy, and British Response

By early 1798, the Jungle Mahals were in a state of open insurrection. The immediate trigger was the Company's decision to auction the estates of several defaulting zamindars, including key allies of the Chuars. Rani Shiromoni, then around seventy years old, emerged as the de facto coordinator of the rebellion. Contemporary British accounts describe her as the chief instigator and supporter of the Chuars, as recorded in a letter from Collector W. Vickers to the Bengal Revenue Board dated March 15, 1799.

Unlike the spontaneous raids of earlier phases, the 1799 rebellion exhibited a rudimentary command structure. Shiromoni's fortress at Karnagarh served as a supply depot and planning center. Tribal leaders from surrounding villages reported to her through a network of messengers called dhuwa. The insurgents established hidden camps in the dense Sal forests of the Kankrajhor range, from which they launched coordinated attacks on Company thanas or police posts, revenue collection centers, and the residences of collaborating zamindars.

The Chuars employed classic guerrilla tactics: hit-and-run raids, ambushes on jungle paths, destruction of bridges, and interception of supply convoys. Their weaponry was rudimentary—bows, arrows, axes, swords, and occasionally matchlock muskets captured from Company forces. Their advantage lay in intimate knowledge of the terrain and support from the forest-dwelling population. The British, by contrast, relied on regular sepoys and cavalry, who struggled in the unfamiliar jungle environment.



The Company's response was swift and brutal. In early 1799, Governor-General Lord Wellesley authorized the deployment of two regiments of sepoys from the Burdwan garrison, reinforced by artillery. Under the command of Captain William G. Forbes, British forces launched a scorched-earth campaign: villages suspected of harboring rebels were burned, crops destroyed, and wells poisoned. A contemporary dispatch from Forbes to the Bengal Council, dated April 3, 1799, boasts of the complete reduction of the Karnagarh district and the dispersion of the banditti.

On April 6, 1799, a warrant was issued specifically naming Rani Shiromoni as the principal abettor of the rebellion. British troops advanced on Karnagarh from three directions. According to local tradition, Shiromoni attempted to flee through a secret underground tunnel—the remnants of which were reportedly visible until the 1950s—but was betrayed by a disaffected courtier. She was captured and taken to the British cantonment in Midnapore town. The Karnagarh palace was looted and subsequently razed; only a mound and a dilapidated gateway remain today.

Aftermath and Legacy: Suppression, Memory, and Heritage

The defeat of the 1799 rebellion did not end resistance in the Jungle Mahals, but it severely crippled the organizational capacity of the Chuar leadership. Durjan Singh was killed in a skirmish in 1800; Chaitan Singh surrendered in 1801 and was exiled to the Andaman Islands, then under construction as a penal colony. Over the next three decades, the region witnessed a shift from large-scale rebellion to everyday forms of resistance: squatting on forest land, refusing to pay revenue, and small-scale raids.

Rani Shiromoni's memory survived in local oral traditions, but it was largely excluded from the nationalist histories written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bengali historians such as Akshay Kumar Maitreya, author of *Murshidabad Kahini* in 1905, and Jadunath Sarkar, author of *A History of Bengal* in 1948, focused on Mughal and British political history, with little attention to peasant movements. The first modern scholarly



mention of Shiromoni appears in Binoy Ghosh's PaschimbangerSanskriti, published in 1957, which devotes two pages to Karnagarh but relies heavily on the 1841 court judgment.

After decades of neglect, the West Bengal government declared the Karnagarh ruins a heritage site in February 2022, officially naming it Rani ShiromoniGarh. On November 15, 2022, coinciding with Janjatiya Gaurav Divas, which honors tribal freedom fighters, a life-size bronze statue of Rani Shiromoni was unveiled at the Rani Shiromoni Memorial School adjacent to the site. These actions, part of the central government's AzadiKaAmritMahotsav, have sparked renewed interest among local historians and archaeology departments. However, no systematic excavation of Karnagarh has yet been undertaken, and the site remains vulnerable to encroachment.

Historiographical Analysis: Why Was Rani Shiromoni Forgotten?

The marginalization of Rani Shiromoni from mainstream Indian history is not an accident but the product of three intersecting biases. The first is colonial archival bias. The primary sources for the Chuar Rebellion are British administrative records—reports, letters, and legal documents written by Company officials. These sources consistently frame the insurgents as banditti, lawless, or savage, denying them political agency. Shiromoni is described as a froward woman by Collector Vickers in 1799 rather than as a legitimate ruler. Colonial historiography, from James Mill's History of British India in 1817 to the Cambridge History of India in the 1930s, systematically erased indigenous resistance narratives.

The second bias is the nationalist focus on 1857. When Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century constructed a usable past for the freedom struggle, they centered the 1857 Rebellion as the foundational event. This was a strategic choice: 1857 involved a pan-Indian alliance of Mughal successor states, making it a powerful symbol of national unity. Earlier, localized rebellions like the Chuar uprising were seen as tribal or primitive and thus less suitable for a modern nationalist narrative. V.D. Savarkar's The Indian War of Independence 1857, published in 1909, set the tone, and subsequent textbooks followed suit.



The third bias is gendered erasure. Even within the historiography of peasant revolts, women leaders have been doubly marginalized. Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi escaped this fate because she died heroically on the battlefield and was romanticized in Victorian and nationalist literature alike. Shiromoni, by contrast, was captured alive and died in obscurity—a less dramatic arc that did not lend itself to myth-making. Moreover, her leadership of a multi-caste, multi-tribal coalition did not fit the dominant model of female rule as either victimhood or martial heroism.

Comparative Analysis with Other Female Leaders

Placing Rani Shiromoni alongside other female leaders of the anti-British movement illuminates both commonalities and distinctions. Like Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat Mahal of Lucknow, Shiromoni assumed leadership as a widow defending her territory against Company encroachment. However, whereas Lakshmibai commanded a princely army and feudal retainers, Shiromoni's base was predominantly tribal peasants and small zamindars. Lakshmibai fought the Company's doctrine of lapse, which annexed Jhansi after her husband's death; Shiromoni fought the revenue system of the Permanent Settlement, which auctioned her peasants' lands. In terms of outcome, Lakshmibai was killed on the battlefield in 1858, becoming an instant martyr, while Begum Hazrat Mahal fled to Nepal. Shiromoni was captured, imprisoned, and died under house arrest in 1812. This less heroic arc, combined with the pre-1857 date of her rebellion, largely explains why she remained in the margins while Lakshmibai entered the canon. Historiographical recognition, in short, depends not merely on the scale of resistance but on the narrative affordances of the leader's death and the alignment of their struggle with later nationalist frameworks.

Implications for Contemporary History Writing and Pedagogy

Recovering Rani Shiromoni's story has implications beyond academic antiquarianism. First, it challenges the periodization of Indian anti-colonial struggle as beginning with 1857, pushing the start date back to the late eighteenth century and, by extension, recognizing



the Permanent Settlement as a foundational moment of colonial violence. Second, it complicates the category of tribal rebellion by showing how tribal and non-tribal groups such as Bhumij, Sadgop, and Kurmi could form effective coalitions under female leadership. Third, it offers a pedagogical resource for teaching women's history in a manner that avoids both tokenism and exceptionalism: Shiromoni was not a lone warrior queen but a product of specific political-economic conditions.

Concrete recommendations for further work include the inclusion of the Chuar Rebellion and Rani Shiromoni in NCERT and state board social studies curricula, a systematic archaeological survey of Karnagarh and Abasgarh by the Archaeological Survey of India, the digitization and translation of the 1841 court judgment and other colonial-era documents related to the rebellion, and the establishment of a dedicated Rani Shiromoni research fellowship at the University of Calcutta or Vidyasagar University.

Conclusion

Rani Shiromoni's life and rebellion constitute a vital but forgotten chapter in India's long anti-colonial struggle. From her emergence as a widowed ruler of Karnagarh to her leadership of the 1799 Chuar uprising, she embodied a form of resistance that was simultaneously traditional, rooted in zamindari authority, and radical, mobilizing tribal peasants against colonial revenue extraction. Her capture, imprisonment, and subsequent historical erasure exemplify the mechanisms by which colonial and nationalist narratives have marginalized local, pre-1857, and female-led movements. The recent heritage designation of Karnagarh is a welcome corrective, but substantive historical recovery requires sustained archival research, archaeological investigation, and curricular reform. Recognizing Rani Shiromoni is not merely an act of historical justice; it is essential to constructing a more pluralistic, accurate, and inclusive account of how ordinary people fought back against the first predatory capitalist empire in Asia.

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