

Tatya Topé's **OPERATION RED LOTUS**



The Topé family presents
the story of Tatya and the
Anglo-Indian War of 1857

Parag Topé

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JAKHLON JUGGERNAUT

Tatya's marches, alternating between lightning speeds and slow movements had thrown the English forces off their rhythm. With Tatya's arrival, Central India had flared up again and local forces were keen on restoring Indian rule. Over the next few weeks, Tatya's mission would be to wrest back towns under English control and hand them to Indian leaders. The towns were along the Malwa-Bundelkhand border, roughly on either side of the Betwa river and had fallen in English hands after the Jhansi genocide.

The English initially celebrated their triumphs at Rajgarh and Biaora. The premature celebrations were aborted, as reality dawned on the English. A telegram from the commissioner of Jabalpur, on 25 September reported:

Information has been received by me of Tantia Topee being defeated at Beora by General Michel on the 15th instant, but I have since learned (sic) that Tantia's troops having reinforced Adil Mohamed Khan, they (sic), have retaken Seronge and again got some 16 pieces of Artillery.

...it is more than probable that this indefatigable rebel will again endeavour to get south and may succeed in doing so...⁷⁰

After the 'action' at Rajgarh and Biaora, Tatya marched to Sironj. Prior to arriving at Sironj, Man Singh's men and possibly Man Singh himself joined Tatya Tope.⁷¹ It is possible that he could have joined Tatya either prior to the action at Biaora or shortly afterwards.

By the end of September, Tatya's position was strong as he set out to restore Indian rule in eastern Malwa. Tatya was marching with supplementary forces of Man Singh and Adil Muhammed, who would hold out these towns after Tatya was finished taking them. Tatya at this time was practically an unstoppable force. Meanwhile, the English were creating a vast cordon of forces to narrow down on Tatya and to put an end to his campaign.

Roberts was on the west of him; Napier, Smith, and Robertson were on his north; Michel, Hope, and Lockhart, on the south; and Whitlock on the east. Active he assuredly had been; for since the fall of Gwalior he and his mutineers and budmashes had traversed a vast area of the

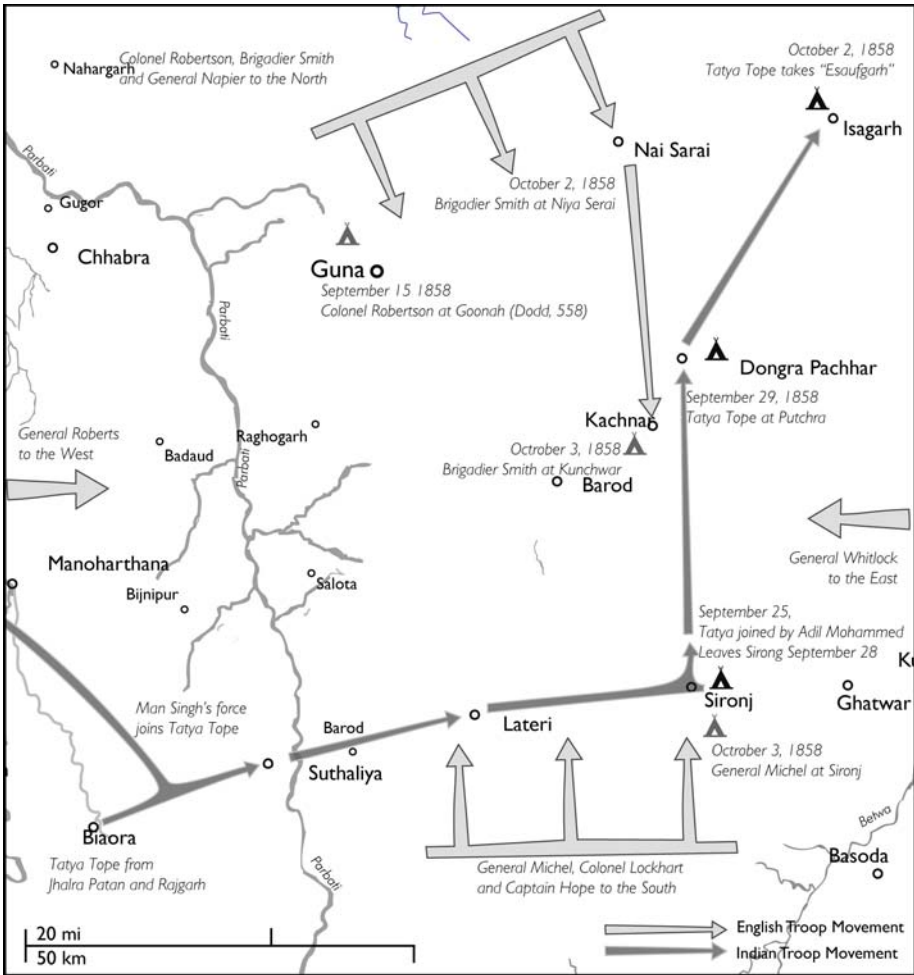


Figure 43: Uncordonable Taty
15 September–2 October 1858

Rajpoot and Mahratta territories; but he was now within the limits of a cordon, from which there was little chance of his ultimate escape.⁷²

On 28 September, Taty left Sironj and headed towards Isagarh to the north.⁷³ On 2 October, Isagarh was in Indian hands. Reinforced by Adil Mohammed and Man Singh of Narwar's troops, Taty's army, according to English estimates had swollen to 15,000.⁷⁴ With this army, over the next two weeks, Taty took control of all the towns on both sides of the Betwa, from Isagarh to Lalitpur.



Figure 44: Tatya's Jakhlon Juggernaut: Part 1
3-19 October 1858

Meanwhile, the English forces were reassessing their next move. Colonel Robertson was at Guna,⁷⁵ General Michel had moved towards Sagar after the action at Rajgarh/Biaora had now moved upon Sironj after Tatya left. Brigadier Smith was very close to Isagarh, at Nai Sarai, when Tatya captured it, yet he did not move upon Isagarh while Tatya was there!⁷⁶

Isagarh was under Jiyaji Rao's Shinde's army. The 'Scindia's Army' was different from the Gwalior Contingent, most of which was fighting alongside Tatya. Some of them had dispersed after Gwalior. Jiyaji Rao's army was

supposedly 'loyal' to the English, yet when Taty Tope reach Isagarh, instead of attacking him they 'fraternised with Taty Tope'.⁷⁷

Although 'cordoned' by the half dozen approaching English columns by early October 1858, Taty was still in a strong position.

Maintaining a very strong army, possibly over 15,000, meant higher funding. At this time, all the 'thanas' and the treasuries in these areas were full. Taty split his forces to raid these English treasuries to keep up with the 'burn rate' for his army.⁷⁸ At this time, Taty Tope and Rao Saheb decided to split their forces as they attempted to re-establish Indian rule in this important area at the border of Malwa and Bundelkhand.⁷⁹

Taty split his army into three columns. Each of them taking circuitous routes to eventually meet south of Lalitpur. He sent one cavalry regiment to raid the *thana* where the English administrator maintained the treasury, and, establish Indian control. Taty himself took the longer route via Siras Ghat and Tal Behat and reached Lalitpur by 16 October.⁸⁰ Another column under Rao Saheb or the Nawab of Banda went east to Chanderi, where they were apparently 'repelled' by the 'Scindiah troops'.⁸¹

Rao Saheb was primarily responsible for the safekeeping of the 'mobile treasury'. Rao Saheb, with the treasure, went in the direction of Chanderi.⁸² If 'Scindiah' forces had not responded positively to messages sent earlier, would Rao Saheb, with a diminished force, have actually taken the risk to march into hostile territory with the entire treasury? Seems very unlikely.

Taty marched into Lalitpur without any resistance. The English had abandoned it on the news of Taty's arrival in the vicinity. After marching into Lalitpur, Taty probably sent a detachment to the east towards Tikamgarh. This detachment was probably the one that came across General Michel's army on 19 October 1858. Michel's army was marching around in the area 'claiming victories' that in no way impeded the free movement of Indian troops in the area.

Despite being 'cordoned' by the approaching English columns, none of the English forces seemed eager to take Taty on. In the next three weeks, there were two skirmishes with General Michel. One of these skirmishes has been labelled as a major victory by Michel himself, which was simply repeated and exaggerated by historians without checking facts.

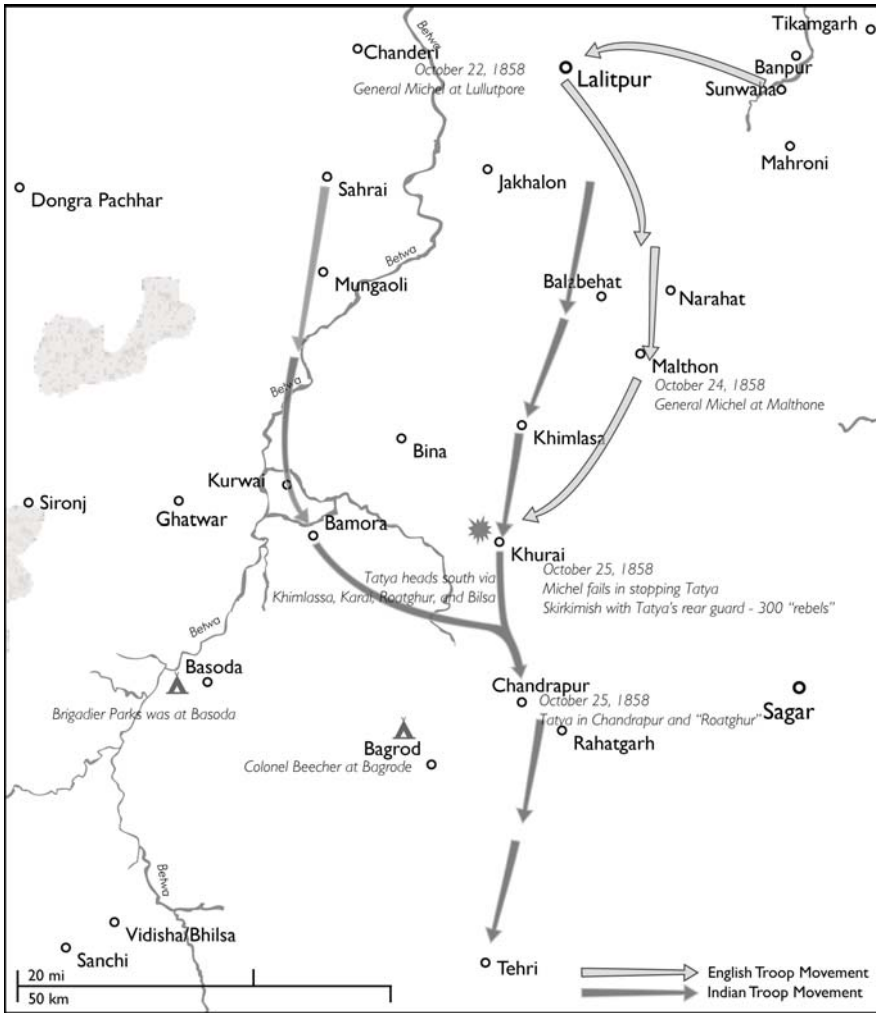


Figure 45-1 Tatya's Jakhlon Juggernaut: Part 2
19–26 October 1858

One of the most severe defeats he (Tatya Tope) received was at Sindwah, on the 19th of October, at the hands of General Michel; another, on the 25th, near Multhone, from the same active general.⁸³

One of Tatya's alleged 'severe' defeats of 25 October was near Khurai, as his rear guard was marching south. One telegraphic message reports this as

Michel having intercepted the march of the Rao's army of about 2,000'.⁸⁴ Of Taty's total army, this had to be only one column under Rao, which Michel attacked. Was it really 2,000 strong? Another report refers to this as him having 'succeeded in intercepting about 300 of the rebels....'⁸⁵

Regardless of whether Michel forced a 'severe' defeat on a small column of Taty's army, or invented a story to avoid further embarrassment; at the end of this encounter, Taty and his army continued to march down south.⁸⁶

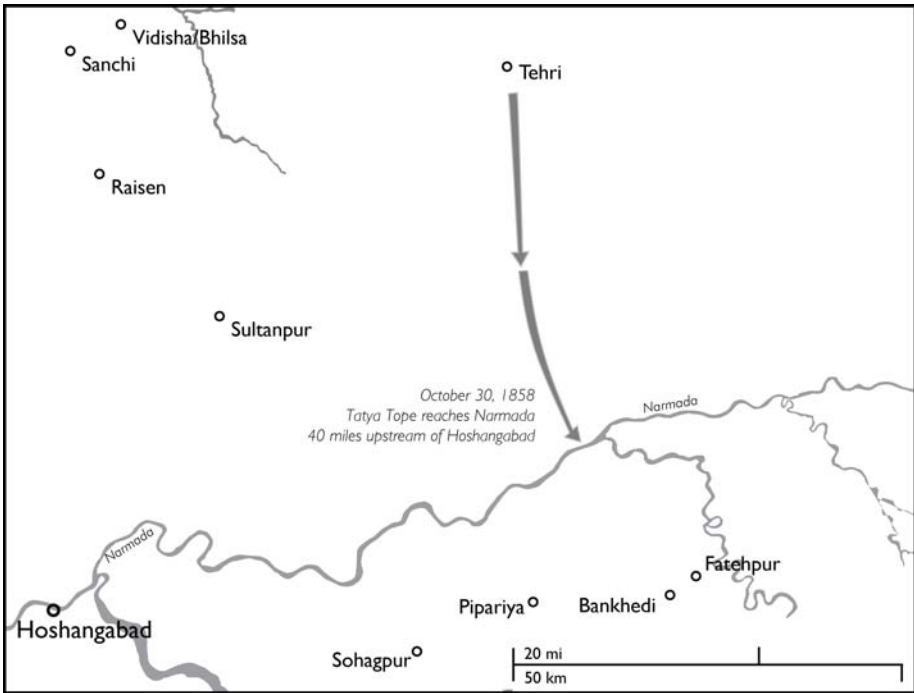
Michel's presence on banks the Betwa, in the jungles of Jakhlon was irrelevant. Brigadier Parke was right at Basoda, watching helplessly, as Taty's army marched south. Colonel Beecher was at Bagrod, probably hiding during this period. Colonel Liddel's presence to 'guard' Taty's movement had failed.⁸⁷ Taty, at this time was too strong to be dared by the English. All other English columns that were considering 'cording' Taty in this area, despite tall claims, had failed miserably.

After completely disrupting English command over Malwa, and despite all odds, Taty had managed to break off and head straight down to Narmada, with his army of about 4,000 to 6,000, including Adil Mohammed.⁸⁸ The army of Man Singh stayed back in Malwa to hold on to the newly liberated towns. Taty's first 'circular' march from Gwalior to the west in Rajputana, and back to the east had rejuvenated the spirit of freedom. Taty's seemingly circuitous marches, designed with a purpose were thinning the English forces as Taty ignited new insurrections wherever he marched. While the Christian missionaries celebrated their success in the suppression of 'the procession of the car of Juggernaut (Jagannath), which took place annually at Pooree, in Orissa',⁸⁹ Michel was unable to stop Taty's juggernaut.

General Michel's inability to rein Taty's movement had a significant impact on the war.

At no time since Taty's departure from Gwalior, 'or indeed since the fall of Delhi, had the Bombay and Madras Governments felt so seriously alarmed as they did on the receipt of the intelligence that he had got to the south of all the columns in Malwa, and would cross the Narbudda in a few days.'⁹⁰

Taty crossed the Narmada on 31 October 1858, about forty miles upstream of Hoshangabad and camped in a village called Fatehpur.



*Figure 46: Unstoppable Tatya
27 and 30 October 1858*

It was not just the physical act of crossing the Narmada that demonstrated the magnitude of the action. It was a metaphorical statement on the English inability to decisively win the war. It was evident that the soldiers and civilians were determined to support Tatya despite the genocide and terror they had been through.

In the process of hiding their inability to stop Tatya, the English leadership at Calcutta recognised something significant. As soon as the news of Michel's inability to rein in Tatya reached Calcutta by the middle of October, an important and far-reaching decision was made. A decision that was probably in the process of making, as Tatya began gaining momentum after Jhalra Patan.

For Tatya Tope, and India in general, this was going to be a piece of good news wrapped in bad.