

Unsung Heroes and Tribal Freedom Fighters of Santal Paraganas, Jharkhand

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Abstract: The tribals had experienced deeply felt unrest and turmoil in India in general, and more particularly in Santal Paragana and Chotanagpur (Jharkhand) during the British Rule. Tribals viewed colonial bureaucrats, such as landlords and moneylenders, as significant threats to their social and cultural stability. On the one hand, British officials supported the landowners, while on the other, they committed heinous acts of encroachment and exploitation against the tribals. While protecting the landlords, British officials also engaged in heinous crimes of exploitation and invasion against the Tribals. The Tribals of Santal Paragana and Chotanagpur (Jharkhand) have been badly impacted by the development of mines, industry, land alienation, and displacement, which have harmed their natural resources and human dignity. This paper depicts about the life and contribution some of the unsung, lesser known heros and freedom fighters of Santal Paragana during British rule.

Keywords: British, Freedom fighters, Santal, Landlords, Tribal

Introduction: The Republic of India has a culturally significant category of people known as Scheduled Tribes. There are around 427 tribes located in different geographical areas, speaking a variety of languages and engaged in several types of productive activities for their livelihood. They are culturally and socially distinct in several aspects from the rest of the national population. The non-tribal population refer to them as Vanavasi (inhabitants of forest), Paraharia (hill-dwellers), Adimjati (original communities) and Janjati (folk people). In 1800, the colonial authorities implemented Ordinary Regulation in Chotanagpur, which allowed the Bengal Regulations to be carried out there. The Tribals of Chotanagpur were subject to "excise-taxes" under that regulation. British Government has introduced the Chotanagpur Tendency Act (Amendment) of 1903 and the Santhal Pargna Settlement (Amendment) Reputaion of 1908 (Horo, 2013). The colonial government started stamps and paperwork and established the Zamindari Police to control and dominate the land and culture of the Tribals in Chotanagpur in order to make that step effective, efficient, and advantageous to the landowners. The landlords described the destitute Tribals who rebelled as lawless savages and dacoits. As a result, a powerful police force led by the British government crushed down the tribal people. The geographical entity that is now present-day Jharkhand has also seen strong participation, undisputed leadership, and magnificent displays of bravery in the independence movements. It is not inaccurate to suggest

that the many tribal uprisings that occurred in this region known as Chhotanagpur laid the groundwork for the early conflicts against the British authority (Singh, 2005). Territorialisation is defined as the creation of a regulated space for the goal of administering and controlling the population and available resources in and around a certain territory (Elden, 2010; Scott, 1998). Against this context, Birsa Munda developed a re-territorialising activist image in his fight to reclaim sovereignty and authority over their land. Re-territorialisation is the process of reconfiguring territorialized land by restructuring political and economical activities. In the late nineteenth century (1896-1900), Birsa Munda issued a call for 'Ulgulan' (complete uprising) against the British and Dikus³ to begin re-territorialization. The ultimate goal was to boycott British tax laws and establish the 'Munda Raj' (self-rule) – political autonomy. In a way, his movement sought independence from British domination. He also used the slogan "Abua Raj Seter Jana, Maharani Raj Tundu Jana," which translates as "Let the queen's kingdom be ended, and our kingdom be established" (Srivastaya, 2021).

This move of the colonial administration infuriated the Tribals. The landlords skilfully destroyed the land system of the tribal people, who were reduced to living as tenants on their own land. The main object of the British administration was to preserve peace at all costs, because land matters and zamindar-tenant relations were in very delicate tension, and these issues constantly threatened to disturb the peace. Moreover, the policies and attitudes of the British administrators toward tribals were biased in favour of the landlords, since the landlords helped in collecting taxes and revenues from the Tribals. Thus, the tribals of Chotanagpur suffered terrible atrocities and without juridical recourse. The unjust system and extreme exploitation of the Tribals and the prevailing socio-economic and political structures created by the colonial powers and supported by the landlords led to many revolts in Chotanagpur, such as the Kol Insurrection (1831-1832), the Santal Revolt (1855), the Sardari Movement (1859-1885) and many others. The long history of social unrest in Jharkhand is part of the people's collective consciousness. It is undeniably part of its people's will to survive and flourish as a society, not just to exist. Ranged against that historical reality is the series of oppressive acts of the majority, the culture of oppression and terror (Devalle, 1992).

Unsung and lesser known heroes of Santal Paragana

The history of India's freedom struggle is not only composed of famous personalities, but also includes stories of countless individuals who displayed unwavering courage and determination (Nagori, 2024). There exists an information lacuna on a very large number of unsung heroes of freedom movements in India. The mainstream historical research has given very limited space to local freedom fighters and whatever inadequate information is available has received scanty public attention. These unknown, sometimes unrecognized, martyrs have not only been instrumental in shaping the regional consciousness towards the value of independence and self-determination but also triggered large-scale political mobilizations (Kumar et al., 2024).

Bir Sing Majhi

The first individual leader and prophet to openly oppose the dominant caste was Sasan, a parganait in Lachimpur. In 1854, he claimed that the primary god of the Santals, Cando Bonga (Supreme Being), had appeared before him and given him magical charms that allowed him to instantaneously put to sleep any individual he wanted to deprive of his money. With a band of followers, he began committing robberies against moneylenders and wealthy non-Santals. In the course of apprehending him, police not only abused and harassed his supporters, but they also prosecuted many innocent Santals. Thousands of Santals from Birbhum, Bankura, Chotanagpur, and Hazaribagh came together to protest the persecution.

Sidhu and Kanhu

While the Santal people were in the utmost state of mental stress and resentment, the brothers Sidhu and Kanhu from the village of Bhagnadihi, south of Barhait, entered the scene and became the outstanding and undisputed leaders of all Santals. Their village had been exploited heavily by landlords and all of them had lost their ancestral land to them. Sidhu and Kanhu others tried to get justice by the British people.

When all attempts to get justice from the government administration failed,” the Santal leaders decided on a corporate march of all Santals to Calcutta, the capital, with the intention of appealing in person to the Governor-General of India. About 30,000 Santals, together with their wives and children, obeyed the summons and assembled at Bhagnadihi in June, 1855 and marched under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu. The way to Calcutta proved to be longer than they had imagined. Soon their provisions were gone, and they were forced to plunder some markets. This provoked police action.

On July, 1855, the Santal rebellion (Hul) was precipitated, although it was against the initial intention of the leaders. Soon other Santal chiefs and headmen joined the rebellion. The revolting masses carried out mass murders, looting and large scale destruction. By the end of July, available government troops were mobilized and sent against the Santal rebels. In spite of the government’s superior arms and strategies, it took them about months to put down the rebellion. Many Santals were killed, as they fought with reckless courage and suicidal obstinacy. The ring-leaders of the rebellion were caught, summarily tied, and hanged. Sidhu was betrayed early by some of his followers and handed over to British troops. The memory of these leaders became part and parcel of Santal consciousness. In their songs and communal gatherings their memory is constantly recalled. In spite of the mass killings and destruction, one good result emerged; the eyes of British officials were opened, and as a result, a District was created for the Santals featuring a special administration and more power to village headmen among other concessions.

Bhagirath of Taldiha

In 1871, Bhagirath established himself as a religious teacher (Babaji) and started a religious revival movement. Later, it became a political issue. The new movement was named after the Santal tribe's traditional name, Kherwar (villagers). The new movement advocated for the Santals' return to their ancient culture and

faith. Bhagirath persuaded the Santals that their current subjugation was a divine punishment for abandoning worship of the true God in favor of minor and bad spirits.

A drastic change of heart would return the Santals to their 'Golden Age', when they were uncontested masters of their own territory. Ritualistic purity along the lines of Hinduism was scrupulously observed. For this reason, they are referred to be 'Sapha Hor' (pure men). Bhagirath's teaching took on a more political tone as he began to preach that the Santals had a right to the land they cultivated and that no government could tax them. Before Bhagirath could signal a revolt, he was captured and imprisoned. Without a leader, the movement gradually dissipated.

Dubia Gosain

Dubia Gosain's preaching resurrected the Kherwar movement in 1880. He arrived near Deoghar and insisted that the Santals adopt ceremonial cleanliness in religious devotion and all other activities. He commanded the Santals to slaughter their pigs and fowls and adhere to Hindu rituals. He claimed heavenly authorization and sanction. The Santals' displeasure with repressive surroundings, combined with a strong desire for supernatural manifestations, kept them in a volatile state.

When the Census was conducted between 1880 and 1881, the Santals were advised not to cooperate with the procedures. Gosain and his followers used this opportunity to call for an independent tribal governance. Serious disturbances to law and order compelled the administration to arrest Gosain. A section of military police was stationed in the District, and troops marched across the country to overwhelm the Santals. The movement started by Dubia Gosain ultimately faded.

Bangam Manjhi of Borobera

Bangam Manjhi established a reform movement among the Santals in 1930, drawing on the Kherwar movement's 'Soapha Hor' beliefs. Bangam Manjhi assembled a large group of Santala around him, claiming some inexplicable inspiration. Bangam instructed his disciples to wash their lips and bathe their bodies every day, as well as refrain from meat and drinks, in order to maintain ritual cleanliness.

Bangam Manjhi also worked actively with the Congress Party to ensure India's independence. Some of his movement's programmes, such as employing handwoven cloth (khadi) rather than mill-woven material, were in agreement with the Congress Party. Due to their collaboration and cooperative work, two hundred and ten Santals were initiated into the Hindu religion in May 1930 through the investiture of sacred thread (a sign of Hindu caste), which later prompted others to join the cause.

Collective Leadership

Before the migration and settlement of Santal Parganas, the Santals evolved collective leadership to transmit and maintain their traditional values, beliefs, customs, and conventions. This collective leadership also provided mechanisms for social control when members deviated from normal practices. Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics, and a Historical Analysis of Santal Leadership and exercised at critical

junctures within the social structure. At the village level, the administrative elders and the village council exercise leadership. Between villages, the parganas and pargana councils operate as a chief decision-making body. On a regional basis, the annual hunt council functions as the highest court of appeal and decision-making. Collective leadership which is exercised through the village elders' council not only regulates life within villages but also orders villagers' relations with the outside world. The headman is a symbol of correctness and justice. He is expected to maintain in his own conduct and in his relationships with the people, both moral and legal traditions of the ancestors. As a guardian of traditions, he stands against the assimilative tendencies of the present time. As a symbol of justice, he avoids arbitrariness and uses mediation to settle disputes and resolve irregularities by developing consensus. Without this effective functioning, neither the Santal identity nor Santal society could be maintained.

Conclusion

For generations, tribals have fought their oppressors, namely British authorities and landlords, who invaded their social, cultural, economic, and political life. The majority of the regulations were enacted by British officials at Chotanagpur. The Zamindari taxation system, the Zamindari Police, the Permanent Settlement Act, and the Civil Justice systems all had a significant negative impact on Tribal lives. These colonial power regimes invited landlords and moneylenders to collect tribal taxes. Land ownership could only be claimed under the Permanent Settlement Act. By taking away Tribals' land, these colonial governments shattered their cultural, economic, and social peace. As a result, the tribals were forced to change their identities and leave their ancestral territory in pursuit of security and a better living elsewhere in India. The British administration relied significantly on landlords. However, the landlords mostly used this ability to seize land from Chotanagpur's tribals. The landlords misrepresented the regulations and legislation and implemented them in a way that benefited their own personal interests. In fact, the Tribals were not represented at all due to their illiteracy and misunderstanding of the new order's practices. In the midst of this tremendous exploitation and injustice, the arrival of Christian missionaries provided inspiration and emancipation to the Tribals of Chotanagpur.

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