

# Colonial Perception of the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 : A Critique of the Ideological Writings of W.W.Hunter

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## *ABSTRACT*

William Wilson Hunter (1840-1900) was Scottish Historian and as a Civil servant in India (1862-1900) he was very active and also famous as one of early colonial authors .He authored, edited and compiled books on history, statistical accounts and gazetteers etc., but he was not free from colonial thinking and approach, hence Hunter could not be impartial and honest as a writer. This is apparently clear in his one of famous books titled “The Annals of Rural Bengal”(1868,Smith Elder, London ,Indian reprint in 1975 Cosmo Publications, New Delhi)).In this book he wrote on the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 and stressed that exploitation of the Santals by Hindu merchants and Hindu usurers was mainly responsible for the Insurrection as the Santal had nothing against the government. (pp 228-250) Apparently Hunter represented colonial attitude in his writings on the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856, and applauded those who assisted the government during the insurrection and called them “patriotic native landlords ” (p-246). In this study, therefore, colonial aspects of his discussion on the Insurrection in his said book are traced, explained and examined in historical perspective.

**Keywords: Aboriginal,Santal, Birbhum,Insurrection,Merchants, Money-lenders, Oppression, Exploitation, Military**

## **Introduction:**

More than a decade after the suppression of the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856, the biggest armed challenge to the biggest British Colonialism, the book titled “The Annals of Rural Bengal” by William Wilson Hunter published in 1868 (Smith Elder, London, pp I- XIV+475) mainly represented colonial attitude as the author intentionally overlooked almost all concerned official sources in shape of reports, notes etc. of Civil and Military Authorities of the Government of the East India Company in India. Hunter did not view and examine the Notes by Captain Walter Stanhope Sherwill (1851) and the noted book

“Sonthalia and the Sonthals” written by E.G.Man published in 1867 wherein the author gave an account of the Insurrection. As an official author, he had limited academic freedom and as a Civil Servant of Bengal Government it was not possible for him to write against the wishes and attitude of the government. In fact, Hunter mainly represented official tone of colonial administration and as such he could not be impartial and honest in his approach and writings. Apparently Hunter’s writings on the Insurrection lack scientific description of the historical event. In this study, therefore, the colonial perception of Hunter

is traced, discussed and analyzed.

### **Methodology:**

The study is mainly based on published materials in forms of Books and Journals etc. available in different archives and libraries in India. "The Annals of Rural Bengal" by W.W.Hunter was first published in 1868 from London and its Indian reprint published by Cosmo Publications, New Delhi in 1975. Even after its Indian reprint, the book is available in archives and libraries only. Bengal: Past and Present, Calcutta, Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, West Bengal, and Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Patna, Bihar, The Calcutta Review 1856 (26) and the Calcutta Review 1860 (35), Proceedings of Indian Historical Records Commission etc. are other archival sources of the study.

### **Review of Early Literature:**

Before the publication of the book "The Annals of Rural Bengal" by W.W.Hunter in 1868, a year before i.e. in 1867, the book titled "Sonthalia and the Sonthals" by E.G.Man published by Geo Wyman & Co. London. (pp I-VIII +195+27, (Appendix). Man tried to trace and discuss the origin and causes of the Santal Insurrection and also discussed its effects in brief and rightly noted that "The causes that gave rise to this rebellion, with the prior inactivity to give the Sonthals redress, and the stringent measures afterwards taken, form a dark blot on the pages of British History in India." (p-117). But Hunter, it appears, intentionally overlooked all these aspects noted and pointed out by Man before him. Moreover, it is to be noted that Hunter belonged to the Bengal Civil Service and apparently and admittedly he had an easy access to all concerned government records especially of different places of Santal Parganas as well as Notes, Reports and Correspondences of Civil and Military Officials of the Government of East India Company, but Hunter did not bother to view and assess all these official records, consequently Hunter miserably

failed to use facts and information of the Insurrection available in official records. Therefore, it is difficult to call his writings on the Insurrection a scientific and authentic study.

### **William Wilson Hunter and the Colonial Perception of the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856**

Hunter was one of the noted colonial writers who first broadly wrote on the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 in his famous book titled "The Annals of Rural Bengal". It was first published in 1868 (Smith Elder, London) and its Indian reprint was published by Cosmo Publications (24-B, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi-110066) in 1975. (pp1-XIV+475). The book is an immense source of various kinds of information and is of great academic interest not only to Historians but Sociologists, Anthropologists and Administrators also. But as Hunter belonged to the Bengal Civil Service, also as an author he had certain limitations, his writings suffered from colonial ideology.

During East India Company's rule in Bengal, the survey department conducted extensive investigations into the rural history and statistics of India. Hunter took much help from these investigations and attempted to narrate history of rural Bengal. The learned colonial author started from the state of the country when it passed under the Rule of the East India Company and recorded the Ethnical Elements of the lowland population, the Aboriginal hillmen (Paharia), the Rural Administration and Village Government System prevailing in Bengal etc. In total there are seven Chapters (pp1-378) and an Appendix (pp 379-475)

In the book Hunter broadly wrote on the history, administration, people, culture etc. including the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856. In Chapter IV titled "The Aboriginal hill-men of Beerbhum" (pp140-260), Hunter at first described the various aspects of socio-economic and cultural life the Santals (pp141-221) and devoted three pages (pp 216-218) to describe and explain the Santals' aversion to strangers.

## Discussion:

In the process of his descriptive writings, Hunter traced the Santals' immigration to northwards i.e. Rajmahal and its adjoining areas. (pp222-224) The Santals, as their population increased, became "interested to work at anything that would yield them a living" but they "preferred agricultural employment." So the Santals engaged themselves in clearance of dense forest for cultivation. (McAlpin 1904, p-4) Up to 1851, according to Walter Stanhope Sherwill (1851), the Santals had established their 1473 villages and their population amounted to 83265 souls in Rajmahal Hills. According to Hunter, "the Santal colony became as safe and peaceful as any district of Lower Bengal. The British Government treated them leniently, but the ignorant and honest Santals were exploited by unscrupulous Hindu merchants" . Hunter wrote further, "not a year passed without some successful shopkeeper returning from the hill-slopes to astonish his native town by a display of quickly-gotten wealth and to buy land upon the plains. The Santal country came to be regarded by the less honourable orders of Hindus as a country where a fortune was to be made, no matter by what measures, so that it was made rapidly. That the Hindus appear throughout their whole connection with the Santals as cheats, extortioners, and oppressors . . . They cheated the poor Santal in every transaction." (pp228-229) Then Hunter broadly described how the dishonest Hindu merchants cheated, extorted and oppressed them and "in a few years grew into men of fortune." (pp229-230)

Hunter observed, "Redress was out of question; the court sat in the civil station perhaps a hundred miles off. The English Judge, engrossed with the collection of the revenue, had no time for petty grievances of his people. The native underlings, one and all, had taken the pay of the oppressor: the police shared in the spoil. 'God is great, but He is too far off', said the Santal; and the poor cried, and there was none to help him." (p-230)

Not only by Hindu merchants, according to Hunter, the Santals were badly exploited and coerced by Hindu usurers also who lent money to the Santals at high rate of compound interest, even at thirtythree percent. (p-233)

Thus according to Hunter, the Santals were cheated, extorted and exploited by the Hindu merchants and Hindu usurers, not by the British Government and its officials. According to Hunter, Government knew nothing of the misdeeds of the Hindu merchants and Hindu usurers. The Government deputed an English officer to look after the Santals and "what one man could do he appears to have done." (pp 229-230)

The East India Company Government had also decided to give Railways to India and the line skirted the Santal country for two hundred miles. This gave the Santals a golden opportunity to earn money more and more by their labour. According to Hunter, ". . . the entire free population who had not land of their own went forthwith their women and children . . . to work for a few months on the railway, and then to return and buy land, and give feasts to their clansmen." (p-235) It was then, observed Hunter, "that the distinction between the slave and the freeman began to make itself felt." (235) Therefore, ". . . in spite of high prices for their grain and high wages for their labour, the race swayed relentlessly about. The truth was, that the rich Santals had determined to be no longer the dupes of the Hindus, who intercepted these high prices, the poorer agriculturists had determined to be no longer their serfs, and the day-labourers had determined no longer to their slaves." (p-235)

It is evident from the above discussion of Hunter that the learned scholar tried to cover the failures of the Government to protect the poor Santals from the onslaughts of not only of money-lenders and landlords but also from police and revenue officers who also exploited and tortured them. Hunter did not write about the police harrasing, mal-practices of revenue and court officials and staffs and immoral acts and

oppression of contractors and officers mainly employed in the railway line construction in the Santal country, as these are broadly mentioned in the Calcutta Review of 1856 (238-264) and Calcutta Review of 1860. (pp 510-531)

Hunter wrongly observed that Government knew nothing of the misdeeds of the grasping and rapacious landlords and money-lenders etc. as in fact the Santals had submitted many petitions to present their grievances to the government. W.C. Taylor, Assistant Commissioner at Sreekund (near Barharwa) wrote to A.R. Thompson, Deputy Commissioner at Naya Dumka that the Rajahs of Maheshpur and Pakur were hated by the Santals because they granted leases of Santal villages to non-Santal Bengali zamindars and money-lenders. (Datta 1940, p7) As the railway engineers, officials and staffs tortured and exploited them and their women, even raped and murdered their women, (Singh 1973 p-240) they were the main targets of their attacks during the rebellion. (Roy 1960, pp-172-191 & 1961, pp 61-72) The Calcutta Review of 1856 cited cases of 'forced abduction of two Santhal women, and even murder and some unjust acts of oppression as taking kids, fowls etc. without payment on the part of the Europeans employed on the line of the railroad.' (p-242). Even on fateful day June 30, 1855, under instructions of the meeting, letters were then written by Kirta, Bhadoo, Suno and Sidhu, addressed to Government, to the Commissioner, Collector and Magistrate of Birbhum, to the Darogas of Thanahs of Dighee (Borio Bazar) and Tikree (Rajmahal) and to several zamindars and others. (Datta 1940, p-14) But the Government did not take any prompt action and remained deaf to the Santals' letters and appeals, in fact, it had learnt nothing from the earlier Santal uprisings in 1811, 1829 (Natarajan 1981, p-138) and 1831. A noted scholar of tribal studies Stephen Fuchs rightly observed, "If the officers of the British administration had been sympathetic, even at the this stage a bloody rebellion could have been

averted; but all the appeals of the Santal leaders were summarily rejected by the haughty British officials whose minds had been poisoned by false and malicious reports of Court pleaders and landlords." (Gupta 1974, pp 59-73, 137-172)

### **Conclusion:**

It is, therefore, evident that the combined oppression and exploitation of the Santals by the landlords, the money lenders, traders, contractors, Europeans and government officers—Civil, Judicial and Revenue --- were the underlying cause of the insurrection, not only the extortion and exploitation by the Hindu merchants and Hindu usurers as observed and explained by Hunter. In fact, Hunter intentionally overlooked all those aspects noted and pointed out by authors, civil and military staffs before him. Moreover, it is to be noted that Hunter belonged to the Bengal Civil Service and obviously and admittedly he had an easy access to all concerned government records especially of different places of Santal Parganas as well as Notes, Reports and Correspondences of Civil and Military Officials of the Government of East India Company, but Hunter did not bother to view and assess all these official records, consequently Hunter miserably failed to use facts, figures and information of the Insurrection available in official records. Undoubtedly he authored, edited and compiled books on history, statistical accounts and gazetteers etc., but he was not free from colonial thinking and approach, hence Hunter could not be impartial and honest as a writer. Therefore, it is difficult to call his writings on the Insurrection a scientific and authentic study. Hunter stressed that exploitation of the Santals by Hindu merchants was mainly responsible for the Insurrection as the Santal had nothing against the government. Apparently Hunter represented colonial attitude in his writings on the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856, and praised all those who helped the government during the insurrection and called them "patriotic native landlords". (p-246) As colonial official, Hunter did

not dare to go against the wishes and intentions of colonial masters in India and England. So he utterly failed to produce a scientific study of the tribal history of the region especially his exposition of the insurrection is obviously biased, fallacious and prejudiced. In fact, Hunter failed to understand the infamous mahajans-zamindar-amlah-police axis that was the bane of the Santals and other aborigines as it was of the commoners of Birbhum. (Gupta 1974, pp59-73, 137-172) Therefore, “with hope in their hearts, a song on their lips and bows and arrows in their hands, the Santhal peasants raised the flag of open armed insurrection against the unholy trinity of their oppressors- the zamindars, the mahajans and the government.” (Natarajan 1981, p-140) In brief we can say that Hunter was a great colonial author with colonial mindset evident in his writings because Hunter as an author successfully tried to suppress the authentic historical facts of the Insurrection to save the image of colonial administration of the East India Company.

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