

Tribal Revolts in Santal Parganas of Jharkhand: A Study of Tribal Resistance to Foreign Rule in 19th Century

Bapan Kumar Das

Research Scholar, Bankura University, Bankura, West Bengal

Dr. Dinesh Narayan Verma, (Retd. Prof.)

Shiv Mandir, Chandmari Road (Uttarpalli) Rampurhat, Dist. Birbhum, West Bengal

Abstract

Historically Paharias, Santals and other sections of the regional society began to resist the authority of the East India Company as soon it was established in the region during the later part of eighteenth century. They successfully resisted foreign rule during nineteenth century and refused to be subjugated by foreign officials. During ancient and medieval periods the Paharia communities under their militant heroes strongly opposed Hindu, Muslim and Mughal rulers and tried to defend their freedom and identity though they lost most of their Jagirs and Kingdoms to governors (Subedars) and military officials of the Mughals. In spite of this historical loss of their dominated regions, the militant Paharias never surrendered to foreign rulers and even from woods, mountains and hills, where they had retired, they continued their fights against alien onslaughts. The new comers the Santals also resisted the rule of East India Company in the region during 1855-1856 under the leadership of Sido, Kanhu and others. Even after the brutal suppression of the Santal Insurrection 1855-1856, the Santals and other communities continued their opposition to the foreign rule for years as the Saphahor Movement erupted again and again and during Quit India Movement 1942-1943 they were very active against the British government in the region. In view of the tribal challenges to foreign government, the nineteenth century proved to be an epoch making century in the tribal history of Santal Parganas.

Keywords: Paharias, Santals, Foreign Rule, Tribals, Dalits, Backwards, Company, Zamindar, Mahajan, Exploitation, Movement.

Introduction

Military successes in the battles of Plassey 1757 and Buxar 1764 boosted the morale of the trading East India Company's Officials. The officials became politically ambitious and they tried to have control over the entire region economically as well as politically. Undoubtedly the Indians had been militarily defeated, politically humiliated and morally wounded, but it did not mean that they were finally suppressed as the historical documents speak of their unceasing radical challenges, specially those of the different tribal communities just after decisive battles of Plassey and Buxar. It is significant to note that these were the tribal

communities who had been described as savage and uncivilized who never surrendered before and accepted foreign rule. The autochthon Paharias who had opposed Hindu, Muslim and Mughal rulers and long maintained their independence for centuries strongly resisted Company's officials in the region for years. Even after loss and fall of their a number of Jagirs and Kingdoms, the militant Paharias continued their opposition to foreign rule and Company's officials had to adopt conciliatory methods to control and divide the warlike Paharias who continuously opposed and challenged the foreign rule. The Paharias strongly opposed coming

of the Santals to their homeland but during Santal Hool 1855-1856 (the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856) with other tribal communities, dalits and backwards, the Paharias also accepted the leadership of the Santals during the insurrection against Company's rule with a view to establish "People's Raj" in the region. During 1861, 1865, 1871-1874 and afterwards, the Santals again got highly agitated and dissatisfied. The British officials, therefore, immediately took measures to pacify the agitated Santals. Apart from opposition to high rent, exploitation of Zamindars and Mahajans, the Santals opposed British rule and with other circumstances all these gave rise to their movement against foreign rule and it is historically better known as Saphahor Movement 1875 (Kharwar Movement). However the British officials attempted to control and suppress the movement but in spite of unceasing efforts of the British officials, the movement erupted times and again and caused much more disturbances to the foreign administration in the region of Santal Parganas.

Methodology

Colonial writings, Reports, Books, Correspondence, published and unpublished, Journals etc. are the main historical sources of the proposed study. These archival and other sources are available in various archives and libraries in India. Keeping in mind, the tenets of the study of "history from below", it is attempted to trace and discuss tribal resistance to the foreign rule in the nineteenth century hitherto overlooked by most of social scientists.

Review of the Literature

Colonial authors wrote on the regional history but they overlooked archival sources as they were mainly concerned with the official views of the foreign regime. They, therefore, defended colonial actions against tribals and attempted to belittle the historical significance of tribal challenges to colonial administration in nineteenth century in Santal Parganas. E. G. Man (1867), W. W. Hunter (1868), F. B. Bradley-Birt (1905), Mc Pherson

(1909), L. S. S. O'Malley (1910) and others wrote and discussed the aspects of regional history. But they all represented colonial attitude and overlooked historical facts of origin, causes, spread, suppression, effects and the leaders of the tribal resistance in nineteenth century in Santal Parganas. Even official scholars McPherson (1909) and L. S. S. O'Malley (1910) overlooked correspondences of the officials of the East India Company rule who were posted in different places of the region and had the knowledge and experience of tortures and troubles of the people. But they all tried to suppress the history and importance of tribal resistance to the foreign rule in the region. There is no discussion of tribal resistance in historical perspective in any of their writings. Undoubtedly noted scholars K. K. Datta (1934, 1940, 1970, 1976), N. D. Majumdar (1956), R. R. Diwakar (1959), P. C. Roy Chaudhury (1962, 1965), K. S. Singh (1985), R. C. Verma (1990), S. P. Sinha (1993), and some other scholars based their studies on archival sources, but in all their writings there is no interpretation of tribal resistance in Santal Parganas during nineteenth century. The present study is mainly based on published materials in authored and edited books and journals etc. Therefore, the present study aimed at discussing tribal resistance to foreign rule in Santal Parganas during nineteenth century.

Challenges to Foreign Rule: Paharias and East India Company

The autochthon Paharias opposed Hindu, Muslim and Mughal rulers and long maintained their independence for centuries. They were the first tribal to resist Company's officials in the region for years. (Prasad 1961, p-34, Raghavaiah 1971: 162-163) Even after loss and fall of their a number of Jagirs and Kingdoms, the militant Paharias continued their armed challenges to foreign rule and Company's officials had to adopt various kinds of conciliatory methods (Nath & Verma 1998, pp280-288) to control and divide the warlike Paharias who continuously remained opposing and

challenging to the foreign rule. The freedom loving Paharias with their traditional weapons challenged Company's officials and military officers and again and again revolted against the Company's administration in the region of their dominance. According to a noted Paharia author Shivalal Manjhi the revolts of Paharias in 1772, 1778 and 1789 against the administration of East India Company were very effective (Nath & Verma 1993, p-6) as the Company's officials began cruel and merciless suppression of warlike Paharias with the help of Santals who were then coming into the region and settled with the help and encouragement of the Company's officials in the region during 1790-1851. L.S.S. O'Malley (1910, p-51) and John Houlton (1949, p-74-75) and other colonial writers are of the opinion that the Santals settled in the region without opposition from the Paharias and tried to suppress the warlike character of the Paharias who actually resisted the settlement of Santals in their motherland but they had to retire to the summits of the hills because of Company's officials' active support and help to the coming of Santals in their settlement in the region.

Rani Sarbeshwari of Maheshpur Raj and Paharia Sardars

But the militant Paharias unceasingly resisted the administration of the East India company in the region of Rajmahal Hills that forced Company's officials like Captain Brooke, Major Browne (1774-1778) and Collector Augustus Cleveland (1779-1785) to adopt conciliatory measures to control aggressive Paharias. The Rani of Maheshpur Raj (Sultanabad, Pakur, Santal Parganas) Sarbeshwari revolted against the Company's Rule and got active assistance from the warlike Paharias and some their Chiefs of the area. Augustus Cleveland, Collector of Bhagalpur, on the 14th February, 1783 in the third paragraph of his letter remarked, "Strong suspicion exists of the hill chiefs having been instigated to the revolt by Rani Sarbeshwari, Zamindar of Sultanabad." (Singh 1988, pp28-29) After having held

investigation on the subject, Augustus Cleveland, therefore, suggested to Government that she "should be dispossessed of her Zamindari and not be permitted to reside at or near Sultanabad". The government approved the suggestion of Augustus Cleveland by an order, dated 6th May, 1783. A pension of Rs. 100/- afterwards reduced to Rs. 50/- per month was allowed to the Rani and she spent her last days in the Bhagalpur jail where she died (Ball 1985 p-229) on 6th May, 1807. But Paharias and other tribal communities continued their fights against Company's Rule in the region. Even the local people joined the fights and challenged the authority of the Company's administration for years and never allowed Company's official to be in rest and peaceful. The Judge of Benares Division in 1808 rightly pointed out, "At an early period of British administration that tract of the country lying between Birbhum and Bhagalpur was in a state of extreme disorder. The inhabitants were in an open arms against Government and its other subjects. A perpetual savage warfare was maintained by them against the inhabitants of the plains, and they were proscribed and hunted down like wild beasts; so that I have been informed by a gentleman who was at the time Collector of Birbhum, their heads were brought to him by basket loads." (Roy Chaudhury 1965 p-62)

The Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856

During 1790-1850 after continued efforts for clearance of wood, Santals settled and established their villages in the region, but very soon they exploited and tortured by the trio group of Zamindars, Mahajans and Company's civil, judicial and revenue officials and staffs. (Roy Chaudhury 1962: 64-65; Raghavaiah 1971: 148-152; O'Malley 1938: 51-60) At first in 1854 Morgo Manjhi and Bir Singh Manjhi rose against the exploitation and torture to the members of Santals' families. (Fuchs 1965: 47-54) It ultimately resulted in Mass uprising (1855-1856) against the Company's rule led by charismatic leaders Sido and Kanhu of Bhaganadih (a village near Barhait

block headquarters, in Sahibganj district under Santal Parganas of Jharkhand) with their younger brothers Chand and Bhairab. (O'Malley 1938:55) The historical event is better known as the Santal Revolt or Santal Hool as the Santals played key role in organizing the other tribals, dalits and backwards and led them against the most powerful empire of the world and fought tooth and nail to the end for establishment of People's Raj. Karl Marx noted the upsurges of tribals, dalits and backwards in his "Notes on Indian History." In his letter the Commissioner of Bhagalpur wrote to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal on July 28, 1855: "From all accounts it appears that the Santhals are led on and incited to acts of oppression by the gowallahs (milkmen), telis (oilmen) and other castes who supply them with intelligence, beat their drums, direct their proceedings and act as their spies. These people as well as the lohars (blacksmiths) who make their arrows and axes ought to meet with condign punishment and be speedily included in any proclamation which Government may see fit to issue against the rebels." (Natarajan 1981, p-140; The Calcutta Review 1856 p-246) Thus as per Company's official evidences, most of lower sections of society joined the armed struggle against the foreign rule and played a key role in the struggle. It spread in Bhagalpur District (now in Bihar) and Birbhum District (now in West Bengal) of undivided Bengal Presidency, a very large area under the Company's Rule and its officials' administration. By the 20th of July, the revolt spread and was in activity from Taldanga at the south-east of Birbhum, on the Grand Trunk Road, and Sainthia at the south-east, to Bhagalpur and Rajmahal on the Ganges at the north-west and north-east of the Bhagalpur district (Datta 1970 p-76). It continued for about two years and was ruthlessly suppressed by joint action by civil and military officials of the Company government. Various kinds of "pralobhans" ("temptations") offered to the revolutionaries by the officials who even proclaimed Martial law (O'Malley 2015, p27), but the revolutionaries never

surrendered and fought to the end. It is evident from the statement of Major Jervis who rightly noted that the Santals never knew surrender and flew away. Noted historian K.K. Datta rightly pointed out that "The insurrection opened a new chapter in the history of Bengal and Bihar. It convinced the Government of the need of taking immediate steps to bring the Santali areas under effective administrative control." (Datta 1976: 180) Thus by Act 37 of 1855 the Santali areas were formed into a separate non-regulation district to be known by the general designation of the Santal Parganas. (Verma 1990 pp 44-47)

The Santal insurrection was not only against foreign rule in India but it was also one of the biggest mass struggles of Asia as well as most organised Peoples' movement for freedom from foreign rule. The broad participation of lower sections of society entirely changed the character of the struggle as it turned to be a mass movement, first of its kind in Indian History when lower sections of Hindu and Muslim society came together, fought together for the establishment of their own government with traditional arms and weapons before the Great Revolt of 1857. (Roy 1960 pp 171-190 & 1961 pp 61-81) But against authentic historical facts Colonial writers W.W. Hunter (1975: 218-255) and Bradley-Birt (1990: 159-206) attempted to show that the insurrection was not against the government rather against the Hindu Mahazans and Zamindars who were mainly accountable for exploitation and coercion of tribals and non-tribals. The colonial perception of the Santal Insurrection was palpably sabotaged by W.J. Culshaw who rightly pointed out that "The Santals rose against the intolerable rapacity of the moneylenders, with whom the subordinate officials of the government, and particularly the police, were in league." (Culshaw 2018:6) Robert Carstairs also observed that "The Police and the moneylenders worried them into rebellion." (Carstairs 1912:221) Historically, it was "the political expression of the

idea seeking restoration of the primeval world...”(Singh2002:19)

Peasant Insurgency

A noted Indian historian Ranajit Guha called the Santal Insurrection as peasant insurgence and advocated that it was a movement to challenge British colonialism in the region. The weaker sections of society, in fact, jointly launched an armed struggle to free themselves from the economic oppression and official exploitation of money-lenders and landlords and police, revenue and judicial staffs respectively. In various ways backwards and dalits assisted militant Santals against the Company’s rule in the region.(Guha1983 pp177-182) Undoubtedly the Santals were inspired and influenced by the appearance of the Thakur before their leaders but Guha argued the basic cause of the insurgency was agrarian problems of the Santals.

The Revolt of 1857 and the Tribals of Santal Parganas

The Santals and other tribal communities did not openly oppose foreign rule during the Revolt of 1857. But the Company’s officials were very restive and fearful of their activities as they were found highly agitated and attacking and resisting the officials. These activities compelled the officials to send secret messages to the local officials to be attentive of their activities and be ready to act promptly in the event of their armed challenges to the government. (Singh 1998, pp 76-85). But it was from Rohini (Deoghar, Santal Parganas) that the three Sepoys (Salamat Ali, Amanat Ali and Shaikh Haro) first revolted against the Company’s authority in June 1857 then it spread to Deoghar (Jharkhand) and Bhagalpur (Bihar).

Tribal Disturbances During 1861-1875

During 1861, 1865 and 1871 the Santals were again found highly agitated and dissatisfied and the British officials immediately took measures to pacify the agitated Santals. The Governor of

Bengal and the Deputy Commissioner of the Santal Parganas admitted that the Santals had good grounds for open rebellion. Apart from opposition to high rent, exploitation of Zamindars and Mahajans, the Santals were highly opposed to the British rule and with other circumstances all these gave rise to their movement against foreign rule and it is historically better known as Sapha Hor Movement 1874-1875 (Kharwar Movement).

Sapha Hor Movement in Santal Parganas

The colonial official McPherson rightly observed, “..... the alarm occasioned by the outbreak of 1855 had not altogether died away and when in 1871 the Sonthals were found to be in a state of unrest, memories of 1855 compelled the attention of the authorities. Government took immediate steps and determined to revert fully to the non-Regulation system. The Advocate General’s opinion was referred to the Government of India and declared erroneous.” An enquiry was ordered into the grievances of the agitated Santals and its final outcome was the passing of Regulation III of 1872. It was “the Magnacarta of the Sonthal Parganas.”(McPherson 1909, p-40) In spite of passing of the act to satisfy Santals, Bhagirath Manjhi and Gyan Parnait and other tribal leaders (MacDougall 1985:48-49, 78) emerged and led the Sapha Hor Movement of the Santals. In second phase of the movement many tribal and non-tribal leaders and Babajis with Dubia Gosain led the movement.(Roy Chaudhury 1965, pp 951-955; Troisi 1984 pp350-351)

Epoch Making Century in Tribal History of Santal Parganas

In view of the series of tribal challenges to the foreign rule in the region during nineteenth century, it witnessed an epoch making century in the tribal history of Santal Parganas and marked the unceasing bid for the establishment of their traditional political set up in the region controlled

and dominated by the tribal and other leaders. In spite of severe military action against them to suppress their challenges to foreign government, the tribal and other people never accepted the rule of foreign government. The armed struggles of tribals and others, erupted times and again, prepared the ground as it inspired them for much more armed struggles against foreign rule to be launched in coming years. One of the underlying impacts of the movement, as it is pointed out by Hodne, that “The Kherwars were strong opponents of Christianity and had a checking influence on the progress of Christianity in Santal Parganas in the latter part of eighteenth Century.”(Hodne1967: Introduction)

Impact of Tribal Challenges

However, the British officials attempted to control and suppress the Sapha Hor Movement but in spite of unceasing efforts of the British officials, the Saphahor Movement – ‘the revivalistic movement’ (Singh2002:19) erupted times and again and caused much more disturbances to the foreign officials and their administration in the region of Santal Parganas. A famous scholar Olav Hodne in his famous book “Seed Bore Fruit” pointed out its again and again eruptions in 1874, 1875 and 1881 (Hodne1967: Introduction, 22.23.34) and its impact on the region, according to P.C.Roy Chaudhury (1965pp 951-953), in 1880-1881, 1891, 1897, 1919 while famous historian K.K. Datta(1958 pp185-195 &288) noted that the Sapha Hors were active during nation wide Quit India Movement of 1942- 1943 in the region and as a result of this Santal Parganas joined the main political stream of the country. (Sinha 1993, pp200-224) It is worthwhile to note that the Saphahor Movement had initially began as socio-cultural reform movement but in coming years its tone radically changed and it eventually assumed character of a political movement against

foreign rule. The movement aroused political consciousness among different tribals of the Santal Parganas as they challenged British Government with their traditional weapons of bows and arrows on 17th February 1943 at Latthi Pahar, better known as “Latthi Pahar ka Sangharsh” led by famous revolutionaries Lal Hembrom and Bariyar Hembrom. (Kejriwal 1949 pp 107-123).

Conclusion

Admittedly tribals, dalits and backwards continuously opposed foreign rule of East India Company as soon as it was established in the region. Though on the strength of authority, army and ammunition, the British officials cruelly suppressed Tribal Revolts(1855-1856) and hanged its Heroes, but it could not kill their feeling of to be independent of the foreign rule. Rather it encouraged and emboldened them to come together more and more against foreign rule to establish their own government and administration in the region. Undoubtedly, the Santals and other tribal communities did not openly oppose foreign rule during the Revolt of 1857, but the Company’s officials were very restive and fearful of their activities as they were found highly agitated and attacking and resisting the officials. Even after disturbances during 1861-1875, the Saphahor Movement again and again erupted as the Sapha Hors were active during nation wide Quit India Movement 1942-1943 in the region. As a result of this Santal Parganas joined the main historical stream of the country. Conclusively we can surmise that the tribal challenges to the foreign rule began in nineteenth century continued up to the gaining of independence in Santal Parganas of Jharkhand. It is a glorious chapter of tribal history of Modern Santal Parganas that revealed the tribals’ bid for to be independent of foreign rule to maintain and preserve their traditional political set up in the regions dominate and controlled by them.

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