

# The Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 First Strong, Organized and Armed Challenge to the Foreign Rule in India

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## *ABSTRACT*

The Santal insurrection of 1855-1856 was the first strong, organized and armed challenge to the foreign rule in India. The tribals, dalits and backwards unitedly opposed the government of East India Company and attempted to establish people's raj in the region. They were led by four brothers Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bahirab of Bhagandih (Barhait Block, Dist. Sahibganj, Jharkhand) who got active support from lower sections of local society. The insurrection, therefore, emerged as people's movement against foreign government and proved to be the biggest armed challenge to alien administration in India. It marked a turning phase in the tribal relations of Colonial government and ushered in a new era in the history of Bengal Subah.

**Keywords:** Rule, Movement, Government, Administration, Colonial, Company, Santal, Struggle, Foreign, Tribals, Authority, Zamindar, Mahajan, Police

### **Introduction:**

The tribals of India during nineteenth century challenged the authority of East India Company with their traditional weapons and tried to establish their own system of people's government. Among the series of armed struggles of the tribals and other communities, the Santal insurrection of 1855-1856 got separate recognition as it was the biggest armed (Devalle 1992:123-124) challenge to the largest Colonial Regime of the world. It was not only the first mass movement in India (Karn 1994:3) but also the biggest mass movement of Asian subcontinent.

### **Methodology:**

The study is completely based on published materials and archival sources in shape of Colonial Correspondences, Books, Articles (Bengal: Past and Present) Reports etc. The booklets "A Handbook of Bhagalpur District Revenue Records (1774-1855) and "Care and Preservation of Records in Bihar State Archives As Source Materials for the Study of Modern Indian History" edited by K.K. Datta and T.S. Sinha, respectively directors of the archives in 1975 and 1977 (Patna), are significant to trace the concerned records. Many of the concerned account of the Santal Insurrection by colonial authors and archival sources with correspondences have been

published by Tarapada Roy (1983) and S.P.Sinha (1991). The famous books on the Santals by Charulal Mukherjee (1943, 1962, Calcutta), P.C.Biswas (1956, New Delhi) and Nabendu Datta-Majumdar (1956, New Delhi) are other noted and significant published sources of the proposed study.

### **The Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856: Mass Uprising led by Sido, Kanhu and others**

The armed struggle (Hembrom 1996:15) was launched and led by four brothers Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairab (Biswas 1956:9; GOB) of Bhagnadih (Barhait block, Dist. Sahibganj, Jharkhand) who got active support (Hunter 1975:250; Hunter 2012:47; Gupta 1974: 66-67 & 143-146) from other tribals, dalits and backward communities (Devallle 1992:119) after arranging several nocturnal meetings to brood over the injustices (Tudu 2016:9) done to them by the collusion of zamindars, mahajans, police and revenue and judicial staffs for years. (Kumar 2017:47; Gupta 1974:66; Man 1983:110-115; Ragahvaiah 1971:148-150; Roy Chaudhury 1965:73-74,79; Datta 1940:14) As the Santal leaders received active support and help from downtrodden and backwards of Hindu and Muslim society, there developed a separate distinction of the revolt in India and forced the colonial masters to change their attitude towards tribals whom they had described as savage, semi-savage, wild, uncivilized and unlettered. (TCR 1856 & 1860:255,510 respectively; McPherson 1909:38) It was the first example of communal harmony among tribals, dalits and backwards of Hindu and Muslim society before the first war of Indian independence of 1857. In this communal harmony, the limits and bounds of caste and religion dashed to the ground as all the tribals, dalits and backwards got inspiration from communal brotherhood. After moving of Sal Twig in several villages and also its purification under their cultural traditions,

(McPherson 1909:38) about ten thousand Santals of four hundred villages assembled at Bhagnadih on decided date of 30 June 1855 and gave slogans of 'do or die' under the leadership (Roy Chaudhury 1965:79; Umashankar 1966:63) of Sido and Kanhu who were said to have inspired by appearance of their gods and goddesses before them and their directives to free the Santals from the clutches of bondage. (Fuchs 1965:46; Fuchs-A 1965-A:11-62) They were also inspired by their idea of ancient kingdom when they had no overlords and had to pay no rents etc. (McPherson 1909:38) When no action was taken on their request through petitions to local and high officials for immediate redress of their grievances, they decided to see Lt. Governor at Calcutta and started their march for the purpose. (Hunter 1975:230; Biswas 1956:10) But as their food and drink etc. soon exhausted, they started committing 'dacaity' in the houses of mahajans and later killed Darogah which was described by a contemporary well merited reprisals of the injustices inflicted on them by the axis of zamindars, mahajans, police and revenue and judicial staffs. (TCR 1860:511-512)

The Santals who had settled and established their villages (Sherwill 1851:548 & 604) in the region during 1790-1810 largely exploited by the trio group of Zamindars, Mahajans and Company's officials including Court's Amlahs. (Datta 1934:32) Thus the oppression and exploitation of Santals and others by zamindars, moneylenders, police, court and revenue staffs were the root of the all problems and officials posted in the region were aware of it so they reported it to the higher officials. In his letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> July 1854 the Officiating Collector of Bhagalpur to the Commissioner of Revenue, Bhagalpur reported (Letters 1855) what was remarked by Pontet, the Superintendent of Damin-i-koh. In the letter, the Officiating Collector stated that "Mr. Pontet's remarks on the exaction committed by the Mahajans residing within the

Damin-i-koh that he has frequently endeavoured to protect the interest of the Santals, but when his back is turned these Mahazans have recourse to the civil courts, where the Santal are sold out of house and home and are utterly ruined.” The Officiating Collector further informed that “Mr. Pontet suggests the extension of Regulation-1 of 1827 to the Santal Tribe or Hill Tribes cultivators of the soil, he remarks that the Santals of those village are not in arrears ....”. The Officiating Collector mentioned the settlement of men of plains who robbed and plundered hill tribes of various races. He clearly informed the Collector of Bhagalpur that “The Bengalee traders will never think of settling accounts until his debt exceed 100 rupees and he will then proceed into the Moonsif’s court and sue the Santals as is the case at present.” In an another letter in capacity of Collector of Bhagalpur Mr.E.F. Lantour wrote to Mr.Pontet, Superintendent of Damin-i-koh that Sezawal stationed at Kurhurreah petty traders residing in the Dehat (countryside) of his thana oppress Santals most desperately and intimated Pontet that you have served notice to only three Mahajans while you were directed to serve notice to all Mahajans residing in Dehat. (Letters1855) The letter exposed the violation of directions of the Collector by the Superintendent of Damin-i-koh that proved harmful to the Santals of the region.

In his letter to Officiating Collector of Bhagalpur, Pontet, the Superintendent of Damin-i-koh, objected transfer of Sultanabad and Amber to Murshidabad on the ground that these Parganas were cultivated by Santals who were also not interested to cross any river. Mr.Pontet doubted in his letter that on hearing of transfer of the Parganas the Santals would abscond and revenue would go to ruin. Pontet informed that Kankjole ought also to be dealt with these Parganas. In his letter Pontet clearly pointed out that these Hill men claim the right of Trial by jury and these juries are found from the different Sardars, Naibs and

Manjhis of the Rajmahal Hills. Therefore, according to Pontet, the sending of them to another District would be a great hardship as their only intercourse has been for the last century with Bhagalpur. In his letter to Pontet (Rajmahal) one his obedient staffs informed him the presence of the Santals between Chundella and Amdundah in July 1855.) Here it is significant to point out this was the month when Santals and others were fighting against the Company government and the insurgents had murdered Daroga Mahesh Lal Datta and his nine police staff on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1855 at Panchkathia. (Letters1855)

In this regard the report submitted by the Commissioner of Nadia Division A.C. Bidwell, who had been appointed Special Commissioner for the suppression of insurrection in Santal Parganas towards the beginning of August, 1855, broadly focused on the exploitation and oppression of Santals and others. In his detailed Report, Mr.Bidwell discussed causes, suppression and measures to be taken to avoid such risings for the future. Referring to the causes, Mr. Bidwell pointed out excessive taxation and prescribed reduction as demanded by Sido, the leader of the insurrection, in his notice to the officials. According to Bidwell, it is also mentioned in the said notice that “...the country is to taken away from the Sahibs on account of the prevalence of falsehood, the negligence of Sahibs, the extortion of the Mahajans, the corruption of the Amlahs, and the oppression of the Police.” Mr.Bidwell noted the statement of Sido given to Ashley Eden wherein the leader said that he and others had repeatedly complained of the oppression of and excess interest taken by the Mahajans to Mr. Pontet but could get no redress. The leader further stated that one of the Railway Sahibs carried off two Santal women, wounded a Santal and killed another. For these reasons the Santals were dissatisfied and were pondering what was to be done, when a God descended in form

of a cartwheel , and advised them to kill Pontet and the Mahajans and then they would have justice and a father and mother.

In his Report Mr. Bidwell also included the statement of Peetoo Parnait, Manick Santal , Dullas Manjhi, Purtoo Parnait, who were prisoners, wherein they all said of the oppression and exploitation by Mahajans and Naib Sujawals and Railway officials who dishonoured their women and carried off their goats, fowls and kids by force. It is significant that in his statement Purtoo Parnait said that he was addressed by Sido and Kanhu who told him that justice had arrived and that the hakims had erred in taking too much rent, and the Mahajans in taking too much interest. These clearly exhibit that how the Santals were plundered and looted by the collusion of exploiters and officials. Mr. Bidwell broadly noted the opinion of Captain Walter Stanhope Sherwill wherein the Captain pointed out that he was particularly struck by the barefaced capacity of the Mahajans and Merchants buying grain and produce of Santals. The Santals hated them and murdered them who fell into their hands after the outbreak. According to Sherwill Barhait and Borio were the two important places where the insurrection broke out. These were the places where traders flourished at the cost of Santals According to Captain Sherwill religion has been mixed up with the rebellion in order to strengthen the hands of the rebel chiefs.(Sherwill1851:548)

Referring to the Conclusion of Charles Barnes that the origin of the outbreak is to be traced in religious fanaticism alone, Mr. Bidwell noted that Barnes does not believe that Santals had been oppressed by Zamindar, Police or Mahajan and also misuse of divine appearance to recover the imaginary kingdom of the tribe. But Bidwell did not abide by the opinion of Barnes

and stated his mistake in understanding the agonies of the tribe. But Mr. Bidwell seemed to have agreed with the opinion of Mr. Droess who informed the complaint of the tribe of the encouragement given to Bengaly Mahajans to settle in Santal villages and other grievances of the tribe. Mr. Bidwell also pointed out brotherhood of the tribe as indicated by Mr. Droess in his opinion. Mr. Bidwell focused on the opinion of Mr. Grant, Col. Baboo Girdharee, Rani Kshema Sundari, Rajah of Maheshpur and Mr. Taylor who also pointed out oppression on the Santals and also on their women by Mahajans, Zamindars and Railway officials. Mr. Bidwell did not accept the opinion of Mr. Pontet and rightly concluded that the Naib Suzawals and others extorted money from the Santals. He also noted that the statement made by Peetoo Santal and considered it near to the truth. Mr. Bidwell referred the complaints against Mahajans taking exorbitant interest, using larger measures etc. by Pontet from 1849 to 1854 and noted that “the Mahajans have also caused some injury to the settlers by carrying them into the Moonsiff’s Courts and getting out attachments upon their cattle before the ryuts even hear of it.” In his Report Mr. Bidwell viewed all petitions sent to him by Pontet and found in many petitions written complain of oppression against Mahajans and slammed slackness on the part of Mr Pontet in dealing with all the cases of Santals against Mahajans.. W.J. Culshaw 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.” (Culshaw2002:6) Robert Carstairs also observed that “ The Police and the moneylenders worried them into rebellion.” (Carstairs1912:221) Historically, it was “the political expression of the

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

At first in 1854 Morgo Manjhi and Bir Singh Manjhi rose against the exploitation and torture to the members of Santals’ families. It ultimately resulted in Mass uprising (1855-1856) against the Company’s rule led by charismatic leaders Sido and Kanhu with their younger brothers Chand and Bhairab and others. The uprising is better known as the Santal Revolt or Santal insurrection 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. The insurrection was not only against foreign rule but also one of the biggest mass struggles of Asia as well as most organized first Peoples’ movement in India for the gaining of independence. 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.” (Nataraja 1981:140) In fact, the broad participation of downtrodden 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.

The Daroga of Thana Dighee Mahesh Lal Datta with his police attempted to arrest Sido and Kanhu at the instigation of mahajans but on 7 July 1855 the Daroga and his police were killed (Hunter 1975:240, TCR 1860:511) and its information stunned the civil and military officials of the Company. It was an open armed challenge to the authority of the Company’s administration and soon spread over a large region from Taldanga to Sainthia and from Burdwan to Bhagalpur and Rajmahal (Datta 1940:37, 1970:76) presently covered the three states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar. In July 1855 the Santals under the leadership of Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairab looted many places in Santal Parganas, Bhagalpur and Birbhum districts and fought many battles against the Company’s forces. They defeated Major F.W. Burroughs and his sepoy and killed Lt. Taulmain ((Raghavaiah 1971: 125; McPherson 1909:37; TCR 1856:250). Many of the Santals and their leaders were also severely wounded, injured or killed, at Maheshpur. (Roy Chaudhury 1965:81) Various kinds of “pralobhans” (“temptations”) were given to the revolutionaries by the officials (O’Malley 2015:27), 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. The Company Government issued an order that who would come in and submit within a week would be pardoned with the exception of the leaders and those who had committed murders. P.C. Biswas noted that “The Santals took the offer as a confession of weakness and in the month of September again renewed their activity. By the end of the month of September the area from Deoghar to the South Western border of the district came in the hands of the Santals. The Santals

showed great bravery and reckless courage in the struggle against the military. As long as their national drums continued to beat, the whole party would stand and allow themselves to be shot down.” (Biswas 1956: 11). The Hool spread in Bhagalpur District (now in Bihar) and Birbhum district (now in West Bengal) of undivided Bengal, a very large area under the Company’s administration.

As the Santals and their compatriots were no match to the Company’s forces who were well equipped with modern weapons, the revolt was mercilessly suppressed. The Commissioner of Nadia division A.C. Bidwell was appointed Special Commissioner for the suppression of the revolt and Martial Law was declared on 10 November 1855 to the affected regions of Burdwan, Bhagalpur and Murshidabad. Major General Lloyd, Brigadier Bird, Captain Sherwill, Captain Shuckburg and civil officials worked actively together with their forces and after six months of armed struggles and heavy casualties they suppressed the revolt in December 1855 as it was officially declared. On 3 January 1856, the Martial Law was suspended. All the leaders eventually captured and hanged or killed in battles but the insurrection proved to be a great historical event in the history of Bengal Subah. 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. Thus by the Act of XXXVII of December 1855 the Santali areas were formed into a separate non-regulation district to be known by the general designation of the Santal Parganas. (Datta 1940:69) and Ashley Eden was appointed its first Deputy Commissioner. According to Natarajan, “the echoes have kept on vibrating through the years,

growing louder and louder as more peasants from various places joined the fight against zamindari oppression . . . It was finally to merge in the massive demand of the peasantry all over the country for an end to the suppression of the zamindars and moneylenders.” (Natarajan 1981: 146-147; Troisi 1984: 342-348)) 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. 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. Significantly, the spirit and desire of gaining of independence deeply sprouted by the insurrection and the brilliant martyrdom of its leaders and thousands of revolutionaries could never be suppressed rather encouraged and emboldened the people to come and join together more and more against foreign rule to establish their own government and administration in the region. Therefore 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. An enquiry was ordered into the grievances of the agitated Santals and its final outcome was the passing of Regulation III of 1872, “the Magnacarta of the Sonthal Parganas.” (McPherson: 40)

## Conclusion:

Thus historically the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 was the first strong, organized and armed challenge to the foreign rule in India. In the History of India for the first time, the tribals, dalits and backwards of Hindu and Muslim society jointly resisted the Company's rule and tried to establish People's Raj in the region. Therefore, the insurrection emerged as people's movement that openly challenged the administration of the Company and proved to be the biggest armed challenge to the foreign rule in India. It marked a turning phase in tribal relations of colonial government and introduced a new era in the history of Bengal Presidency.

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