

The Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 in Birbhum of West Bengal An Enquiry into the Archival Sources of the Insurrection

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ABSTRACT

In Tribal History of India, the Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 got a separate recognition as local people, the sons of the soil participated in the struggle against the rule of the East India Company for their own 'sarkar'. After its clarion call on 30 June 1855 at Bhaganadih of Barhait block in Sahibganj district (Jharkhand), the insurrection spread over a vast region of Bengal Subah within a month and it highly struck civil and military officials of the administration of East India Company. From its birth place, the insurrection also engulfed its neighbouring places of Bhagalpur in Bihar and Birbhum in West Bengal. The paper explores its spread in greater part of Birbhum district as its places became the centres of revolutionary storm during the insurrection.

Keywords: Suri, Martial Law, Santals, Birbhum, Tribals,

Introduction:

The Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 was the first armed challenge to the East India Company Rule in erstwhile Bengal Subah by Tribals, Dalits and Backward Communities under the leadership of Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairab of Bhaganadih (Barhait block) in Sahibganj district of Jharkhand. Since its clarion call by the leaders on 30th June 1855, it spread far and wide as it covered the region of present three states of West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand. It was the first mass revolution of India and the biggest mass movement of Asian subcontinent in nineteenth century. (Dinesh 2007: VI) Historically the insurrection at first broke out in the Santal Parganas and spread to its adjoining districts of Birbhum, Bhagalpur and other places. By 20 July 1855 the insurrection had spread and was in activity from Taldanga at the South-West 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. (The Calcutta Review 1856: 247-248) The Company administration proclaimed Martial Law and the

insurrection was thoroughly suppressed with the strength of arms, ammunitions and well armed forces under well trained military officials. But the tribals, dalits and backward communities fought against them with their traditional weapons of arrows, bows, axes etc. They never surrendered as they never knew it and fought to the end with an avowed determination.

Hypothetical Approach

Tribals, Dalits and Backward Communities challenged the authority of the East India Company administration under the leadership of four Santal Brothers- Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairab- of Bhaganadih for the establishment of people's sarkar. Undoubtedly the Santals of Rajmahal and its neighbouring regions played a key role in organizing and leading their compatriots, so the Santals of neighbouring regions must have not lagged behind and must have participated in large number in the struggle against foreigners. Hypothetically the Santals living in Birbhum district and its adjoining places must have largely participated in the insurrection, so after meticulous probing and assessing primary and

secondary sources it is attempted to focus on the insurrection in Birbhum district so far not discussed and assessed in historical perspective.

Methodology:

Colonial writings, Reports, Books, Correspondence, published and unpublished, Journals, Proceedings, etc. are the main multiple primary and secondary sources of the proposed study. The books written by colonial and Indian writers also formed important sources. The Calcutta Review of 1856, the Calcutta Review of 1860, relevant issues of Bengal: Past and Present, Indian Historical Records Commission Proceedings, Journals of academic institutions etc. also form important sources for the proposed study.

Review of the Literature:

Colonial authors wrote on the regional history but they overlooked its many significant aspects including its origin and spread in Birbhum district of West Bengal. Most of them were mainly concerned with the official views of the foreign government. They, therefore, highlighted and appreciated colonial administration and all administrative decisions and actions and totally overlooked its origin and spread in adjoining district of Birbhum. E.G. Man (1867), W.W. Hunter (1868, 1907), F.B. Bradley-Birt (1905), McPherson (1909), L.S.S. O'Malley (1910/1910), W.J. Culshaw (1949) and others wrote and discussed the aspects of regional history. But they all focused on colonial attitude and overlooked its origin and spread in Birbhum. Even official scholars McPherson (1909) and L.S.S. O'Malley (1910) and others overlooked correspondences of the British officials who were posted in different places of the district and had the knowledge and experience of its origin and spread in Birbhum. But they all overlooked it and gave no importance to its origin and spread in adjoining regions of Santal Parganas. Undoubtedly noted scholars K.K. Datta (1934, 1940, 1970, 1976), P.C. Biswas (1956), N.D. Majumdar (1956), R.R. Diwakar (1959), C.L. Mukherjea (1962), 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 the proposed study is missing.

Purpose and Objectives:

The main purpose of the proposed study is to trace and assess the origin and spread of the insurrection in Birbhum district of West Bengal. It is interesting to know that the Santal insurrection was not confined to Santal Parganas instead it originated and spread in Birbhum and its adjoining regions also. It is also significant to disclose that the colonial authors purposely overlooked its origin and spread in Birbhum or said few words about its progress in Birbhum. This overlooking created a gap in tribal history of India, hence to fill the gap is within the objectives of the proposed study.

The Santal Insurrection of 1855-1856 in Birbhum

According to O'Malley, the most interesting event in the subsequent history of Birbhum is the Santal Insurrection of 1855. (O'Malley 1910: 25). The leaders of the insurrection had sent petitions/letters not only to the authorities of Bhagalpur but also to the authorities at Birbhum to redress their grievances against moneylenders, landlords, police, revenue and judicial staffs. (Culshaw and Archer 1945: 219-220; Fuchs 1965: 50) Historically the insurrection at first broke out in the Santal Parganas and spread to its adjoining districts of Birbhum (The Calcutta Review 1856: 247-248; The Calcutta Review 1860: 511), Bhagalpur and other places (Roy Chaudhury 1962: 66 / 1965: 81; Gupta 1974: 145) By 20 July 1855 the insurrection had spread and was in activity from Taldanga at the South-West 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 1940: 37; 1970: 76) Apparently "the flame of revolt spread over the whole expanse of country between Rajmahal and Colgong; half of Bhagalpur and the greater part of Birbhum was engulfed in the storm and the neighbouring districts quaved for fear of coming within the fiery circle." (Chaudhury 1955: 115) In the beginning of July 1855 the Santals moved across the border and sacked Palasi in the north of the district. They, however, fell back when a force of 400 men of the 7th native Infantry advanced from Berhampore (Murshidabad) and defeated them at

Maheshpur. By the 20th July 1855 Mritunjapur and Narayanpur to the north-west of Rampurhat had been sacked and by the 23rd July 1855 Ganpur and other villages had been destroyed. (Majumdar 1975:118) Further south the revolutionary Santals overran the country from the Grand-Trunk Road in Burdwan, a few miles across the south-western boundary to Sainthia in the heart of the district. (O'Malley 1910: 25).

On the western border parties of the 2nd, 37th and 56th regiments were engaged in skirmishes with the Santals at various places, whom they defeated with severe loss; but the small detachments posted at distant places in a wide range of territory were unequal to the task set them. The Santals obtained possession of Nagar and Afzalpur, Lieutenant Toulmin was killed in an unadvised attack upon a superior force of 8000 Santals posted on the opposite side of a nullah (Letter from Officiating Collector of Birbhum to the Commissioner of Burdwan, dt. 2nd August 1855, The Calcutta Review 1856:250-251). The Birbhum correspondent of the Sambad Prabhakar reported that "the district headquarters were then encircled by about 40,000 insurgents. He expressed apprehension that "should they jointly attack with arrows, there is no chance of protecting Beerbhoom with a few sepoy stationed there." He added "leave aside the fear of the subjects, the Sahibs themselves seized with fear are shifting their respective families to other places. What is a matter of regret, the oppressors left two of our adjacent villages after burning them down and plundering everything, the ryots possessed. The Magistrate dispatched a few sepoy and barkandazes to save two villages but they could not stand before the arrows of the Santals." The country, therefore, was panic-stricken, and Suri (Siuri) was threatened with an attack by the Santals. Major Vincent Jarvis was ordered up with his regiment from Barrackpore. On his arrival at Burdwan, he was directed by the Commissioner to push on straight towards Siuri which was in instant danger of attack. (Majumdar 1975:118) Major Jarvis wrote, "We marched for two days and a night, the rain pouring the whole way, and my men without any regular food. As we came near to Suri, (the capital of Beerbhoom) we found panic in every village. At Suri we found things

worse. One officer kept the horse saddle day and night, the jail seemed to have been hastily fortified, and the bulk of the coin from the treasury was ... hide in a well." (Hunter 1868:242, O'Malley 1910:26) The Sambad Prabhakar endorsed the news of shifting Government treasury from Suri to some other place, adding that there were hardly any men in the town: "the Government officers and amlahs there have sent their respective families to their homes, the residents have fled away leaving their quarters, the government school is closed and the official works are almost at a stand." (Gupta 1974:147) However, after some more fighting, the Company forces under Lieutenant Delamaine, the Santals were compelled to retreat across the border to Kumarbad. (Majumdar 1975:118)

Towards the end of July 1855 General Lloyd was placed in command of a force employed against the Santals (Letter 1855a), and shortly afterwards another officer Colonel Bird was appointed with the rank of a Brigadier (Letter 1855b), to the special command of troops in Birbhum and Bankura. All the troops available were hurried up, and by the 17 August 1855 quiet was for a time restored in this part of the country. A week after on the 24th August 1855, the Magistrate of Birbhum reported that "The villagers have returned to their homes, and the husbandmen are engaged in the cultivation of their land as usual. The Santals are nowhere to be found, having retreated to a place some thirty miles off in another district." (O'Malley 1910:26) Trouble, however, started again when a proclamation was issued promising that all rebels who had laid down their arms would be pardoned, except the leaders and those proved to have committed murder; but this offer was regarded as a confession of weakness and the flame of rebellion again blazed up. (O'Malley 1910:26) According to report of the collector of Birbhum to Colonel Burney, Commanding at Siuri, the Santals were seen at the village at Rajor. (Letter 1855c) The Collector noted in his report, "This village cannot be more than four or at the utmost five miles from Nungolea and I should think Captain Gott with his detachment might surprise the insurgents by making a night march and coming upon them early in the morning. I apprehend these Sonthals are the same

men who burnt Puriharpore ,immediately after the departure of Captain Fooks' detachment and it is essentially necessary that a severe example should be made them ,if possible.” (Letter1855c) The Diary of Collector of Birbhum (R.I.Richardson) noted the activities of Santals at Deolee, Kejoree, Rajor, Afzalpur,Doobrajapore,Niggur,Deocha,Rajbandh Palace,Bara Batta,Amjurra(on the boundary North of Siury),Talbooney, Buddinathpore, Saruth, Operbandah, Gurjori,Birchandpur,,Chandra Dawh Pharee,Mohamud Bazar and Rampurhat and also reported armed forces deployment and arrangements of Dak in different places.(Extract1855)

Letters from the Collector of Birbhum dated 21 September,24 and 28 September 1855 reported the activities of Santals at Raneebahal,a village on the north side of the More river,Bara Bathan,Rangaloya, Operbundah, Doobrajapore, Nugger ,Tantipara (where a large body of Santal had assembled), Raksadangal, Shanna and Afzulpore and the Collector reported, “With detachments at Gurjora, Nigolea, Mahmud Bazar and Gillon's force at Nugger, I do not think the Santhals can do much ,and if besides we hold Doobrajapore nothing more I am convinced can be done until the cold season commences.”(28 September 1855) It is important to note that the Letter from the Magistrate of Birbhum to the Commissioner of Burdwan Division dated 24 September 1855 reported the strength of the Santals from 12000 to 14000 and also about Moohea Kansjola,Rama Manjhi ,Soondra Manjhi and Seeroo Manjhi who led the Santals at Raksadangal and Teelabooney. (Letter1855d).In the same letter ,plundering and burning of thirty villages by the insurgents in Thana of Operbundah and Nangoola are also mentioned. Letters from the Collector of Birbhum to the Military Official Colonel Burney, Commanding at Siuri and Magistrate of Birbhum also reported the activities of the Santals in most of the said places of Birbhum and directions to military official Commanding at Siuri in Birbhum.(Letters1855e) These letters reveal the spread of the insurrection in remote regions and intensity of the insurrection in the district of Birbhum.

By the end of September 1855 the Magistrate of Birbhum reported that the Santals had once again risen up in arms so the whole country from four miles

west of Nagar to Deoghar was in their hands.(Majumdar1975: 118) The daks were stopped and the villagers had fled from their homes. (O'Malley1910:26).About 5000 to 7000 Santals were waiting at Tilaboni, six miles west of Siuri “where they had dug tanks ,strengthened their position by earth works,..... They were, it was reported only waiting for another body of about 3,000 Santals to join them before advancing to attack Suri, and had given notice of their intention in a characteristic way.” (O'Malley:1910:26-27)

Meanwhile, A.C .Bidwell, Commissioner of Nadia Division had been appointed Special Commissioner for immediate and thorough suppression of the insurrection.(Letter 1855b) On10th November 1855, (Bradley-Birt1905:206;Roy Chaudhury1965:82) “martial law was proclaimed over Bhagalpur right of the Ganges, Murshidabad right of the Bhagirathi and the whole Birbhum district.”. (McPherson:1909:37) A cordon of outposts numbering twelve to fourteen thousand men, pushed back the Santals from open country (O'Malley 1910:27) Though the Martial Law was suspended on 3rd January 1856(The Calcutta 1856:252) and the insurrection was declared to be thoroughly suppressed(McPherson1909:37) but after three months later a large party of the Santals from Birbhum plundered several Mahajans near Serampur in Pargana Kurruckdeea so a company the 37th Regiment Native Infantry was stationed in the Pargana.(Gupta1974:156) So the Santals of Birbhum fought against foreign regime longer time than that of their fellow brothers and others in neighbouring regions of the district.

Conclusion:

Thus in Birbhum also, the insurrection had become formidable at many places of the district. It remained in a disturbed condition for a much longer time and after rainy season in September 1855 the Santals not only resumed their activities in parts of Bhagalpur but in Birbhum also.(Roy Chaudhury 1962:66) Martial law was proclaimed over Bhagalpur right of the Ganges and Murshidabad right of the Bhagirathi but it was proclaimed over the entire district of Birbhum in West Bengal. So the Santals of Birbhum

also bravely fought against the administration of East India Company. Though it was thoroughly suppressed with the strength of arms, ammunitions and well armed forces after seven months, but it opened a new chapter in the history of erstwhile Bengal Subah. (Datta1976:180)

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