

# The Santal Movement of 1855-1856 in Damin-i-koh of Bengal Subah Manifestation of the Movement in Multiple Archival Sources

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## *ABSTRACT*

The paper traces and assesses the origin and spread of the Santal Movement of 1855-1856 in Damin-i-Koh then geographically spread over Birbhum, Bhagalpur and Murshidabad of erstwhile Bengal Subah.(Buckland1901:11) The Movement was one of mass upsurges against the authority of East India Company in the nineteenth century. Though it engulfed a large region of Bengal Subah but it was mainly an armed challenge of tribals, dalits and backwards of Damin –i-koh surrounding the Rajmahal Hills demarcated in 1833 after the region was surveyed and made certain recommendations by Sutherland, Joint Magistrate of Bhagalpur. Meanwhile the Santals had immigrated to the region from Birbhum, Barabhum, Manbhum, Palamau and Chotanagpur etc. and under support and inspiration of colonial administration most of them gradually settled in ‘Damin-i-Koh’ after clearance of the jungles. But soon they became victims of combined exploitation and coercion of nexus of Mahajans-Zamindars and Staff of Police and Revenue Departments and Judiciary. Consequently the Santals, with the help of other tribals, dalits and backward communities, rose against the authority of the East India Company and fought with their primitive weapons for their own swaraj. So historically Damin-i-koh became the epicentre of the Santal Movement of 1855-1856. It was an important historical event of Damin-i-koh after its demarcation in 1833.

**Keywords:** Santal, British, Damin-i-Koh, Movement, Exploitation, Encouragement.

### **Introduction:**

The Santal Movement of 1855-1856 was the first mass based armed challenge to the authority of East India Company in erstwhile Bengal Presidency. It marked a new phase in the history of the region. After the historical assemblage of the Santals on 30 June 1855 and killing of Daroga and police staff on 7 July 1855, the Movement spread far and wide of the region mainly in Damin-i-koh where the Santals had immigrated and settled during 1790-1850. But gradually they became victim of combined oppression and exploitation by the axis of moneylenders-zamindars and staff of police, court and revenue department. This ultimately resulted in the Santal Movement of 1855-1856 under the charismatic leadership of Sido and Kanhu and others of Bhaganadih

(Barhait, Sahibganj, Jharkhand) of Damin-i-koh. So it became one of the main centres of the Movement.

### **Methodology:**

The study is mainly based on archival sources published by Roy(1983), Sinha(1991) and Pankaj(2021). Books authored by Colonial authors, edited and authored books by Indian writers, official reports and correspondences, articles published in Journals are important sources. Apart from the sources, contemporary newspapers etc. also available in libraries and archives are other important sources. These sources contain various accounts of the Movement in and disclose its origin and spread in Damin-i-koh with its adjoining places.

**Literature Reviewed:**

Man 1867, Hunter 1868, 1877, 1907, Buckland 1901, Bradley-Birt 1905, McPherson 1909, O'Malley 1910, Robert Carstairs 1912 etc. the noted colonial authors wrote on the Movement and discussed its various aspects from colonial perception but not discussed its origin and spread in Damin-i-koh, the main centre of the Santal Movement of 1855-1856. Even Basu 1934, Datta 1934, 1940, 1976, Roy Chaudhury 1965, N.B. Roy 1960, 1961, Stephen Fuchs 1965, Ranjan Gupta 1973, Ranajit Guha (1983), Tarapada Ray 1983, Joseph Troisi 1984, K.S. Singh 1985, S.P. Sinha 1991 Arun Chaudhury 1989, 2000 and other Indian scholars also followed more or less the perception of colonial authors because in their writings the Movement in Damin-i-koh is briefly noted or not properly discussed. "History of Bihar" by Prof. Radhakrishna Choudhary (Bihar State Archives, Patna, 2012, p-157) and "Bihar ka Itihas" by Kauleshwar Rai (Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 2013, pp 234-236) do not even mention the Movement in Damin-i-koh. It is, therefore, necessary to trace its origin and spread in Damin-i-koh, the epicenter of the Movement.

**Formation of Damin-i-koh in 1833:**

The most important event of the region was the demarcation of the Damin-i-koh as a Government estate in 1833. It was recommended by Mr. Sutherland in 1819 and carried out by Mr. John Petty Ward between the years 1824 and 1833. (McPherson 1909:32). The region was mainly inhabited by autochthon Paharias. (McPherson 1909:13). The autochthons' numerous complaints of corruption and tyranny and continued disputes between Paharias and lowland landlords created serious problems to the Company Government. (Roy Chaudhury 1965:71) The Government, therefore, deputed Mr. Sutherland to make an investigation into the state of the landed tenures of the Paharias and report generally on the future administration of the hills. (Datta 1976:178). Sutherland submitted his recommendations in 1819 and the Company Government accepted it in 1823. After survey the Damin-i-koh was demarcated by

Mr. John Petty Ward between the years 1824 and 1833 who was assisted by a survey officer Captain H. Tanner. (Letter 1827; Bradley-Birt 1905:122-124; McPherson 1909:32-33) It was comprised of an area of 1,338 square miles (O'Malley 1938:365; but 1356 square miles according to McPherson 1909:34; and 1366 square miles according to Diwakar 1959:599) which included adjoining portions of Rajmahal, Pakur, Godda and Dumka. The name Damin-i-koh is a Persian one, meaning the skirts of the hills but the tract comprised not only skirts of the hills but also of extensive table lands suited for plough cultivation. The valley lying at the foot of the hills and well watered by streams was cultivated and inhabited for the most part by the Santals who had recently immigrated from its adjoining regions and gradually settled in Damin-i-koh (O'Malley 1938:365; Oldham 1854:263-283) under official encouragement and support.

**Administration of Damin-i-koh Before the Movement (1835-1855):**

In his Report (dated 10<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1855) A.C. Bidwell, the Commissioner of Nadia Division, who was appointed Special Commissioner for suppression of the Movement, gave a short sketch of the administration of the Damin-i-koh for the last twenty years and revealed shift in official policy regarding autochthons of the region and encouragement to coming and settlement of the Santals for clearing of jungle: "This tract which, as the Government is aware, embraces what are called the Rajmahal Hills and the lands skirting the entire which were not included in the Decennial Settlement, with the remainder of the District was declared to be the Government property in the year 1823 and a special officer was for many years entertained to decide and demarcate the boundaries thereof. For several years, the culturable lands included in the tract were reserved for Hill people, but in the year 1827, 31<sup>st</sup> October, the Board supported Mr. Ward's recommendation that other classes should be admitted to cultivate these lands; that the clearance of the forests if left to the Hill people would never take place, whereas the Sonthal race were largely employed by neighbouring

reminders in bringing forest lands into cultivation and no possible objection existed to employ them in the same way in the Damun .

“The Government, however ,replied that his Lordship in Council was unwilling to depart from the resolution which the Government had come to that the Damun lands should be exclusively reserved for the encouragement of the Hill race in agriculture .Should the Hill race disappoint these expectations it will then be the option of Government to change their plan and took to other classes for the improvement of their lands. No formal orders of Government repealing these instructions appear on record; but the Sonthals gradually located themselves on the Damun lands, and in 1830 the Government recognized their existence there by authorizing the local authorities to protect them from any demand ,beyond that which it is customary for them to pay ,by taking a stipulation to that effect from the Hill grantees.

“ After repeated recommendations from the local authorities in favour of encouraging Sonthals to settle on these lands on the only means of clearing the jungle the Government on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1836 consented to the appointment of a special officer for the Superintendence of the Damunikoh; and the Collector Mr. Dunbar in his instructions to Mr. Pontet who was nominated to the office, intimated to him that his duty was to use his best efforts to bring the culturable portion of the Damun lands under cultivation by means of the Sonthals, and that the sooner to effect this desirable object, he should not only afford protection to those already settled in the Damun, but also give every encouragement to fresh settlers upon the unoccupied lands.”

(Letter dated 14<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1856 This shift in the Company government’s policy produced desired effects as revenue from Damin-i-koh gradually increased from Rs.36407/- in 1837-1838 to Rs.58033/- in 1845-1846 and the Santals in large numbers settled in Damin-i-koh as their number of villages and population rose up to 1473 and 83265 respectively.(Sherwill1851:548,604)

### **The Santal Movement of 1855-1856 in Damin-i-koh**

During 1790-1830, the Santals gradually immigrated from its neighbouring regions (Datta1970:43-44) and the Government allowed their settlement with a promise with non-interference in their land .According to O’Malley, “The Santals were treated for some years under the Special Regulation of 1827 framed for the Paharias and, when its application to them was stopped ,with great liberty as regards their belongings, and assessments” (O’Malley1938:369). Meanwhile the administration of the Rajmahal Hills deteriorated due to lack of adequate supervision. According to Stephen Fuchs the landlords enslaved them as “agricultural serfs” and “mercilessly exploited (them) as tenants.”(Fuchs1965:46) There were numerous complaints of oppression and exploitation of Santals by money-lenders and landlords . Later the money-lenders and landlords connived with Police, revenue and court staff and oppressed and exploited Santals in multiple ways. Fuchs disclosed that “Oppression was fiercest in the so-called Damin-i-koh—a government estate in the north-east of the Santal Parganas, extending over 1,356 square miles, where the Santals had settled only a few decades before.”(Fuchs1965:46-47) So Devalle rightly pointed out that “The 1855 Movement started among the Santal peasantry of the Damin-i-koh and later embraced the rural population across an extensive area.”(Devalle1992:119) Devalle also stressed that “Santals in the area surrounding the Damin had in their tradition rebellions that took place at the end of the eighteenth century.” (Devalle1992:122). Here it is significant to quote Kaviraj, “The Santhals took special care to draw into their ranks the ‘lower castes ’like the Domes, the Bauris, the Lohras ,the Gowalas, and others. With their assistance they established ‘a poor man’s raj over Damin-i-koh and the adjoining areas of the districts of Birbhum and Bhagalpur.” (Kaviraj1984:116-117) Historically, therefore, it was among the Santals of Damin-i-koh that the Movement had its origin . (Roy Chaudhury1965:73) In order to free themselves from the vicious axis of money-lenders, landlords and staff of police, revenue and judiciary and also for establishment of own self rule of ancient golden days when they were free and paid no rent, the Santals

first opposed them in the Damin-i-koh (O'Malley1938:369) under the leadership of Sido and Kanhu and others and very soon it became mass movement against the foreign rule as the dalits ,backwards and other tribals also joined them in a large number. The Movement obstructed for more than six months the peaceful consolidation of British rule in the Damin-i-koh and the surrounding areas.(Datta1940:10)Though the entire Damin region was disturbed but "the Dumka Damin remained longest disturbed." (McPherson1909:37)Thus the Movement erupted at first in the heart of Damin-i-koh and then it spread far and wide. In this context,some of the Correspondences of James Pontet, Superintendent of Damin-i-koh (office Bhagalpur) from April 1855 to June 1857 are significant. A Letter dated 29<sup>th</sup> September 1855 addressed to James Pontet ,Rajmahal informed presence of the Santals between Chundella and Amdundah in July 1855 and in an another Letter(date not mentioned) addressed to Pontet by Civil Surgeon who stated "Confound these Santhals. They are a great nuisance" when "by the 20<sup>th</sup> of July (1855)the revolt had spread ,and was in activity from Taldunga at the south-west of Beerbhoom,on the Grand Trunk road, and Synthea at the south-east, on the Adjyo river,to Bhaugulpore and Rajmahal on the Ganges at the north-west and north-east of the Bhaugulpore district".(The Calcutta Review1856:247-248).The Santals were carrying operations at various places in Murshidabad ,Birbhum and Bhagalpur but most of them were carrying operation in the north of Damin-i-koh ,and along the south bank of the Ganges from Colgong on the west to Rajmahal on the east .However Mr.Vigors and Railroad men made resolute and vigorous resistance and saved Rajmahal from the insurgent Santals. (The Calcutta Review1856:248). The Company administration made major preparation to control and suppress the movement but on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1855 Sergeant Major and 25 men of the corps were killed and many wounded by insurgent Santals at Pyalapur near Pirpainti (Bhagalpur) .They also defeated Kishen Singh a zamindar at Chouckotee. (The Calcutta Review1856: 248-249) But Captain Francis repulsed eight hundred insurgent Santals who

had attacked his camp. Another Captain Sherwill moved in the heart of the district while insurgent Santals were active at "Hendweh and Belputta,at Rajshadang,Telabonnee and other places within and near the chains of hills."(The Calcutta Review 1856:250)They were active in Birbhum District where more than 30,000 insurgent Santals were active but military operations under Lieutenant Delamaine drove them to jungles. Even then the insurgent Santals pooh-pooed the Government Proclamation (August 1855) for their submission With undaunted spirit and courage, the Santals fought with their primitive weapons against modern weapons and ammunitions of the Company's soldiers. Ultimately on 10 November 1855 Martial Law was proclaimed and meanwhile the Commissioner of Nadia Division A.C.Bidwell was appointed Special Commissioner for "immediate suppression of the insurrection." After major military operations under Major-General Lloyd (The Calcutta Review 1860:513) and Brigadier General Bird other British Military officials, the Movement was brutally suppressed and most of its leaders were captured and hanged, but "it remained as a lamentable scourge revealing the volcanic substrata beneath the foundation of British Rule in India." (Chaudhury 1955:115). The operation of Martial Law was withdrawn on 3 January 1856(The Calcutta Review1856:250-253) and the movement was officially declared to be at an end. (Mc Pherson 1909:37)

### Conclusion:

Thus the Movement engulfed a large region of Bengal Subah but it was mainly an armed challenge of tribals, dalits and backwards of Damin –i-koh. After the historical assemblage of the Santals on 30 June 1855 and killing of Daroga and police staff on 7 July 1855,the Movement spread far and wide of the region mainly in Damin-i-koh where they had settled during 1790-1850.So historically Damin-i-koh became the epicentre of the Santal Movement of 1855-1856. It was an important historical event of Damin-i-koh after its demarcation in 1833. (Mc Pherson 1909:32,37) .It marked a new phase in the history of the region as it led to the constitution of a



non-regulation district of Santal Parganas under the Act of 37, December 1855. (Datta 1976: 180; Datta 2014:35).

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