

# A Critique of Colonial Politics and Emergence of Political Consciousness in Santal Parganas (1870-1945)

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## *ABSTRACT*

The Santal Hul of 1855-1856 for Self Rule was suppressed and its Heroes were captured and hanged, but what could not be suppressed was sprouting of mass based political consciousness in Santal Parganas. It gradually developed and proved challenging to the British Government. In fact, the messianic message of the Hul Brothers was not completely lost. The British Government enacted and implemented various Acts to satisfy and appease Santals and others who had taken active part in the Hul, but there was no end of troubles and tortures of tribals, dalits and backwards. Consequently, the discontent of the Santals and others were reported in 1857, 1861, 1871 and eventually the birth of another great movement better known as Kharwar Movement (Sapha Hor Movement) 1871-1874. The Movement united the people against foreign rule as it revived again and again in spite of colonial attempts for its suppression. This opposed colonial politics and led to the growth and emergence of political awakening in Santal Parganas. It proved to be an important epoch making event in the political history of the region.

**Keywords: Growth, British, Hull, Tribals, Dalits, Backwards, Santals, Struggle**

### **Introduction:**

As Santal Parganas constituted as a direct sequel to the Hul, it gradually emerged as a centre of political upheavals. The first spark of National Struggle of 1857 appeared in Rohini and spread to its adjoining regions. Its Heroes Salamat Ali, Amanat Ali and Shaikh Haro were captured and hanged but it produced far reaching effects. Tribals and others again got dissatisfied successively during 1861, 1871, 1871-1874 that caused great consternation among colonial officials. The memories of glorious sacrifice of Heroes of the Hul and 1857 in the region filled the people with nationalist feelings. (Das 1993:71) Its ultimate outcome was rise and growth of political consciousness in Santal Parganas in face of repressive actions of colonial officials during 1870-1945.

### **Motivation and Objective:**

Motivated by the undeniable importance of people's challenges to the British government even after suppression of the Hul, the paper aims at tracing and assessing colonial politics and gradual emergence of political consciousness in Santal Parganas. The chief objective, therefore, is to bring to light the colonial politics versus the emergence of political consciousness in Santal Parganas during 1870-1945.

### **Methodology:**

The study is completely based on published materials and archival sources. Edited, authored Books, Articles, Reports etc. are included in published materials. "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 help and guide to trace relevant records in archives.

### **Hypothesis:**

Historically the people of Santal Parganas have been freedom loving as they always opposed foreign rule in the region. Even after suppression of the Hul, the people must have challenged the authority of foreign rule and its colonial politics. Therefore, agitation over rent question 1861, mass dissatisfaction during 1861-1871 leading to birth and spread of Sapha Hor Movement (Kharwar Movement) 1871-1874 etc. defied the colonial politics. Four of national leaders in Santal Parganas must have added fuel to the fire. It ultimately prepared fertile ground for birth and spread of political consciousness in the region.

**Literature reviewed:**

K.K.Datta(1957,1957a,1958), P.C..Roy Chaudhury (1965), Stephen Fuchs(1965), Umashankar (1966), Joseph Troisi (1984),J.C.Jha (1985),P.N.Ojha(1985), S.P. Sinha (1990,1991, 1993) are noted Indian scholars who wrote on regional, tribal and national movement and its various aspects but none of them traced and discussed colonial politics versus political consciousness in Santal Parganas during 1870-1945. Motilal Kejriwal (1949), N.M.P.Srivastava (1974), Radhakrishna Chaudhary (1958/2012) and Kauleshwar Ray (2006/2013) also overlooked its discussion in their noted works. John Kochuchira ((2000,Political History of Santal Parganas from 1765 to 1872, Inter-India Publications ,New Delhi) discussed it only up to 1872.

**Colonial Politics and Emergence of Political Consciousness 1870-1900 :**

The yearning for independence played a key role in hastening the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. W.B. Oldham rightly observed that “ the fundamental idea at work and that which has attempted to be put in practice was the establishment of a Sonthal realm and kingdom.”(McPherson1909:38) Historically 87 years one month and ten days ahead of Mahatma Gandhi, Sido and Kanhu, the Hul Heroes had asked the foreign rulers to quit their country and hand over to them the administration of their country. Even after its cruel suppression, this mass upsurge and patriotism and martyrdom of its tribal leaders profoundly influenced the region, its latter political movements, inhabitants and gradually entire India. Perhaps, it was first signal for a national feeling in this region and the tribal leaders successfully displayed it(Sinha1983:143)Therefore, it is now claimed that it was the first national movement against the foreign rule in India, so the honour of the first Indian martyrs should be given to Sido and Kanhu rather than on M Nagal Pandey of the National War of 1857(Chaudhary:1993:1). The Hul inspired political as well agrarian movements as during the second part of the 19th century and first part of the 20th century, and it strengthened tribal challenges and political movements in India. (Natarajan1981:146-147)

Therefore, the first spark of the National War of 1857 appeared at Rohoni village in Deoghar district of the Santal Parganas Division. On the 12th June,

1857, the Sepoys of the 32nd Regiment of Native Infantry attacked on their English officials and cut one them at once. This mutiny spread to Bhagalpur in August, 1857 when the 5th Irregular Cavalry mutinied, but the sepoy were arrested, court martialled and hanged after a summary trial on the 16th June, 1857.( Roy Chaudhury 1957:33; Devi1989:88;Datta1957:41) It was strongly suppressed, but it largely influenced villages of adjoining region. During 1856-1861, the Santals again got agitated and the officials immediately took measures to pacify the Santals (Sen1982:3; MacDougall1985:46-47;Roy Chaudhury1965:95) No doubt, these were agrarian causes responsible for Santals’ dissatisfaction, but it disturbed entire administration and political set up in Santal Parganas during 1861-1871. “The organisers were inspired by the recent indigo rebellion in the plains.”

The Wahabi Movement deeply influenced the various places of Santal Parganas and after its leader Sayyid Ahmad’s visit to Rajmahal many became strong followers of its leaders. This alarmed the government and its officials in the region. Therefore, several persons were arrested by the special department of the government. (Datta1957:93) Though the Wahabi Movement was suppressed but it manifested political influence of its leaders on Santal Parganas. As the lesson, taught by various kinds of movements in and adjoining areas of Santal Parganas, was mainly political in character, during 1861-1871, there was again a strong feeling of dissatisfaction in Santal Parganas and the officials feared one more tribal challenge because of oppression on Santals and particularly on their Manjhis. The Governor of Bengal and the Deputy Commissioner of the Santal Parganas admitted that the Santals had good grounds for open rebellion. McPherson has 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, "The Magnacarta of the Sonthal Parganas." (McPherson 1909:40) All these prepared a fertile ground for a socio-religious reform movement in Santal Parganas. (Verma 2022:60-64) The movement started in the region is known as Kharwar Movement also known as Sapha Hor Movement, as its followers called themselves Sapha Hors. (Diwakar 1959:601; Guha 1983:73) The movement started in 1871 immediately spread far and wide. Its main objective was social and religious reform by exhorting the Santals worship the true God only, abstain from intoxicating liquor and also from eating pork and fowls. (Fuchs 1965:55-58)

The Movement progressed through various phases (Sarkar 1983:45) and prepared a fertile ground for political awakening in the Santal Parganas. The teaching of its propagator Bhagirath Manjhi was in keeping with Santal traditions according to which their ancestors had worshipped only Thakur and had no Bongas (spirits) (O'Malley 1910:175-176). He had taken part in the Santal Insurrection and in 1871 he again became "king" of proposed new Santal Raj (Jha 1960:104). But immediately his teaching assumed political character and the other leaders also gave the movement a political aspect by inciting the people to refuse payment of taxes from their land holdings on the ground that the land which they had reclaimed from the jungle belonged solely to them. So its leaders Bhagirath Manjhi and Gyan Parganait were arrested and imprisoned (Singh 1985:133). After his release, Bhagirath Manjhi again became active till his death in 1879. But under the leadership of Dubia Gosain, the movement revived and disturbed the British officials in Santal Parganas. (Das 1993:62-66) Various piece-meal measures adopted by Bengal government failed to bring peace and tranquility as it revived in 1881, 1891, 1896-1897, 1911, 1919, 1921 (Bodding 1921:222-232) and 1938 in the region. (Verma 2022:30) During 1942-1943, its followers were very active and played a leading role during the Quit India Movement (Datta. 1958:178-203, Sinha 1993:200—224). Out of 75 persons who sacrificed their life during the Movement, there were no less than 25 Sapha Hors (Kejriwal 1949:323-362).

### **Political Consciousness and Nationalist Movement in Santal Parganas 1900-1945 :**

Meanwhile a number of Bengalis had settled in the Santal Parganas, especially at Deoghar and its adjoining areas, because of its promoting healthy climate. They were actively associated with Swadeshi Movement and Revolutionary Movement in Bengal. Thus the Santal Parganas directly came under the influence of these movements. Therefore, Deoghar and Dumka became main centres of revolutionary activities in Santal Parganas. (Dumka Darpan 1986 : 12; 1996:6) In 1908, Prafulla Chakravorty was fatally wounded while testing a bomb on Digria Pahari in Deoghar sub-division. The revolutionary and inspiring role of Sakharam Ganesh Deoskar, a Marathi settled at Karun village in Deoghar sub-division, made political activities more active and challenging to the colonists in Santal Parganas. His book "Deshar Katha" got immediate popularity and aroused national feeling, so the Government banned it in 1912.

The Sedition Commission Report (1918) mentioned revolutionary activities at Deoghar and Dumka and recorded details about the Rodda Arms Case. Prabhu Dayal Himmatsinghka (Dumka) and others were arrested and transported out of Bengal. Aurobindo Ghosh, his brother Barindra Kumar Ghosh and mother visited many times and lived at Rohini village in Deoghar sub-division. A dreaded member of Rodda Groups Haridas Datta alias Kunja came to Dumka in 1914 and resided in the building of Prabhu Dayal at Dumka. Thus the revolutionary movement in India profoundly influenced the political awakening in the region. In spite of this the division very soon realized the significance of the message of Mahatma Gandhi and Congress and quickly responded to its political calls. (Roy Chaudhury 1965:121-123)

During non-co-operation movement the students of Jamtara, Deoghar and other places boycotted their school and became political workers of the Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. (Letter 1921) The arrival of political leaders of national eminence further politically agitated tribal and non-tribal people. The political activities started from Jamtara, Deoghar, Madhupur, Dumka, Sahibganj and other places permeated to villages. The peace-loving Sapha Hors (Santals), Paharias and

other tribal people turned to be political agitationists. This alerted the British officials who feared a “minor revolution in the Santal Parganas.” Thus the Santal Parganas was gradually becoming a nucleus of political activities. (Jha1985:26). Upendra Rakshit (Prior1922:6) Robin Soren, Jabra Paharia of Taljhari, Dey Brothers of Rajmahal and others openly challenged and opposed British Colonialism in India. When the political repression was going on by British officials in the Santal Parganas, Rajendra Prasad toured the Santal Parganas and visited Dumka and Pakur. (Prasad1992:192-193)

But the political repression by the British officials failed to dampen the spirit of the people. In Jamtara sub-division two volunteers were arrested and sentenced to one month’s rigorous imprisonment each. In Godda sub-division, one volunteer was convicted under section 17(a) Cr. Law Amendment Act and three Santals were convicted for having hoisted a national flag. In Pakur subdivision, Congress leaders and three persons were arrested and sentenced. In Dumka subdivision, six persons with Shyama Charan Lahiri were arrested and convicted. Binodanand Jha and some other prominent leaders and political workers were also arrested and convicted.

In this backdrop the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Santal Parganas in 1925 excited the entire region and its people. His first visit at Deoghar (1925) was an important event in the political history of Santal Parganas. It produced far reaching repercussions and gave new impulse and direction to the political movement in Santal Parganas. Gandhiji also visited Kharagdiha, Giridih and Madhupur.(Datta1969:113). The commissioner of Bhagalpur agreed with the Deputy Commissioner of Santal Parganas that immediate action was essential to stop seditious propaganda of the leaders. (Letter1929).

Gandhiji’s Civil disobedience Movement and his March to Dandi unleashed mass participation as Deoghar, Jasidih and Madhupur turned to be centres of political upheavals during the movement in the region. Shashi Bhushan Rai with his wife Shailbala Rai, Binodanand Jha, Prabhu Dayal Himmatsinghka and other leaders visited several places and delivered speeches. Motilala Kejriwal and Pramath Nath Dey of Rajmahal were arrested and sentenced.

Meanwhile women and tribal people had also become politically conscious and preached Civil disobedience moving place to place in the region. Therefore, the Deputy Commissioner asked the Sub-divisional officer to take action against tribal leaders who were preaching civil disobedience (Datta 1957a:133-134). Many tribal and non-tribal leaders and workers were arrested, but the British officials failed to control the political agitation of the people of Santal Parganas. After 1921, Rajendra Prasad again came to Santal Parganas in 1931 and visited Pakur where he was accorded warm welcome by local people. He visited some remote villages in Santal Parganas which spread political movement far and wide in the region (Prasad1992:358) In the wake of his Harijan tour in Bihar, Gandhiji again came to Santal Parganas and visited Jasidih on 25th April, 1934. (Datta1957a:226)

During 1935-1936, political conferences were held in different districts in Bihar, in Santal Parganas it was held at Rajaun in Godda sub-division in January, 1936 with Srikrishna Sinha its president and Shri Buddhi Nath Jha “Kairab”, chairman of the Reception Committee. This proved to be an important political event as it gave further strength to the political consciousness of the people of Santal Parganas. Perhaps this political consciousness dashed the hopes of Kisan Movement and Muslim League also failed to spread its activities in Santal Parganas (Datta1957a:320; Roy Chaudhury1965:122-123) The communal efforts completely collapsed during the nation wide campaign of Individual Satyagraha (1940-1941) and the Quit India Movement (1942-1943) as people from all sections joined the Congress calls under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. In 1940 Jambuvati, mother of Prafulla Chandra Pattanayak, set up a Tribal Ashram at Amrapara to educate tribal people and arouse national consciousness among them.

During Individual Satyagraha tribal and non-tribal jointly offered Satyagraha in different places of the division The Congress activities increased in the Santal Parganas and the vice chairman of the newly constituted district board combined his official duties as vice-chairman with Congress work (Confidential 1:1). The Santal Parganas Congress Committee passed



a resolution congratulating Vinoba Bhave on his arrest and conviction and also unanimously decided to join the Individual Satyagraha (Confidential 2:1) Therefore many persons offered Satyagraha at different places in Santal Parganas and were convicted under sections of the Defence of India Rules. (Report 1940-1941:1-23).

Thus with the active participation of the Santal Parganas in the Individual Satyagraha Campaign, the whole area turned to be a hot bed of political upheavals. Even after its suspension in November, 1941, some local leaders and tour of national leaders kept Santal Parganas politically agitated, so there was a great political movement in Santal Parganas during the nationwide Quit India Movement of 1942-1943. (Limye 1973:6) As tribals and non-tribals spontaneously joined the movement, it spread across the length and breadth of Santal Parganas. (Datta 1958:178-203) and six hundred persons were arrested including two hundred tribals. (Sahai 1947:136) As thousands of leaders and workers were active including Motilal Kejriwal, Prafulla Chandra Pattanayak and others (Kejriwal 1949:323-362), the British government adopted repressive measures to quell the political challenges of the people of Santal Parganas. The death of Shri Trigunanand Khaware through military firing at Deoghar produced great consternation and a wave of unrest swept throughout the region. Meanwhile two great tribal leaders, Lal Hembrom and Pagan Marandi and the Sainiks of their "Deshodharak dal" fought against the British forces on the 17th February, 1943 at Lathi Pahar. The dal sainiks were driven away by the British forces but they did not surrender. (Verma 2022:85-87) After negotiations with Indian leaders, the British decided to Quit India and the British Parliament passed Indian Independence Act of 1947.

### Conclusion :

Thus the growth and spread of political consciousness in Santal Parganas was an important political event of the region. It marked opposition to colonial politics and led to the origin and emergence of political awakening in Santal Parganas.

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