

The Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and Its Heroes Sido and Kanhu Exploring the Annals of the Hul and its Heroes in Contemporary Print Media

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ABSTRACT

Historically Sido and Kanhu and their two younger brothers Chand and Bhairab were the Heroes of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 who played a key role in organizing tribal, dalit and backward communities against the authority of East India Company. After going through archival and contemporary print media sources concerned, we come to know about Santal Kowalia, Ram Manjhi and other comrades also but said four brothers of Bhaganadih (Barhait, Sahibganj, Jharkhand) were main Heroes of the Hul. They took the command of the Hul as they got elected as Suba in great assemblage of Santals on 30 June 1855 held at Bhoganadih wherein more than ten thousand Santals of four hundred villages had participated. This proved to be a turning phase in the Tribal History of India as the Hul message affected entire India and its people. Not only colonial administrators and authors but contemporary print media also broadly focused on the Hul, its various events and its heroes and pin pointed out its origin, nature, demography and marvelous courage and chivalry of the Hul and its Heroes.

Keywords: Santal, Company, Hul, Bengal, Newspaper, Heroes.

Introduction:

The Santal Hul of 1855-1856 was the first strong, organized and armed challenge to the Colonial Rule of the East India Company in the 19th Century. The tribals, dalits and backwards unitedly opposed the foreign rule and attempted to establish People's Raj in the region. They were led by four brothers Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bahirab. The Hul, 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 erstwhile Bengal Presidency. These historical aspects of the Hul is focused and discussed in contemporary print media and need to be traced, discussed and assessed. The report published in various issues of Newspapers (1855-1856) disclose the various unnoticed aspects of the Annals of the Hul and its Heroes.

Purpose and Motivation

The basic purpose of the study is to trace and assess the account of the Hul and its Heroes reported in Contemporary Print Media. These are indigenous sources hitherto mostly overlooked by the scholars of tribal history and quite different from the colonial sources as they focus on its ground realities and called it a Revolution instead an Insurrection/ a Rebellion.

Methodology

The study is mainly based on indigenous sources available in contemporary print media. These include the relevant editions of The Hindoo Patriot, The Bengal Hurkaru, The Friend of India, The Sambad Prabhakar and The Samabad Bhaskar published from Calcutta.

Literature Review

K.K. Basu (1934), K.K. Datta (1934, 1940, 1970), C.H. Koomar (1937), Charulal

Mukherjea (1943), S. B. Chaudhari (1955), N.D. Majumdar (1956), N.B. Roy (1960, 1961), P.C. Roy Chaudhury (1962, 1965), Stephen Fuchs (1965), Umashankar (1966), Vennelkanti Raghavaiah (1971), Tarapad Ray (1983) L. Natarajan (1981), Ranajit Guha (1983), Joseph Troisi (1984), Suchibrata Sen (1984), K.S. Singh (1985), J.C. Jha (1985/1986) S.P. Sinha (1991), Ashok Kumar Sen (1992), Suprakash Roy (1999), Nahari Kaviraj (2001), L.P. Mathur (2004), Ranjan Chakravorty (2008), Suresh Mishra (2019) and E.G. Man (1867), W.W. Hunter (1868), C.E. Buckland (1901), F.B. Bradley-Birt (1905), McPherson (1909) and L.S.S. O'Malley (1910), John Houlton (1949), W.J. Culshaw (1949) etc. are famous Indian and British writers who wrote on various aspects of the Hul. But most of them overlooked the facts and figures contained in the contemporary newspapers as noted above.

The Annals of the Hul and Its Heroes in Contemporary Print Media

During nineteenth century print media played an important role in highlighting historical events and its various aspects. The correspondents dispatched reports from different places about the Hul and the owner and editor got it regularly published in their newspapers (Calcutta). They represented indigenous side i.e. the ground realities of the Hul and highlighted what were not given importance by the colonial administrators and writers as well as most of Indian scholars. Historically the reports published in Newspapers are contemporary authentic sources of the Hul and they represented to a large extent indigenous perception of the Hul. By their nice performances, owner, editor and staffs honest and devoted to their profession virtually set an example in the History of Print Media in India.

The Hindoo Patriot

The Hindoo Patriot described the Hul as a sudden rising against established authority in the districts of Bhagalpur and Rajmahal by the Santals and pointed out their "something regular organization." The Santals are "peaceable and honest race" but

driven to the Hul by "substantial injuries." "It is evident that the employees of the Railway company have to answer for much of the disposition which led to the risen." It revealed the exploitation of Santals' labour but noted that "what seems to have exhausted their patience is the violation of their women." It clearly stated that the grievances of the Santals were known to the local authorities, but was "treated with indifference by them until the movement become general." It expected "perfectly impartial investigation" by A. C. Bidwell, the Commissioner of Nadia Division and clearly reported that "it is misuse of terms to call the rising a rebellion" and noted what the Santals wanted for him and his whole family. (19 July 1855)

According to the newspaper "the insurrection appears to be a much more serious affair than we at first supposed it to be...evident that almost the entire race of aborigines inhabiting the hills and jungles...more or less involved in the movement." The Newspaper noted that "they have manifested a power of organization for which few were previously disposed to give them credit." It described the strategic management of the Santals and also "military preparations for the suppression of the outbreak" by the government. It referred the reporting of two correspondents who disclosed the "Zullum" and highly exasperation of the Santals caused by removal of "a sacred stone." (26 July 1855)

The newspaper reported about "a flat nosed man" among the Santals and mentioned "a confirmed report that the Santals are acting under Nepalese instigation and leadership." (2 August 1855). It clearly reported that "the insurrection has met with a partial check". The district of "Bhaugulpore is still under marauders. Lieutenant Jourlmin's death is all but certain, no trace of him having been found since the affair at Naggur...". Mentioning the report from Mr. Toogood, the Magistrate of Moorshidabad and his statement, the newspaper noted that "the insurrection took its rise from the ambition of two of Sounthals' chief, who pretended to have received a mission from heaven, undertook to drive out the British from the country. They induced the Sounthals to join their

standard by promising to procure them exemption in future from heavy rents, and payments of debts and various other benefits.” But the newspaper strongly criticized the statement of Toogood and observed that it is impossible to believe that the disposition to join the standard of revolt was created solely by the promise of benefits enumerated by Mr. Toogood.”(9 August 1855)

It further noted that “The Sonthal outbreak is less a rebellion than a revolutionary movement. ... the efficient causes were a sense of oppression suffered at the hands of a race dominated by tradition and still maintaining their denomination by virtue of their superior civilization and a desire national in extent to throw off that domination.” It reported that even after killing of leaders, “the movement continues. This is the most recent phase presented by the Sonthal insurrection.” The newspaper stated “the unsubdued spirit of the Sonthals in Beerbhoom” and observed that “The amnesty offered by the civil authorities appears to have been availed by very few.”(13 September 1855)

The Bengal Hurkaru

It quoted an extract of a letter from Toogood, the Magistrate of Murshidabad, dated camp Bhaganadihee, 25 July 1855 wherein he noted military activities on both sides, attacks on the rebels, plundered and deserted Barhait and Bhaganadih, the Thacoor in Kanhu’s house, Sido’s wrist of his right hand broken at the fight at Maheshpur, papers and documents of the ringleaders found in a tin box, the seal of Darogah of thanah Dighee, some orders of the Magistrate of Bhagalpur, Sido’s written orders etc. After enquiry Toogood pointed out that “rebellion have been instigated by four brothers, resident of the village of Bhagnadih by name Kanu, Sedu, Chand and Bhyrub, all manjhee” and noted the descending and worship of Thacoor, killing of Darogah etc. Toogood mentioned orders of Thacoor, as told by Sido to his followers that “the English were to be driven out of the country, and water only would come out of their guns etc.” He “burnt the village of Bhugandihee and with it the whole of the Thacoor Bari” and issued the enclosed proclamation. (7

August 1855)

The Bengal Hurkaru mentioned the letters from Pontet camp Koomerabad dated 17 and 18 August 1855. Pontet described the several fights with the insurgent Santals their killings and noted their retiring to hills and jungles. (22 August 1855) He mentioned the report of a correspondent dated 28 July 1855 and criticized the observation of the Friend of India – “The Friend ascribes the rise of the Sonthals to the oppression of mahajans or native money lenders and by their own statements to the extortions of the Amlah of the Court” but criticizing it Pontet wrote that “The latter assertion has not the slightest foundation in truth.” The newspaper described the military actions and noted that “it is a fact known even to a child of five years there is or was not a single Sonthal in Bhaugulpore, Moorshedabad and Beerbhoom who did not join or aid and abet the insurgents.” It also mentioned the narrative of Pontet of the Hul who claimed the facts supplied are not generally known. But in fact his narrative is more or less same as described by other military officials except few significant historical facts as “Seedoo and Kanoo.....openly declared that the day of Sonthal glory was come.....”

The newspaper questioned why Martial Law was not declared at the outset and why Government did not exert to cripple the resources of the insurgents? and reported the busy activities of the Santals in Bhagalpur and Birbhum districts and fight between Santals and Colonel Burney. The troops “burned down eighty Santal villages and immense stores of grains have been removed or destroyed.” (16 October 1855). It reported the arrest of “Sonthal Kowlia” on 9 October 1855 who was more dangerous than Sido as “Ten thousand Rupees were offered by the Government for his apprehension whereas Seedoo was only valued at five thousand.” Kowlia was captured “due to the activity of Lieutenant Aitkon, and also to a clever Darogah, Kishen Singh, who was the first to suspect the prisoner’s whereabouts.” (16 October 1855). The newspaper also reported the activities and capture of “much feared” Ram Manjee by Lieutenant Dunbar

of 37th Regiment. It is to be noted that the newspaper mentioned the surrender of about hundred Santals who reported that there were “a great number of the disaffected rebels gathering about Nungeles...” , “a great many (of the rebels) were killed...” (22 October 1855) The newspaper reported details of Captain Nicoli’s action with the Santals at “Suhunpore.” (25 October 1855). In its edition dated 12 November 1855, the newspaper published a letter declaring Martial Law on November 10th 1855.

The Friend of India

In its edition dated 26 July 1855, it mentioned the views of many of the correspondents who ascribed the outbreak “to the violence of those who engaged in Railway operations” and pointed out that “there can be no doubt that there have been occasional instances of oppression and insult ; indeed the determination to kill all the sahebs, and the destruction more particularly of all Railway property.” It also observed that the indiscriminate plunder and conflagration of villages , and the murder of natives... would lead to a different conclusion.” It noted that “One circumstance which has been mentioned to us , to fix the insurrection the character of a fanatical and political movement.” A body of the troops sent by the train to “Raneegunge” for safety...” The Santals spread over to the district of Birbhum and “the country in every direction presents a scene of the most complete desolation. The villages have been plundered and burnt, and the inhabitants who could not make their escape have been massacred. The Magistrate of Beerbhoom, with fifteen or twenty Europeans of the Railway and contractor’s staff, are now besieged at Rampore Haut” who were saved by Rose with a small body of police. The newspaper noted the activities of various groups of insurgents and Mr. Toogood and Captain Birch with military aid by the Nawab of Murshidabad and killing of the European Quarter master Sergeant . The newspaper noted the Hul “spreading over a wider circle and daily becoming more serious and demands the most earnest and immediate attention of the Government of India..” (26 July 1855). It contained the reporting of correspondents who reported activities of “shrewd

Bengalee Muhajuns” and also “the extortions of the amlah of the court.” And informed that the family of “four brothers appears to have been either ruined by the Muhajuns or injured by the Amlahs” and spread of the Hul in Bhagalpur and Birbhum. (9 August 1855)

It reported that “an extensive and ferocious insurrection has broken out in the heart of Bengal ... express trains are busy in conveying troops ... The tribes in the Rajmahal hills have suddenly descended by tens of thousands into the plains , carrying desolation in every direction. The Santals “have been pressed into the service of the Railway without remuneration , and that their females have been subjected to insult.” “The insurrection has taken the public authorities by surprise . It is the most improbable event which could have happened , and no blame can therefore be attached to them for the want of due preparation.” “The insurrection is much more formidable than it appeared at the beginning, and the Government has met it in a spirit of the most determined energy.” (19 August 1855)

It reported the plundering of the masses of the district of Birbhum and noted that “cholera and fever will probably destroy more lives than the arrows of the savages.” It referred to the statement of “Seedoo Manjee, the chief through whom the Deity was supposed to reveal his orders” to clear the cause of the rebellion. The newspaper noted the causes, appearance of Thakoor, courses etc. of the Hul and Sido’s confession . Sido denied “any hostility to Government he did not want to fight the sepoys. He did not want to hurt anybody except the Muhajuns and Mr. Pontet.” It also pointed out “the intense contempt in which the Sonthals were held by the Bengalees. “. the rebellion had a cause beyond a mere savage thirst for blood, plunder and excitement.” (11 October 1855)

The Sambad Prabhakar

The editor Ishwar Chandra Gupta had knowledge of the Hul and fearlessly published reports of the events of the Hul. Consequently, common people as well as officials of the Company’s administration could have updated information about

the Hul. In this context, its various issues especially that of dated 4 July 1855, 11 July 1855, 12 July 1855, 13 July 1855, 18 July 1855, 20 July 1855, 23 July 1855, 28 July 1855, 31 July 1855, 1 August 1855, 3 August 1855, 6 August 1855, 8 August 1855, 9 August 1855, 10 August 1855, 2 September 1855, 21 February 1856 and 25 November 1856 are significant wherein it published report on various kinds of exploitation of Santals and their families especially of kidnapping, rape and murder of Santal women by landlords and Rail employees, and also the effects of the Hul on agriculture and the signs of an anticipated famine etc. It published a report on “an all-round hue and cry for want of rice.” (28 July 1855) It published a report of kidnapping and murder of three Santal women near Rajmahal. (31 July 1855) It provoked and enraged entire Santal community who retaliated by chasing and murdering of all those who were responsible for dishonouring their women.

The Sambad Bhaskar

The Sambad Bhaskar also dealt with the Hul and indicated its sympathy for the Santals’ cause and strong disapproval of the atrocities committed by the Company’s Government and its civil and military officials etc. (29 January 1856, 21 February 1856, 25 November 1856) It praised the heroism of the Santals and criticized the Government. In its forceful language, the Sambad Bhaskar wrote that a patriotic Santal did not fear the death sentence and he “smoked tobacco before mounting the gallows.” (21 February 1856)

Conclusion:

Admittedly newspapers honestly published the reporting about the Hul and highlighted all those aspects sent to them by their staffs and other interested persons. Historically they are important historical sources for the study of ground realities of the Hul but these are purposely overlooked by colonial authors and administrators. Undoubtedly the noted Newspapers nicely performed their profession and published reports about the various aspects of the Hul but the most of the reporting is missing in most of the works on the Hul. The reporting of these newspapers are no less significant than colonial documents for the study of the Hul as they disclose unnoticed aspects of the Hul not mentioned by Colonial and Indian scholars. It may be concluded that by fearlessly reporting and publishing the true picture of the Hul by the Newspapers and its staffs marked a turning phase in the History of Journalism in India.

References:

1. The Hindoo Patriot, Relevant editions (July-November 1855).
2. The Bengal Hurkaru, Relevant editions (August 1855-November 1855)
3. The Friend of India, Relevant editions ((July 1855-October 1855)
4. The Sambad Prabhakar, Relevant issues (4 July 1855-25 Nov. 1856)
5. The Samabad Bhasakr, Relevant issues (29 January 1856-25 Nov. 1856)

