

Sonthalia and the Sonthals and the Santal Hul of 1855 1856 : A Critique of Colonial Perceptions of Edward Garnet Man

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ABSTRACT

E.G.Man, an Assistant Commissioner in the newly formed District of Santal Parganas (Dec.1855), was fairly acquainted with the Santals so he wrote about the tribe in his book “Sonthalia and the Sonthals” (1867/2003).The book is consisted of notes collected from his journeys. Man not only gave an analysis of the origins of the tribe, their belief in the supernatural powers and in witchcraft etc., but also gave a good analytical account of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 with its various aspects and effects. Though Man was colonial author and focused on the exploitation of the Santals by Moneylenders. Landlords and Police of the Government but he also criticized the Government and disclosed failures of its officials in dealing with the tribe and situation. However Man was not free from colonial perception but in many respects he wrote fairly as he highlighted the bright side of the Santals, their chivalry and disclosed their historical disdain to use poisoned arrows in war against the Company forces.

Keywords: Hul, Movement, Santal , Landlords, Money-lenders

Introduction:

After twelve years of the Hul, E.G.Man was perhaps the first colonial author who focused and wrote in detail on the Hul in his noted book “Sonthalia and the Sonthals”(1867:109-123/2003). In the book Man wrote on various aspects of the Santals including 1. Situation of tribes, their peculiarity. 2. Oral tradition. 3. Mr. Sutherland s report of 1817. 4. Influence of outward impressions on Sonthali character. 5. Poetical feeling of the Sonthal. 6. Mirjadurrik. 7. Druidical sacrifices. 8. Festivals continued. 9. Sketchy calibre of the work. 10. Sanscrit, elder sister, but not fountain head, of language. 11. Ceremonies observed at birth. 12. The cold weather. 13. Camp at Simra. 14. Origin and causes of Sonthal rebellion. 15. Conduct of officials and government with regard to the rebellion. 16. Opportunity for observing missionary efforts. 17. Curious belief with regard to hell. 18. Primitive knowledge of agriculture. 19. Sonthali dances. 20. Marked change with regard to the number of tigers

in Sonthal Pergunnahs. 21. Snakes and reptiles in the Pergunnah. Appendix. Thus the book is full of observations of Man about the Santals and also discussed and analysed the various aspects of the Hull.(pp109-123) The present study with other aspects of the Santals mainly explores Man’s understanding of the Hul and its detailed analysis.

Purpose and Motivation

The underline purpose of the paper is to point out loophole and shortcomings of colonial perception of the Hul in E.G.Man’s discussion in his noted book. It is traced and revealed that how the colonial author Man purposely overlooked contemporary historical documents and archival sources including Report of A.C.Bidwell,the Commissioner of Nadia Division who was appointed Special Commissioner for suppression of the Hul with an avowed intention to save the oppressive and repressive image of colonial administration and its officials whose colonial attitude and lackluster action were no less responsible for

the outburst of the Hul. However, Man criticized the failures of the Government and also noted the bright side of the Santals as a tribe (p-121). In view of its historical importance and its spreading over a wide region, presently covered by three states (West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar), the authors are also motivated to find out ground motif and targets of the Hul and its protagonists.

Methodology:

The study is mainly based on the book *Sonthalia and the Sonthals (1867/ 2003)* by Man. In the book Man wrote on the Hul and expressed his views on the Hul of 1855-1856. For discussing authentic historical aspects and review of the views of Man, published sources in form of books and articles published in different journals available in archives and libraries are important sources. Most of the archival sources of the Hul i.e. confidential dispatches, report, correspondences etc .are easily approached as these are listed in published booklets/books by K.K. Datta (1975). T.S.Sinha (1977/1992), Tarapada Ray (Subarnrekha, Calcutta, 1983), S.P. Sinha (The Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Ranchi 1991) and Ashwini Kumar Pankaj(Nnotion press .com, 2021).

Hypothesis:

Most of foreign scholars were profoundly influenced by racial supremacy, later it developed as Concept of White Men's Burden of western thoughts and condemned tribal communities as savage, wild and unlettered. They were more anxious to justify the colonial administration and administrative action taken by its civil and military officials. So they were bound to appreciate administrative decisions and actions taken and followed by colonists to strengthen their political hegemony and military control over India. It was, therefore, natural for them to condemn and belittle the historical significance of the challenges to their authority by tribes and their compatriots. So the authors of these lines presume that they must have attempted to conceal/overlook the historical importance of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856, as they concluded that the Santals rose against landlords and moneylenders, not against the government. However, Man appeared different as he was a little bit critical of the Company administration and pointed out that "The causes that gave rise to this rebellion, with the prior inactivity to give the Sonthals redress, and the

stringent measures afterwards taken, form a dark blot on the pages of British History in India."(p-117)

Literature Review:

K.K.Datta(1934,1940, 1957,1970,1976), K.K.Basu (1934),L.Natarajan (1953,1981), Sashi Bhusan Chaudhuri, (1955), N.B.Roy,(1960, 19961), P.C..Roy Chaudhury (1961,1962,1965), L.P.Vidyarthi. (1961) Stephen Fuchs(1965), Umashankar (1966),V. Raghavaiah (1971), M.P.Yorke (1972), Ayodhya Singh (1973),Sunil Sen (1982),J.C.Jha (1983,1985), Suchibrata Sen(1984), Joseph Troisi (1984), K.S.Singh(1985), S.P. Sinha(1991,1991,1991,1993), Susanaa B. C. Devalle(1992),Suprakash Roy (1999),John Kochichura(2000),Narhari Kaviraj(2001) L.P. Mathur(2004),John Kochuchira(2006), Ranjan Chakrabarti(2008), Haribans/Faisal Anurag(2009) and Suresh Mishra (2019) are noted Indian scholars who wrote on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and its various aspects but none of them observed and assessed colonial perception of Man nor opened up its various weaknesses. These Indian historians and foreign scholars (W.W.Hunter 1868,C.E.Buckland 1901,F.B.Bradley-Birt 1905,H.McPherson 1909, L.S.S.O'Malley 1910/1910).

Followed the colonial tune and described it as rebellion or insurrection. Here it is suffice to mention that contemporary newspapers (The Hindoo Patriot,the Bengal Hurkaru etc.) highly objected to call the Hul as rebellion and noted that it was a revolution of the masses. The two famous historian of undivided Bihar, Radhakrishna Choudhary(1958/2012) and Kauleshwar Ray (2006/2013) in their noted work on the History of Bihar did not even mention the observations of Man and colonial approach adopted and broadly discussed by Man and obviously overlooked it.

Edward Garnet Man and His Colonial Perception of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856

The colonial author devoted a chapter to the origin and causes of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856.Man clearly noted that the Santals rose up and attempted to release themselves from the oppression and the wrongs they were sufferings, and misery inflicted upon them at the hands of the unwitting British Government.(p-109) Man traced the causes of the Hul as far back as 1832.These mainly are: "(i) the grasping and rapacious spirit of the Mahajans

(money-lenders) who charged as much as 75 per cent of interest, (ii) misery caused by the iniquitous system of allowing hereditary bondage for debt, (iii) appalling corruption in police and (iv) inability to obtain redress from courts” (p-110). They resorted to open rebellion which flamed all over the Sonthal land.

The author is frank enough to acknowledge that "the causes that gave rise to this rebellion, with the prior the inactivity to give the Sonthals redress and the strongest measures afterwards taken, form a dark blot on the pages of British History of India". (p-117) Before this observation Man also pointed out and discussed a kind of slavery imposed forcefully on the Santals and called Kamiotee System. (pp 112-113) Man appended the remarks on the subject of slavery of Mr. Le. F. Robinson of the Bengal Civil Service who reported it to the Government and abolished it. According to Man, the name of Robinson with a few others is now mentioned with affection and gratitude by the people he benefited. (p112) . It is to be noted that there was a controversy about the use of poisoned arrows by the militant Santals but after personal enquiry Man made it clear that the Santals did not use poisoned arrows and pointed out that "There was a rude kind of chivalry, shown by the tribes in this war which deserves to be recorded. Although, as a race they are wonderfully well imbued with a knowledge of all kinds of vegetable poisons with which their jungle abound, and although for hunting and shooting they dip their arrow-heads into a compound so poisonous that a full grown tiger, even if scratched with the prepared barb, surely dies in half an hour; yet despite all this, they disdained or neglected to take such an advantage when at war with our troops. I have never been able to find an instance of a case in which any of our men or officers were wounded by poisoned arrows, although many received arrow wounds. "(p-121). The book also describes the pioneering work of Christian missionaries among the Santals (pp 134-141). He says wherever the missionary goes, he is respected and seldom reviled. Besides being messengers of Christ, they were instruments of carrying education to the children in villages. According to Man, the kaleidoscopic life of Santals would have been incomplete if there had been no mention of the wild life with which the dense forests of Santal land abound.

He describes the terror, struck by tigers turned man-eaters, and the hunting expeditions organised to kill them. Man also attached in his book in Appendix an extract from George Yule's Report on the Santal Parganas for 1858. (Appendix, pp 22-27). The Report is an important historical document for the study of administrative history of the region.

A Critique of Colonial Perceptions of Edward Garnet Man

The author E. G. Man was a civil servant and mainly responsible for administration of vast and varied India. Though written in second half of the nineteenth century, Man's book "gives a glimpse of the white man's frantic efforts to expand and consolidate his Indian empire in its early formative stage." The author served as the Assistant Commissioner of this region (the district of Santal Parganas 1855, now Division since 1983, presently in Jharkhand) which he named as 'Sonthalia'. During his tenure in office, the author came into close contact with these simple, honest and truth-telling primitive people. Free and untrammelled by social or traditional prejudices, he found them highly superstitious and extremely wary of the Bengali money-lenders who grabbed his land—the land he had cleared and cultivated in the midst of dense jungles. The author made a minute study of their ways of life from the cradle to grave and recorded his impressions in this book. According to the author, their life suffered from the twin evils of drunkenness and superstition. As an instance of the former, he quotes, an old Santhal Seeboo, who told him that "it was his custom not only to put himself and his family under the influence of Bacchus once a year, but also to force liquor down his animals' throats and to make them participate in the general debauchery". The author also devoted a chapter to the origin and cause of the great Santal Hul of 1855-1856. As noted above, Man dealt with exploitation and corruption of landlords, moneylenders and others but did not explain the non-performance of the officials concerned in dealing with the grievances of the Santals who had submitted petitions from to local officials to high officials. (Devalle 1992:123), Court records, statements of various Santal leaders and the arrests by Captain Walter Stanhope Sherwill during the Hul (1855-1856), it is evident that autochthon Paharias actively

participated in the struggle for self rule (Singh1985:131), so the observation of Man about the autochthons being involved in plundering in absence of the Santals is difficult to accept. It is also to be noted that Man noted the “happy-go-lucky” style of the Santals, but he did not write about kidnapping, raping and even murder of Santal women when such kind of incidents were reported in the Calcutta Review of 1856, eleven years before Man. It was one of the gravest defects of his perception of the Hul. Obviously the image of colonial administration was attempted to protect and all the onus of the explosion of the Santals was put on landlords, money lenders and police. Man also wrongly pointed out that the Santals were always slaves and “the institution of slavery amongst them was of ancient date” because there is no authentic historical evidence for his colonial remark while tradition and culture of the tribe stress that the Santals have always been free and freedom loving people.

Man did not write about the appearance of Thakur before the Heroes and overlooked an important aspect of the Hul. So Man had no idea of social-religious background of the Hul. Apparently Man’s knowledge about the Santals was incomplete. It is also pointed out that “ Here is a neat little book. Written in impeccable English, not by a professional writer but by a civil servant, an adjunct of the old steel frame, responsible for the administration of so vast and varied a country as India. Written more than a century ago, it gives a glimpse of the white man’s frantic efforts to expand and consolidate his Indian empire in its early formative stage. The book deals with what he has termed as Sonthalia or the ‘land of Sonthals’, differing entirely from their immediate neighbours in their physique, habits and superstitions. The land stretched along the foot of the Rajmahal hills and ‘on the South-Eastern ridge of the Vindhya lying in the districts of Birbhoom, Burdwan, Midnapore and Cuttack’, which were then known as Sonthal Pergannahs and which now comprise the tribal belts of modern Bihar(including Jharkhand), West Bengal and Orissa. It is also to be noted that Man followed the colonial perception of The Calcutta Review of 1856 wherein tribes are described as wild and savage as the Colonial author Man also described the tribe as savages.(pp 109-

110).After Man, all colonial authors W.W.Hunter 1868,C.E.Buckland 1901, F.B. Bradley- Birt 1905,H.McPherson 1909 and L.S.S.O’Malley 1910/1910 followed the foot steps of The Calcutta Review 1856 and Man 1867 and called them wild and savage.

Conclusion:

Thus Man broadly wrote on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 ,traced and analysed its various aspects in historical perspectives. Undoubtedly he was a colonial author but he was not unaware of the failures of colonial officials as he criticized the government to handle the situation properly. Man appreciated the chivalry of the Santals and disclosed their bright side as a tribe and pointed out their historical disdain of using poisoned arrows in war against Company forces. Admittedly Man represented colonial approach, however, his entire analysis of the Hul can not be overlooked .

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