

The Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and the Concept of Deity Arrival Exploring Divine Factor Reported in Contemporary Print Media

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ABSTRACT

The Santal Hul of 1855-1856 was a significant historical event of erstwhile Bengal Presidency as its echoes were heard not only across India but in most of foreign countries also. Some British officials wrote on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and with one voice they all concluded that it was against landlords and moneylenders who were mainly responsible for their years' old exploitation and coercion. Undoubtedly this was one of causes, but not only cause, of the Santal Hul as these were deeply rooted in the changing condition of the region. Historically there were other underlying causes that were not less important and it included the concept of deity and its arrival before the protagonists of the Hul Sido and Kanhu. The landing of the Thakur before and His Command to the Heroes of the Hul proved to be a turning point in tribal annals of the region as it unified the local population of tribals, dalits and backwards against foreign rule. The study, therefore, deals with the gamut of the divine appearance and evaluates its far reaching repercussions especially reported in contemporary print media being published from Calcutta and its adjoining regions.

Keywords: Bengal, Santal Hul, Thakur, rule, officials

Introduction

The Santal Hul of 1855-1856 had stunned the civil and military officials of the Company Administration (1757-1857) by its mass organization through nocturnal meetings and undisputed leadership etc. It had shaken the foundations of foreign rule and forced them to form committee to investigate the entire event. The contemporary and other British officials including 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) and W.J. Culshaw (1949) etc. wrote on the Hul but they all did not give due importance to the coming of Thakur and His Command to Sido and Kanhu. Moreover, the administrative tune set up by colonial and British scholars more or less followed by most of Indian Scholars. Writing on the Hul on the basis of colonial records Dr. K.K. Basu (The Santal Outbreak in Bhagalpur, Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Patna, 20(2), June 1934, pp 186-224) noted religious fanaticism as an ordinary cause of the Hul and

pointed out it had no authentic document. But this study deals with detailed discussion of the event of landing of Thakur and its effects as reported in contemporary newspapers being published from Calcutta and its neighbouring places..

Purpose and Motivation:

The basic purpose of the study is to trace and assess the account of the coming of the Thakur and their command to its Heroes reported in Contemporary Print Media. These indigenous sources have been mostly overlooked by the scholars of history / tribal history so there is an inadequate account of the arrival of their Deity just before the cry of Hul in most of its writings, consequently the divine factor is mostly overlooked aspect of the Hul. This overlooking motivated the authors to trace, discuss and assess the concept of deity arrival before the cry of the Hul as a unifying factor that inspired locals come together and unitedly resist the foreign rule.

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. The Newspapers contained accounts of the divine event published in Bangla language, and these accounts have been translated into English for the purpose of focusing on the Thakur appearance and His Orders to the Heroes.

Hypothesis:

Tribal communities have been nature worshippers and believe in deities and spirits for their well being and prosperity. They devotedly worship their gods and goddesses on definite date and recall them for well being and progress in every walk of life and also to redress their grievances. Traditionally they are of the belief that their Heroes are blessed with divine power and capable of doing their well being. These beliefs are displayed on various kinds of festivals and socio-agricultural functions when huge gathering of tribal communities are very common on the call of their priests and heads of villages. In this background it appears that when heroes of the Hul spread the coming and command of their Thakur to them among villages for their own Rajas it was during ancient period, thousands of Santals assembled at Bhognadih on 30 June 1855. The Heroes were declared their Subahs (Governors) who told them appearance of Thakur, His Command to expel foreigners and coming of their golden age of ancient period. Hypothetically the landing of Thakur and His Command to the Heroes for own Raj, the exploited and coerced locals of tribals, dalits and backwards got excited, supported and stood behind the Heroes of the Hul.

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 (1991/1991), Susanaa B. C. Devalle(1992), Ashok Kumar Sen (1992), Suprakash Roy (1999), John Kochichura (2000), Nahari Kaviraj (2001), L.P.Mathur (2004), Vasudha Dhagamwar (2006), Ranjan Chakravorty(2008), Haribans/Faisal Anurag (2009) and 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 the Hul and its various historical aspects. But most of them overlooked the details of landing of Thakur noted and discussed in the contemporary newspapers being published from Calcutta and its adjoining places.

A Glimpse of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856

The Santal Hul of 1855-1856 was the first major armed challenge to the administration of East India Company as the locals of the region unitedly opposed the foreign rule and attempted to replace it with their idea of People's Raj. Undoubtedly, the protagonists of the Hul Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bahirab (Bhaganadih (Barhait block, Sahibganj district, Santal Parganas, Jharkhand) and other comrades were inspired by recollection of their ancient regime when they had no overlord to pay any kind of tax except to their Subah. But the arrival of their Thakur and His command to the main Heroes of the Hul to unite the people and uproot the foreign rule for their own Swaraj had its magical effect on the locals. The Heroes got it spread far and wide located villages, as a result of this. according to Stephen Fuchs (1965) thirty thousand locals of more than four hundred villages joined the call of Sido and Kanhu and assembled at Bhaganadih on 30th June 1855. Historically the concept of Deity and His appearance before and orders to the main leaders before the cry of the Hul proved to unifying factor that united the locals against the foreign rule in erstwhile Bengal Presidency.

Contemporary Newspapers and the Descent and Command of Thakur

The Newspapers published from Calcutta and its neighbouring places played a key role in highlighting

coming before and command of Thakur to the Heroes of the Hul with its other significant historical aspects. Most of Newspapers (English and Bangla) purposely published the arrival of Thakur and its magical effects on tribals, dalits and backwards of the region who supported the call of the Heroes of Hul and assembled at Bhagnadih on 30 June 1855. It was a mass assemblage of locals from more than four hundred villages. Historically this was a major event in regional history as it eventually united the locals comprised tribals, dalits and backwards against the foreign rule to replace it with their own Swaraj of ancient days when they had not to pay any kind of tax except to their Lord. In one of its issues The Hindoo Patriot (19 July 1855) published that "It appears that the existence ofcause of complaints was known to the local authorities, but (it) was treated with indifferent by them until the movement became general. As usual in such cases, the leaders of the insurrection have called religion to their aid, and the deluded Sonthals verily believe that Kaloo Thakoor and Suba Thakoor will make them independent of oppressive taxes, extortionate landlords and licentious European neighbours." But The Friend of India in its various issues reported in detail of the event and stated that "Kanoo Manjee and his brother Sindhoo Manjee, issued proclamation, artfully appealing to the grievances and declaring that their deity....had become incarnate in the person of a child. Of course the Avtar spoke through the mouth of Sindhoo and so speaking commanded the Santhal people to chase the sahebs, the Muhajuns and the Almas from nither side of the river. He promised them, moreover, that he would protect them from their enemies, turn the sahebs' swords into sticks, and their cannon balls to water, and give to the Sonthals the entire command of Bengal and its wealth.

The proclamations were apparently by some thousand, whose number rapidly increased with their first success." (9 August 1855). After ten days The Friend of India reported "an extensive and ferocious insurrection has broken out in the heart of Bengal.....At present the most probable solution of the enigma is that the men are acting under the influence of religious and political fanaticism. They believe, it is said, that their god has become incarnate, and that they have a divine commission to expel the Europeans, and seat him on

the throne of India.The Thakoor, or god of the insurgents was at a village, about forty miles from the scene of action, and it was Mr. Toogood's intention to lead the troops to that place as soon as possible, in the hope of at once quelling the riot." (19 August 1855).

The Newspaper further pointed out that "Seedoo Manjee, the chief through whom the Deity was supposed to reveal his orders. It confirms in every respect the viewsas to the origin of the outbreak. Seedoo tells his tale with the truthfulness which is the characteristic of a Sonthal." (11 October 1855). In the same issue The Friend of India also reported that "Two Bengalees came into my verandah, they each had six finger. Half a piece of paper fell on my head before the Thakoor came (in the shape he says in another place, of a cart-wheel) and half afterwards. I could not read, but Chand and Lehra and Dhorme read it. They said the Thakoor has written to you to fight the Muhajuns and then you will have justice. Ever since chyte before the Thakor came, the Manjhees had been consulting together to kill the Muhajuns. When the Thakoor came I sent a sal branch to collect the Sonthals together." The Friend of India commented that "The fall of paper looks like tricky but obviously some hazy, dreamy idea of divine invention seems to have been in the mind of the poor savage. No cross examination shakes his faith in the Thakoor's message, or in the consequent righteousness of his own deeds." (11 October 1855). One of other contemporary Newspapers Bengal Hurkaru also reported in its issue of 7 August 1855, "....About two months ago Sedu and Chand went about and told the Manjhees, or Mundles of villages that a Thacoor had descended in their house, and therefore, all should bring a cup full of milk and present it as an offering.....The villagers asked in what form the Thacoor had appeared. They said in a flame of fire.....Sedu shewed them two printed books and two pieces of papers and a small knife, and said these things were sent by the Thacoor, who had said they should be king, that only one anna should be paid for each oxen plough and two annas for a buffalo plough, that their creditors should be paid, and that in future only one pice per rupee per annum should be paid as interest, that the English were to be driven out of the country, and water only would come out of their guns etc.

The four books which it is reported fall from

heaven and in which the order of the Thacoor was written, and which books were read every day at the Thacoor Baree, are translations of the Gospel of Saint John into Bengallee and other languages. They were found on the verandah of Sedu's house, when he used to sit and dictated his orders, and close to the verandah was the Thacoor. The books were wrapped up in a white cloth and tied round with a piece of gold string." (7 August 1855). Apart from these Newspapers, The Sambad Prabhakar, The Sambad Bhaskar, Samachar Sudhadarshan etc. also published reports of events of the Hul reported by their correspondents from their places of working. These published reports in different Newspapers made it clear that the descent of Thakur was an important event just on the eve of the cry of Hul before its Heroes and His Command to them also united the locals consisted of tribals, dalits and backwards against the foreign rule (Chakrabarti 2008:165). A noted historian K.K. Datta rightly pointed out that "Religion often acts as a great stimulating force among the average masses; and here also the story of a miraculous divine revelation inspired the Santals to take prompt and open measures for the removal of their distresses. Thus on the 30th of June, 1855 about 10,000 Santals met at Bhaganadihi, when the divine order that the Santals should get out of their oppressors' control was announced to them by Sidhu and Kanhu." (Datta 1940:14-15). It is, therefore, apparent that the Coming of Thakur and His Orders to the protagonists of the Hul proved to be one of the biggest events in the annals of tribal resistance to foreign rule in India. It revealed the historical importance of divine factor in tribal history of India, as most of the tribal movements eventually assumed the character of messianic movements and the Heroes are described as "Rebellious Prophets." (Fuchs 1965)

Conclusion:

Thus the above noted Newspapers properly published the report dispatched by their staffs posted in different places about the descent of Tribal Deity and His Command to the Heroes of the Hul to unite the locals and expel the British. It is obvious that the divine factor played a key role in unifying tribals, backwards and dalits against their exploiters, foreigners and their rule (Koomar 1937:66-67). It

made clear that tribals, backward and dalit classes can join the same platform of protest if they are influenced and impressed by divine elements. Revealing the unnoticed aspect of divine factor of the Hul and its historical significance, therefore was a significant contribution of the Contemporary Newspapers to the Tribal History of India.

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