

Bondage System and the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 A Critique of Kamiotee and Harwahee Systems under Colonial Raj

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ABSTRACT

Emerging out from the furnace of exploitation, coercion and deep dissatisfaction, the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 was the first people's revolution of India and the biggest mass movement of Asian Continent in 19th century. It was not a sudden mass based armed struggle for self rule as its roots were deeply rooted in the changing conditions of the time for years. Undoubtedly there were various kinds of conditions and many causes responsible for it that have been going on for several years since the foreign rule was imposed on the region, various kinds of bondage systems also played no less significant role in the eruption of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. In this study, Kamiotee and Harwahee systems, overlooked aspects of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856, are traced, discussed and assessed in historical perspective. It explores that how the systems aroused Santals with other tribals, Dalits and Backwards against the administration of John Company in the region. In addition to these bondage systems, Kandh, Bhaoli, Krisani and Palhaiti systems were also existed that exploited and robbed the Santals and others. The aspects of the bondage systems are explained and its effects are discussed in historical perspective.

Keywords: Santals, Moneylenders, Landlords, exploitation, officials.

Introduction:

Historically bondage system originated in 18th century though its roots may be traced in ancient and medieval times across the world as it was associated with slavery and servitude. It was a common practice in ancient civilizations. It was connected to debt, war or punishment for crimes. In Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Greece, Rome, India, Persia etc. it existed and continued for years. Mesopotamian civilization is the oldest civilization to have slaves. Practically it was a system of time bound services to master by his slave (servant). It was common in Northumberland and South Scotland in 18th and 19th centuries. Later on gradually its concept and nature changed as it became more and more exploitative and coercive. So practically bondage is the condition of being a slave or prisoner. But by 1890s the system declined finally and in many countries it was banned legally. In India slavery was often associated with debt bondage as it was existed in erstwhile Bengal Presidency during 18th and 19th centuries. Dalits, backwards and tribals were trapped in its clutches and faced inhuman torture and coercion with family

members losing all kinds of property and agricultural lands. Before the Santal Hul of 1855-1856, the Santals were trapped in the clutches of moneylenders and landlords who had developed connivance with revenue, police and judicial staff to exploit and rob them. The bondage system called Kamiotee and Harwahee systems plundered and robbed Santals and others for years and produced deep dissatisfaction against the officials of John Company in the region. This eventually prepared the furnace for revolution and during 1855-1856 Santals, Dalits, Backwards and other tribal communities launched an armed revolution against foreign rule in the region. It was the first people's revolution of India and the biggest mass movement of Asian Continent in 19th century.

Purpose and Motivation:

The basic purpose of the study is to trace, discuss and assess bondage systems in Kamiotee and Harwahee forms and its effects on Santals. As the systems are overlooked aspect of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856, the study focuses on tracing and discussing the systems in historical perspective. The

systems played a key role for united struggle of Tribals, Dalits and Backwards against foreign government and its brokers-Moneylenders, Landlords etc. who were in league with revenue, police and judicial officials and staffs of foreign administration. However, the systems are overlooked aspects of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 as these are not discussed properly by most of scholars' writings on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Therefore, the study is motivated by overlooking of the systems with an intention to discuss the systems and its effects galvanizing Santals with others for armed struggle during 1855-1856 against the foreign rule in India.

Methodology::

The study is mainly based on published sources in shape of books –authored and edited, reports, contemporary reviews, articles published in journals and proceedings etc. available in archives and libraries. The Calcutta Review, Vol.26, Jan-June 1856, the Calcutta Review, Vol.35, July-Dec. 1860, the famous books on the Santals by Charulal Mukherjee (Research Institute, Calcutta 1943, 1962.), P.C. Biswas (Bhartiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh, Delhi 1956) and Nabendu Datta-Majumder (The Manager of Publications, New Delhi 1956), with relevant issues of Bengal :Past and Present, Social Scientist etc. are other noted and significant published sources of the proposed study.

Literature Review:

K.K. Basu (1934), K.K. Datta (1934, 1940, 1970), C.H. Koomar (1937), Charulal Mukherjee (1943), S.B. Chaudhari (1955), N.D. Majumder (1956), P.C. Biswas (1956), N.B. Roy (1960, 1961), P.C. Roy Chaudhury (1962), Stephen Fuchs (1965), Umashankar (1966), Vennelkanti Raghavaiah (1971), Tarapad Ray (1983) L. Natarajan (1981), Ranajit Guha (1983), Suchibrata Sen (1984), K.S. Singh (1982, 1985), J.C. Jha (1985, 1985/1986) S.P. Sinha (1991, 1991, 1991), Ashok Kumar Sen (1992), L.P. Mathur (1995, 2004), Suprakash Roy (1999), Nahari Kaviraj (2001), Vasudha Dhagamwar (2006), Ranjan Chakravorty (2008) and W.W. Hunter (1868), C.E. Buckland (1901), F.B. Bradley-Birt (1905), McPherson (1909) and R. Carstairs (1912), Herbert Hope Risley (1915), 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 bondage system—Kamiootee and Harwahee systems existed in erstwhile Bengal Presidency in 19th century or not properly discussed the systems in arousing the deep dissatisfaction of local people. Two scholar authors of undivided Bihar R.K. Choudhary (2012) and Kauleshwar Roy (2013) did not discuss the systems in their authored books on History of Bihar. But these were the systems mainly responsible for exploitation and coercion of Santals, other Tribals, Dalits and Backwards who under the leadership of Sido and Kanhu with their younger brothers Chand and Bhairav launched an armed struggle against foreign rule in the region (Verma 2017:217).

Harwahee and Kamiootee Systems and its Effects

Historically there were various kinds of devices which worked much mischief among the Santals as these were used to exploit and rob them on large scale. The execution of bonds was one of the devices and there were mainly two kinds of bondage systems—Harwahee and Kamiootee (Datta-Majumder 1956:25, 31; Prasad 1961:iii; Kochuchira 2000: 76-77). Under the Harwahee system, the borrower had, in addition to personal service, to plough the moneylender's fields whenever required till his loan was repaid. According to Kamiootee system, "a universal feature of the Bengal economy". (York 1972:156) a man borrowed money binding himself to work without pay for the moneylender whenever required till the loan was repaid. The Santals thus became a Kamiya, i.e. the bond servant of his creditor. (O'Malley 1910:47) It was thus practically impossible for the borrower, rightly pointed out by Troisi, "to repay the loan because his services were required during harvest time and the other busy seasons of the year, and this did not leave him enough time to plough his own fields or work for wages." (Troisi 1984:344, Troisi 2024:35). Moreover, the interest was taken in advance, the debtor could never work off his debt. According to the systems, the debtor's children and near relatives were considered liable in case of his death. (Troisi 1984:344-345) Man praised Mr. Le. F. Robinson of Bengal Civil Service who called the

attention of the Government to this crying evil and never abating in his exertions until this great engine of oppression was abolished.(Man1867:112) “His name ,with a few others, is now mentioned with affection and gratitude by the people he benefitted.” (Man1867:112) Man also appended his remarks on the subject of slavery who stated that “It was called Kamiotee, but it is not peculiar to Sonthalia or the Sonthals .You will find it nearly all over the country. ,I believe ,in one form or another .But in Sonthalia it was very bad .A man borrowed money and gave a bond to work it out, binding himself to work for the lender ,whenever he was required, without pay.

The lender of course required his services at harvest and the other busy seasons of the year, when the debtor could have got work and pay elsewhere ,and when work was slack the lender of course did not require his slave’s services .He could make nothing elsewhere ;all he got when work in was food ,and sometimes a bit of cloth once a year .As interest was taken in advance ,the debtor could never work out the debt, the interest was never less than 25 per cent, often much more ;the son, daughter ,or other nearest relation of the debtor used in case of his death to be considered liable ,and if suits were brought on these bonds in the old Moonshiffs’ Courts ,they used to give decrees for their due execution,. no matter how old the debt ,or who was working it out at the time ! I have had a bond brought to me in which 25 Rs. was originally borrowed by a man who worked his lifetime, his son did ditto ,and I released his grandson from any further necessity ;it had been running on for over thirty years, if I remember rightly ! Whenever I got a complaint, I made the creditor produce the bond and impounded or tore it up ,and sent the debtor to work on the railway. It was in 1858 that the whole matter was reported to the Bengal Government. “(Man1867:112-113) Thus the remarks of Mr.Robinson revealed the long term effects of the systems that completely destroyed not only the life of debtor but also of his entire family.

The Calcutta Review reported in 1860 that the Santal thus “ saw his crops ,his cattle, even himself and family appropriated for a debt which ten times paid remained an incubus upon him still. He found his

simple memorandum kept in knots upon a piece of string no match against the Mahajun’s arithmetic supported by pen, ink and paper ,and if he comprehended the gross injustice of the case he gained but little in an argument which was concluded by the Mahajun’s peons summarily carrying off whatever they could lay their hands on, or by as effectual a process performed through the more legal but perhaps equally unjust agency of a Moonsiff’s decree.”(p-511) Even before this, the Calcutta Review of 1856 had also highlighted “ a combined system of extortion, oppressive exactions ,forcible dispossession of property, abuse and personal violence ,and a variety of pretty tyrannies” upon the Santals and noted “usurious interest on loans of money ranging from 50 to 500 per cent; false measures at the haut and market, willful and uncharitable trespass by the rich by means of their untethered cattle, tattooes, ponies ,and even elephants on the growing crops of poorer race ;and such like illegalities have been prevalent....In 1848 the Sonthals of three entire villages suddenly absconded ,and never returned, in consequence of the fraudulent ,false, or exaggerated suits of the muhajuns in the civil courts. (The Calcutta Review 1856:239-241).

Moreover, the discontent of the Santals under these bondage systems was further accentuated by the higher wages gained by free labourers. The labourers had worked on railway constructions then going on and returned with heavy savings. The Santals had also no perfect security in the possession of land which they had made fit for habitation and cultivation by clearing of the forests as they were expert in clearing forests. George Campbell ,therefore, paid tribute to them as being ‘most industrious and even skilful clearers of the jungle and reclaimers of the soil.’(Das1881:564-565)

Apart from these Kamiotee and Harwahee systems, there were other bondage systems called Kandh, Bhaoli, Krisani and Palhaiti existed in the region for years.(Gantzer1936:12-16). Under Kandh system the labourer executed a bond in exchange for the debt he borrowed and since then he was under obligation to work for the creditor. He was bound to do the work until the loan was paid. The worst aspect

of the system was that the rate of interest was never made clear and indebted Santal was bound to work for a lower wage than the paid to a free labourer. In Bhaoli system moneylenders took much interest and easily alienate Santal from his land. As they gained prescriptive rights over Santal's land who became a tenant on his own land. He was bound to pay at least half of the produce. According to Gantzer, Palhaiti is "a system by which a labourer is given a small grant of land on which to build a house and plant some rice for which he pays no rent. (But) He must work for his master when required, and when he does so, he gets wages in kind at about half of the rate which payable to a free labourer. This system of sub-letting has also been treated as coming within the purview of illegal transfers. Obviously all these bondage systems were more or less similar in their exploitative character as they robbed and exploited Santals and others without any kind of restriction. These systems virtually reduced cultivator/debtor to a bond slave of his master. This created fertile ground for people's revolution in a major part of erstwhile Bengal Presidency.

Conclusion:

Thus by the systems, the debtor Santal became bonded servant of his creditor. Therefore, almost his entire harvest went to pay debts. He became trapped in the circle of debts and the systems. The creditor managed his accounts so carefully that usually the debtor Santal was hardly free even at the fag end of his life. The debtor was bound to pay high rate of interest ranging from 100% to 500%. The creditor forced his debtor to pay his debt with the very land he had obtained for cultivation and habitation after clearance of forests. (The Calcutta Review 1856:240-241). Moreover, if the debtor dies before the clearance of debt, his son, daughter or other nearest relative was liable to give similar service to the creditor. The worst thing of the whole system was that it was upheld by the Courts that had given decree for the execution of bond. Thus the Santals were exploited and looted heavily by the trio of Mahajans-Zamindars and Officials (Police, Court and Revenue Dept.) under Kamiotee and Harwahee systems. It is to be noted that the promise to work out debt by personal service and the payment of an exorbitant rate of interest was

highly exploitative nature of the system and eventually destroyed not only the debtor but his entire family. This created an atmosphere of the biggest people's revolution in a large part of erstwhile Bengal Presidency of British India.

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