

# The Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and Indigenous Literature: The Writing of Babu Digambar Chakraborty(1849-1913)

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## ABSTRACT

There was no dearth of indigenous literature on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. But these literary sources were not used by most of research scholars and historians. Even the first Indian writing on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 by Babu Digambar Chakraborty (Pakur, Jharkhand) was overlooked by most of research scholars and historians. Whether it was a foreign writer or an Indian, no one gave any importance to it. This kind of overlooking led to unrevealing of various kinds of important aspects of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. The paper, therefore, traces the efforts of Babu Digambar Chakraborty to collect facts and materials for his book and examines the contents of his writing. It focuses on revealing its historical importance and literary aspects.

**Keywords:** *Santal, Company, Bengal, Hul, British*

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## Introduction:

The writing, reporting and editing published in various Newspapers (English and Bangla) of Calcutta and its adjoining places by its correspondents and editors were perhaps the first indigenous literature on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Samvad Prabhakar, Samva Bhaskar, Samachar Sudhadarshan, Hindu Patriot, Friend of India and Bengal Hurkaru were some important and popular Newspapers wherein accounts of historical events of the Santal Hul were regularly published in their various contemporary issues. But most of these indigenous writings were overlooked by E.G. Man (1867), W.W. Hunter (1868), C.E. Buckland (1901), F.B. Bradley-Birt (1905), McPherson (1909), L.S.S. O'Malley (1910, 1910, 1925), Robert Carstairs (1912), W.G. Archer and W.J. Culshaw (1945), John Houlton (1949) and other British colonial authors who were pioneer in writing on the Santal Hul. In their writing, the colonial authors times and again referred to volume 26 (January-June 1856) and volume 35 (July-

Dec. 1860) of Calcutta Review (London) but they intentionally neglected indigenous writing on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Most of them also overlooked "History of the Santal Hool of 1855" by Babu Digambar Chakraborty (1895-1896) who was the first Indian author to write on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. The study mainly explores historical and literary significance of the work on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 by Babu Digambar Chakraborty.

## Objectives:

The paper highlights overlooked indigenous literature on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 published from Calcutta and its adjoining areas in various Newspapers, but it mainly focuses on the writing of Babu Digambar Chakraborty of Pakur, the first Indian author who wrote "History of the Santal Hool" (1895-1896). The continuous efforts of the author for collection of authentic materials for the purpose of writing an authentic book on the Hul and discussing its main aspects, literary and historical importance etc. are included in its objectives.

## Methodology

The study is basically based on published sources in form of books and specially on Santals and Santal Parganas. It is mainly based on translation of the manuscript of—“History of the Santal Hool of 1855” by Babu Digamabar Chakraborty. A noted historian and author of the book “Hul” (2000, Tathya aur Sanskriti Bibhag, Pashchimbang Sarkar, Calcutta) in Bangla, Arun Chowdhury translated the manuscript into English and got it published in 1989.

## Literature Review

The colonial authors had no knowledge of the writing of Babu Digambar Chakraborty as there is no mention of the book by Babu Digambar Chakraborty. C.E. Buckland (1901), F.B. Bradley-Birt (1905) and L.S.S. O'Malley (1910, 1910, 1925) said nothing in their books about indigenous writing on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 by Babu Digambar Chakraborty. Even most of Indian authors' writings, the work by Babu Digambar Chakraborty is not referred. Further there is very little mention of the work in the book by K.K. Datta (1940), Bihar District Gazetteers Santal Parganas by P.C. Roy Chaudhary (1965) and Narhari Kaviraj (2001). Moreover Nabendu Datta-Majumdar (1956), P.C. Biswas (1956) and C.L. Mukherjee (1962) etc. modern scholars who wrote on Santals and Santal Parganas also overlooked the work of Babu Digambar Chakraborty. However, Peter Stanley (2022) was the first author who many times referred Babu Digambar Chakraborty in his writing on the Hul. In this background, Babu Digambar Chakraborty's book needs to be mentioned with its historical aspects and evaluated because his writing was an unmatched contribution in the domain of Historiography of Santal Hul of 1855-1856.

## Babu Digambar Chakraborty and the Santal Hul of 1855-1856

Babu Digambar Chakraborty (1849-1913), belonged to Pakur, now one of Districts of Jharkhand, was the first Indian author

(Chowdhury 1989:7) to write on the historical events of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Historically he was the first Indian author who noted various events of the Hul as he understood in his mother language of Bangla. As a lawyer he worked hard for many days, so his description is of great historical as well as of literary significance. As a author of the book he mentioned many historical events of the Hul which is nowhere available. His style is impressive as he wrote in simple and comprehensible language. In fact his work is of a great historical importance written in beautiful literary style. Therefore, the study of the Hul can not be completed without going through the work on the Hul by Babu Digambar Chakraborty. This reveals the significance of the work by Babu Digambar Chakraborty. Though it was completed in 1895-1896 but the work was not only overlooked by colonial authors but also by most of Indian scholars who wrote on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 including noted author C.H. Koomar (1937) and Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri (2010). It was in March 1989, after about ninety five years of its writing, Arun Chowdhury, a noted leftist writer, got the manuscript from Sri Binod Gopal Pandey of Pakur, the eighty year old grandson of the writer of the book, and facing many troubles eventually was able to edit and publish it from Aligarh, (Birbhum), West Bengal. (Chowdhury 1989:1)

## The writing of Babu Digambar Chakraborty

When practicing as a lawyer at Pakur, Babu Digambar Chakraborty came in direct contact specially with the Santals and became known to their basic problems and troubles.

This aroused special interest and devotion in him to the Santals. He therefore, began to assist the Santals and sometimes pleaded their cases even without charging his fee from the Santal clients. (Chowdhury 1989:9) He was an exception to some extent as he stood of his own for the accused Santals. Thus he came close both to the Santals and to the tales of their miserable life. This benevolent attitude made him a famous lawyer at

Pakur and its adjoining areas. This led him to give broad assistance to his Santal clients and promptly developed a close relationship with them. This filled him with sympathy for the Santals and he began feeling the need to record the History of the Santal Hool (Hul-Revolution) of 1855 with its all aspects and effects on the Santals. (Chowdhury 1989:9) Perhaps this was the greatest turning point of his career as the process of making him a writer from a lawyer had begun. As a result of this Babu Digambar Chakraborty became the first Indian writer who wrote on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 after collecting materials from the persons who had taken part in the Hul or who had witnessed it personally or who had heard about the Hul from their elders. In his noted work, the author has given a picture of grass-root realities of torture, coercion and exploitation of the Santals and their young females by Mahajans and Zamindars in connivance with civil, revenue and judicial officials and staffs. The author noted active role of a number of close companions of Sido and Kanhu during the course of Hul and mentioned their nocturnal meetings and determined oath for collective fight against all oppressors and to establish their own 'Raj.'

### **The History of the Santal Hool of 1855**

Babu Digambar Chakraborty wrote "History of the Santal Hool of 1855", it was perhaps the most notable work of his life. He collected materials and facts of the Hul while practicing bar at law at Pakur. (Chowdhury 1989:9) For collection of materials he also met and interviewed those who were directly or indirectly involved with the Hul of 1855, Bimla Devi an eye-witness and Nanda Roy (sister and brother of murdered Dindayal of Pakur) who had an opportunity to know of the "Hool" from a person named Jaga Sardar". It is generally believed that he called Chunu Manjhi (Bhagnadih, Barhait, Sahibganj, Jharkhand), the father of Sido and Kanhu, the great Heroes of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 to his residence at Pakur and got important information about the Hul and personality and character of its leaders. (Chowdhury 1989:9) Thus after a long continuous efforts, he

collected a lot of materials and with much labour and enthusiasm, he drafted the facts and materials and titled it "History of Santal Hool of 1855." According to Chowdhury, "He selected the Santali word 'Hool'. Perhaps he thought this word proper to narrate the incident. From various hints it seems that he prepared the manuscript sometime between 1895 and 1896. The book was not printed then. It was in a manuscript form." (Chowdhury 1989:7) The author rightly pointed out that the Santals are not aborigines of Santal Parganas, but they did not migrate in the 17th century as noted by the author. He called them great lovers of truth and focused on their system of village communities and general character of the nation. He discussed how money-lenders became arbiters of their fate throughout their life. He beautifully described the false game of Bhakats and Moiras to exploit Santals in villages where they looted Santals' cattle, land and produce. In midst of continued exploitation Birsing Parganait, Birsingh Manjhi, Kaolek Pramanik, Doma Manjhi and others emerged as the leaders of Santals. Police and zamindars connivance, night meetings, highhandedness of Daroga and other officials with the statement of Birsing Manjhi. Gocho Santal episode, killing of Daroga, Mahajans and others, and various events of the Hul up to its suppression are categorically explained. The author has noted the role of various associates of Sido and Kanhu who disapproved of killing of Englishmen by them.

The author noted the joining of lower castes with swords, axes, bows and arrows, efforts of Babu Jagabandhu Rai to restore peace and order, plight and plundering of villages, killing of Dindayal, "one of the emblematic episodes of the Hul" (Stanley 2022:41-42, 313) and other have also been described. It is significant to note that the author noted how Sido was deceived by his people and handed over to British Captain. (Chowdhury 1989:42-43) In fact, it was the first historical document of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 written by any Indian scholar. Even after lapse of more than 157 years and publication of a number of

monographs and research papers on the Santal Hul, the historical importance of the seminal work can not be overlooked. It is to be noted that its literary characteristics made the work unique as the author wrote the work in a very simple language and lucid manner. It is to be noted that the selection of words for description of the various historical aspects and events of the Hul reflects author's understanding of history writing. It served as a trustworthy source of materials as many scholars and historians collected facts and figures from this manuscript. The distinguished historian K.K.Datta and official author of Gazetteers of Bihar P.C.Roy Chaudhary referred to this manuscript in "The Santal Insurrection of 1855-57" (1940, Calcutta) and Bihar District Gazetteers: Santal Parganas" (1965, Patna) respectively.

### **Literary Characteristics of "History of Santal Hul of 1855"**

The writing of Babu Digambar Chakraborty is historically highly important as aspects and events of the Hul noted and explained in the book are nowhere available. From this point of view, the book is an original contribution to the historiography of the Hul. The style of the writing and its literary characteristics are impressive and brilliant. Literally it is so easy and understandable that a reader of the book is surprised by its picturesque description and it also appears to him that the events are being taken place before his eyes. Really the author was so capable of writing historical events that he described in such a beautiful words that revealed his hold on selection of suitable words in suitable manner that make the author superb and great. In addition to these aspects of the work, it is also a unique writing of great historical event. Further it is also a work of great historical importance as it reveals various significant aspects of the Hul. In fact, his work for the first time revealed various significant historical facts of the Hul. A noted historian Arun Chowdhury has rightly observed, "The book in manuscript form is not a voluminous one, but the contents in it are well-arranged. With an introduction to the Santal

Tribes, their life-style and their idiosyncracies, he went to the details of the rebellion of 1855. He arranged them chapterwise. The first chapter deals with the arrival of the Santal Tribe at Damin-ei-ko, the second, with the structure of their society, the third one with their religious festivals and ceremonies. He dwelt upon their language, dress, food, clothes, ornaments, magic, their livelihood, and then he went deep into the main theme, the history of the rebellion. The arrangement is so well-ordered that it seems to be a case of argument in the Court of Justice."

### **Critique of the writing of Babu Digambar Chakraborty**

The account of the Hul written by Babu Digambar Chakraborty is not above criticism as it suffers from multiple kinds of defects. The author mainly focused on Pakur and its adjoining areas as he belonged to the area. So his description of the Hul and its events are confined to Pakur and its neighbouring areas, and seems to be original and authentic. This reveals author's honesty and devotion to the work of historiography. It is in many respects unequalled so far and a great historical guide to research scholars of regional history. As the author has given a lot of information of different aspects including local socio-economic situation, the work is also significant for the study of regional history. In fact, written after much care and labour, the work is an important milestone in the historiography of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. The various facts and information noted and discussed by the author are also not less significant. Assessing the work, Chowdhury pointed out that the author Digambar Chakraborty "is not at all biased in his treatment of history. Though he came of a feudal family, he was by and large able to come out of his class outlook and with an impartial view and endless sympathy he portrayed a glorious tale of the mass-upsurge dealing a heavy blow to feudalism and imperialism. Many after him narrated the incident, sometimes from a parochial point of view, sometimes from a communal outlook, sometimes they, prompted by a feeling of hatred

towards the aboriginal people ,exerted their best efforts to underrate the importance of the rebellion. They do not describe it as an upsurge of oppressed ,exploited humiliated poor people of society. But Digambar Chakraborty with due justice to history treated the glorious struggle with a unerring sagacity.” (Chowdhury1989:10)

### Conclusion:

Thus Babu Digambar Chakraborty was the first Indian author who wrote the history of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 in easy ,clear and comprehensible language. Therefore the work proved to be a great literary work on the historical event of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. The work displayed the close relationship of History and Literature and remind us the saying that History is Half Literature. From literary point of view, it is first authentic literature on the historical even written by an India writer by his solemn efforts of many days for the purpose.

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