

Rumour and its Historical Significance : A Critique of the Role of Rumours in Santal Hul of 1855-1856

Amisha Raj

Chandmari Road, Uttarpalli, Rampurhat, Birbhum, West Bengal

Dr. Dinesh Narayan Verma

Director, Study and Research Centre, Uttarpalli, Rampurhat, Birbhum (W. B.)

ABSTRACT

Rumours are unfounded and their origin can never be traced but they always act as a crucial catalyst and organizational tool in historical events. They instigate social unrest and revolution in shaping public opinion. They create a kind of brotherhood among different sections of society for common cause. They also influence historical narratives and provide a major trigger for revolution. Historically rumours played a crucial role in the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 as various kinds of rumours served to mobilize the Santals and also fostered in them a sense of collective purpose. The rumours provided a religious sanction for the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 against their oppressors and foreign rule. Rumours spread in the Santal community created public sensation that led to unity of Santals and others before the Hul. Admittedly Hull was propelled by the belief that Heroes had received a divine message from the supreme God Thakur who instructed them to led the Santals against their all oppressors and establish their Swaraj. In short rumours gave birth to a mass revolution better known as the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 in Indian History.

Keywords: Rumour, Role, public, Government, Hul.

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Introduction:

The word 'rumour' is of multiple origins. It is partly a borrowing from French and partly a borrowing from Latin. Historically it originated from Latin word 'rumor' ('rumorem'-nominative rumor), meaning a loud noise, clamour, widespread talk, common talk, hearsay and popular opinion. From Latin, it passed into Old French as rumeur, meaning commotion or report. In the Middle English period around the 14th Century the word rumour was adopted in English from Old French. The earliest known use of the word rumour is in the Middle English period 1150-1500. Finally this Latin word itself is thought to derive from Proto-Indo-European root "reuH meaning to shout " or "to roar." It is to be noted that rumor and rumour are both English terms. But the term "rumor" is predominantly used in American English while "rumour is predominantly used in British English. Dutch rumoer and German rumour are from French. According to Oxford English Dictionary, rumour is "unsubstantiated, often false stories that spread through a community person to person by word of mouth in a manner rather similar to the spread of communicable diseases. So it is an

unverified report or story. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1994:1106), rumour is an "information spread by being talked about but not certainly true." Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008:1248) explaining it mentioned that rumour is "an unofficial interesting story or piece of news that might be true or invented which quickly spread from person to person." But in its modern terminological meaning, rumour is a social phenomenon as it generally originates from individuals' cognition or subject judgment. There may be some partially real facts. These facts may be extremely deceptive and seditious. It is generally interpreted as unfound rumour or fabricated words. So, these days rumour has become an unreliable, deceptive and derogatory term. However, before and during the Hul, various kinds of rumours acted as a crucial catalyst and organizational tool that transformed deep-seated economic and social grievances into a unified, religiously-sanctioned armed struggle against foreigners for their own Swaraj.

Purpose: Keeping in view the role of rumour in history, the underlying purpose of the study is to trace and evaluate the role of rumour in hastening the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 under the charismatic leadership of Sido and Kanhu of Bhaganadih in Barhait Block of Sahibganj District (Santal Parganas Division) of Jharkhand. (Kumar 2021 69:60). It is discussed that undoubtedly there were major causes responsible for the historical event, but multiple kind of rumour played no less significant role in organizing tribes, backwards and dalits against foreign rule. Its role also display the strength of rumour in uniting the different people who forgot their differences that created a kind of brotherhood with communal harmony. Thus rumours created a people's revolution against foreign rule in India. Keeping in view, the tenets of the study of "history from below", it is attempted to trace and discuss the historical role of various kinds of rumours in the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. These rumours and their role in the Hul are not properly recorded, discussed and examined in historical studies.

Methodology:

The study is based on published materials. These include Colonial and Indian writings, Reports, authored and edited Books, Correspondence, published Journals, Contemporary Print Media etc. These archival and other sources are available in various archives and libraries in India. There is, therefore, an abundance of literature on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 as Colonial as well as Indian scholars and historians broadly wrote on the great historical event that virtually challenged the administration of the East India Company in Bengal Presidency. They broadly wrote on various aspects of the Hul and focused on its characteristics.

Literature Review:

There is an abundance of literature on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 as Colonial as well as Indian scholars and historians broadly wrote on the great historical event. In this context, writings of Man(1867), Hunter (1868), Buckland(1901), Basu (1934), Datta(1934, 1940), Roy (1960,1961). Ray Chaudhary (1965), Sinha(1991) etc. are famous and significant. But all these authors mainly said about its Heroes, origin, spread, suppression, effects etc. but most of scholars overlooked many aspects

including role of rumours and its effects in hastening the Hul and organizing the local people against the foreign rule. There is, therefore, a need for careful scrutiny of the sources to trace and discuss various kinds of rumours floating in the area before and during the Hul.

Rumours in History:

Rumours have played a significant role in the History of India. Generally rumours stem from fear, religious sentiment and the subversion of authority. The influence of rumours range from instigating social unrest and rebellion. Even rumours have been found responsible for religious and communal tension and strife. The rumours have also shaped public opinion and influenced historical narratives. Admittedly rumours played a major role in the National Struggle of 1857 by fuelling fear and anger. The specific rumour about the greased cartridges and disrespect of religious customs led to widespread unrest. The simmering tension eventually boiled over following the introduction of the Pattern 1853 Enfield Rifle. The rumour quickly spread that the cartridges (Guha 1983:262) for the new rifle were greased with pig and cow fat. Though British officials denied the rumours but Hindus and Muslims widely believed it because they resonated with existing fears about the destruction of their religion and culture by the British. Thus before the National Struggle of 1857, the rumours created a collective consciousness that acted against British regime. It shaped public opinion and stirred people against established order. It provoked violence and social unrest. It influenced individuals and communities who joined hand against foreign administration and its officials. Even before the National Struggle of 1857, various kinds of rumours played a key role in organizing tribals, backwards and Dalits during the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 against foreign rule.

Historical Importance of Rumours:

Rumour has not only played an important role in public life but it also prepared a deep and cemented background for public protests. It united the common people against the misrule and anti-public laws and ordinances of government. It often played a key role in overthrowing the government. It also played a key role in political turmoil and provoked people against tyrannical ruler and his

regime. Admittedly every society is consisted of people of different thoughts and ideology to which they are strongly attached and have undaunted faith. These characteristics have shadowed societies for centuries. So in its specific nature ,thoughts and ideology are followed and accepted all over the world. However, the people easily come under the influence of rumour/ rumours if the rumours are repeatedly circulated and spread. This shows the strength and importance of rumour. Presently it is generally interpreted as unfounded or fabricated words. It is gossip , deceptiveness or hearsay. Keeping in view its negative repercussions, in USA , China and other countries ,rumours are legally banned, strict punishment and fine etc. are imposed on rumour mongers according to the laws. However, rumours played an unmatched historical role in the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 led by charismatic leadership of its Heroes Sido and Kanhu with their your brothers Chand and Bhairav. In his one of monumental works, Ranajit Guha (1983) referred rumours during the Hul and pointed out their significance in historical perspective ,and described it as "a mobile and explosive agent of insurgency."

Rumours and the Santal Hul of 1855-1856:

Historically when the tribal, dalit and backwards of the region were crying under the unholy trinity of their oppressors: the zamindars, the mahajans and the government, there were many rumours current and prevalent that added fuel to the growing discontent of the people and ultimately united them against foreign rule in Bengal Presidency.(Kumar2021:61-62)A noted scholar Kaviraj pointed out that "Magic, mysticism and rumour based on superstition added a dramatic dimension to the whole scenario, inspiring the Santals to participate in the rebellion in hundreds and thousands, Sidhu and Kanhu's statements which were invariably tinged with touches of mysticism made a deep impression on the mind of the Santals who were desperately seeking for a remedy." (Kaviraj2001:86) The Heroes set the ball rolling when they gave out that they had regular interviews with God. The Heroes proclaimed that they had received a divine message from Suba Thakur urging them to lead the Santals in a Hul. It is well known that religion has often acted as an important motivating force and the claim of Sido and Kanhu that it was God's wish that the Santal

revolt against their oppressors appeared to be spark needed to kindle the conflagration. This religious sanction gave the Heroes the authority they required to be accepted by the Santals.(Troisi2024 :37; Chopra 1985: 402,409) Sido said to his comrades, "God descended from heaven in the form of a cart-wheel. Half a piece of a paper fell on my head before the Thakur came and half fell afterwards. I could not read but Chand and Lehra and a Dom read it, they said, "The Thakur had written to you to fight the Mahajans and then you will have justice."(Kaviraj2001:86) These so-called interviews raised Sido and Kanhu to the status of Heroes of the people so they prepared an elaborate plan to reach out to the Santals in every village, hill and locality .According to Chotrae Desmanhji (1938),the Heroes took sunned-rice,oil and vermilion and circulated in a leaf-pot from village to village with the idea to conciliate the gods so that they may help us in the fight, they made it known to the people that it was God's wish that one young man should come out from each family to go out to fight."

There were many rumours floating in the area about two months before the Hul. A superstitious rumour was set on foot that something wonderful was coming and so the villagers must keep their houses clean. Another rumour was that the Santal territory was being visited by a deadly enemy and the Santals must get ready for the challenge .It was decided that group of men belonging to five villages should visit another group of men of five neighbouring villages and so on, and in each meeting place some elaborate rituals were to be performed to the accompaniment of music and dances. Obviously, as Kaviraj noted ,the purpose to forge unity in Santal ranks. and observed that it was easily believed of appearance of child god who would right their wrongs. There was yet another rumour that Santal women who had same number of children should meet together ,dine together and fraternize among themselves. Jugia Haram rightly pointed out that "the purpose was perhaps that the Santals must close up their ranks and keep themselves united ,in case rebellion takes place, no one betrays the cause ,and all must keep their plan secret." In fact, as Kaviraj observed, "For full two months before the revolt started ,the Santal country was agog with all sorts of rumours of a

mysterious kind. While the rumours had invariably a mystical colour, the message that they conveyed was clear and unequivocal....The mystic element served a double purpose. Not only did it invest the leaders with an unassailable authority because of their association with gods, it was done through a media which was easily intelligible to the Santals." (Kaviraj 2001:87-88).

British Military officer Toogood had talks with a large number of villagers who reported him the visit of Sido and Kanhu to the Manjhis of villages and told them that a Thakur had descended in their houses, and therefore all should bring a cup full of milk and present it as an offering. Jugia Haram also added, it was rumoured that a SubahThakur had been born at Bhaganadihi and they were none else than Sido and Kanhu. On hearing this the people began to visit that place in groups with some rice and milk. It was seen that on a raised platform Sido himself was seated as an incarnation of God. People crawled before him to offer puja." This gave the political mission a powerful religious legitimacy. It made the Hul a 'holy war' in the eyes of the people under undisputed divine command. A secret code of uniquely folded sal leaf branch was circulated through villages for secret communication. The sal leaf branch was a system called Dharwak. It was, in fact, an efficient rumour-based method of mobilization across a wide area. The Heroes used their perceived divine authority to enforce strict obedience. So they also spread rumours that those who disobeyed the Thakur's orders to join the Hul would face death. Other rumours of supernatural occurrences were also spread in the Santal community. These included human eating snakes, a golden boat sinking in the Ganges and roaming buffalo-cows etc. Consequently, the British officers became troubled and worried. So rumours showed its effects and left an indelible mark.

Conclusion:

Thus historically a number of rumours played a crucial and multifaceted role in the Hul. Various kinds of rumours acted as a primary means of mass mobilization, communication and social control. It is to be noted that the most significant role of rumours was in spreading the message of the Heroes of the Hul who claimed

divine instruction. Rumours spread that the supreme God Thakur had appeared and ordered them to overthrow the foreign rule and establish their own Swaraj of Santals. The Santals, therefore, could present a common front when the Hul started. The religious dimension of rumours helped characterize the Hul as Holy War against oppressors and foreigners. The whole tribal community became deeply disturbed by all noted anonymous rumours whose origin could never be traced. This led not only to general unrest but also acts of violence. The rumours affected both -the British forces and the revolutionaries. If a rumour that Kanhu had been killed led some Hul leaders to retreat temporarily while the British authorities also initially hesitated to advance on the Hul headquarters fearing an exaggerated estimate of 20,000 to 30,000 armed Santals in the area. In essence, rumours played a big role in the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and affected its course and character in Bengal Presidency.

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