

Nocturnal Meetings and Political Revolutions : A Critique of the Role of Night Meetings in Santal Hul of 1855-1856

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ABSTRACT

The meetings organized or called at night are known as nocturnal meetings. Historically these meetings played a key role in hastening major political upheavals leading to revolution. In many countries, nocturnal meetings have been regularly arranged to finalize the strategy against the authority before initiating armed struggle for liberation. Of course, nocturnal meetings played a key role in preparing the background of political revolutions, therefore, the focus of the present study is on the role of nocturnal meetings in Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Undoubtedly there were many kinds of preparations before calling the Hul by its Heroes and Comrades, so invitations for, and consequent gathering of large number of tribal and non-tribal communities, nocturnal meetings were one of main preparations for the Hul. It at first contemplated and finally decided the strategy and actions to be followed during the course of challenges and ultimately called for revolution (Hul). The study, therefore, traces, discusses and examines the importance of nocturnal meetings in Santal Hul of 1855-1856. As this is a neglected aspect of the Hul, the purpose of the proposed study is clear and significant.

Keywords: *Nocturnal, Santal, Meeting, Hul, British*

Introduction:

The phrase “nocturnal meetings” is obviously a combination of two words – “nocturnal” and “meetings”. These words used together to describe meetings, gathering or assemblies that essentially called or organized during the night. The word “nocturnal” derives from the Latin “nocturnes” meaning “of the night.” It is related to “nox”, meaning “night”. In the course of time, the word “nocturnal” entered English and maintained its association with night time activity. It is noteworthy that the word “Meetings” comes from the Old English “metan” meaning “to meet, encounter.” It evolved into the noun form “meeting”, representing the act or instance of coming together. When these

two words are combined, the phrase “nocturnal meetings” crystallizes the idea of gatherings specifically held at night. Though the individual words have distinct histories, the phrase itself emerged naturally through English usage to describe this particular concept. In view of the interpretation, the concept includes its multiple aspects including various dimensions of nocturnal meetings i.e. political, cultural, social, romantic, spiritual, personal and secret etc. It served as a vital, hidden arena for political, social and cultural activities. These operated outside the strict norms and surveillance of the daytime. Historically, the night provided a heaven for activities that were otherwise

restricted or forbidden, including forbidden love, political conspiracies, and social gatherings. In its political dimension, the darkness of night enabled clandestine political activities bypassing the control of the state authorities. In various cultures, the night was a time for social gathering that was used to cultivate personal relationship and demonstrate official power. The night was also used for introspection and spiritual, silent and contemplation. In literature, nocturnal meetings are secret and romantic rendezvous. They are defined by the need for secrecy, urgency and intense, intimate emotion, often involving a perilous or difficult journey to reach a lover in the dark. But symbolic meetings represent love that defies societal norms, highlighting the contrast between passionate, hidden or forbidden relationships and societal expectations. In a business setting, nocturnal meetings refer to late-night calls or meetings scheduled to bridge time zone gaps. In light of this discussion, it is obvious that nocturnal meetings are meetings especially held/organize or call in night outside the strict norms and surveillance of the daytime. Admittedly the nocturnal meetings played a key in political revolutions, the aim of present exercise is to trace, discuss and evaluate the role nocturnal meetings in the Santal Hul of 1855-1856.

Purpose:

As nocturnal meetings played a key role in preparing the background of political revolutions, the entire focus of the present study is to find out and evaluate the role of nocturnal meetings in Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Undoubtedly there were many kinds of preparations before calling the Hul by its Heroes and Comrades, so invitations for, and consequent gathering of large number of tribal and non-tribal communities, nocturnal meetings were one of main preparations for the Hul. It decided the strategy and actions to be followed during the course of challenges and ultimately called for revolution (Hul). The study, therefore, traces, discusses and

examines the importance of nocturnal meetings in the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. As this is a neglected aspect of the Hul, the purpose of the proposed study is apparently clear and highly important.

Methodology:

The study is mainly based on published materials in forms of Reports, Notes, Correspondences, Accounts, Books and Journals etc. available in different archives and libraries in India. Bengal: Past and Present, Calcutta, Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, West Bengal, and Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Patna, Bihar, The Calcutta Review 1856 (26) and the Calcutta Review 1860 (35), Proceedings of Indian History Congress and Indian Historical Records Commission etc. are other archival sources of the study. The daily and weekly Newspapers then published from different places of Bengal like Samvad Koumudi, Samvad Prabhakar, Bengal Hurkaru, Hindoo Patriot, Friend of India etc. are included in authentic historical sources.

Literature Review:

E.G. Man 1867, W.W. Hunter 1868, 1877, 1907, C.E. Buckland 1901, F.B. Bradley-Birt 1905, 1910, H. McPherson 1909, L.S.S.O' Malley 1910, Robert Carstairs 1912 etc. are the noted colonial authors who wrote on the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and discussed its various aspects from colonial perception but not discussed role and importance of nocturnal meetings in Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Even K.K. Basu 1934, K.K. Datta 1934, 1940, 1976, P.C. Roy Chaudhury 1962, 1965, N.B. Roy 1960, 1961, Stephen Fuchs 1965, Ranjan Gupta 1973, Ranajit Guha (1983), Tarapada Ray 1983, Joseph Troisi 1984, K.S. Singh 1985, S.P. Sinha 1991, 1991, Arun Chaudhury 1989, 2000 and other Indian scholars also followed more or less the perception of colonial authors because in their writings the role and significance of nocturnal meetings in the Hul is not discussed. "History of Bihar" by Prof. Radhakrishna Choudhary (Bihar

State Archives ,Patna,2012,p-157) , “Bihar ka Itihas” by Kauleshwar Rai (Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 2013, pp 234-236) and “From Region to Nation:The Tribal Revolts in Jharkhand 1855-58” by Indra Kumar Choudhary (2019,Reprint 2025,Disha International Publishing House, Greater Noida, pp 39-65) do not even mention the nocturnal meetings. In recently published and very famous two books –Jharkhand ke Adivasiyon ke Beech by Vir Bharat Talwar (2012,Bhartiya Gyanpeeth, New Delhi ,pp 304-312) and Jharkhand ki Samrgatha by Shailendra Mahto (2015,Danish Books,Delhi,p-48) are also do not say anything about nocturnal meetings and its role in Santal Hul of 1855-1856. It is, therefore, necessary to discuss and examine the role and importance of nocturnal meetings in the Santal Hul of 1855-1856.

Historical Importance of Nocturnal Meetings:

In many countries, nocturnal meetings have been regularly arranged to discuss, contemplate and finalize the strategy against the government and its officials before sounding the bugle of armed struggle for freedom from oppression ,exploitation ,coercion and tyrannical regime.. Of course, nocturnal meetings played a key role in preparing the background of political revolutions Historically nocturnal meetings have played a crucial role in tribal challenges against British rule in India. These meetings served as essential, covert forums for planning, mobilization ,and spiritual validation away from the eyes of colonial authorities. Historically night gatherings allowed leaders to build collective resistance against exploitation by landlords, money-lenders, colonial official and missionary forces. As these meetings often held in forests ,it greatly helped them to mobilize a large number of people. It is to be noted that the meetings were used to inspire resistance by linking the fight to religious ,social ,and political liberation such as proclamation of self rule for freedom from injustice and oppression. These meetings also helped to build a sense of communal brotherhood, a bond of

friendly attachment among tribal communities, Dalits and backwards. The gradually developed brotherhood also eliminated the barriers of caste and religion ,consequently united locals of different social sections under one umbrella that united them to challenge the ruling power. In fact, the night meetings were vital for maintaining secrecy while organizing attacks against foreign power and their allies. The nocturnal meetings also fostered solidarity among diverse groups and allowed leaders to spread news of resistance. It is to be noted that the leaders often used these meetings to invoke religious or messianic authority ,which was essential for overcoming fear and motivating the people to fight superior ,modern weaponry .Moreover, the leaders used night gatherings to disseminate the idea of revolution. It also created a distinct identity for the struggle as the leaders often used traditional symbols and language to rally the people on declared day and place. It is observed that the darkness of night traditionally offered a reprieve from daily surveillance and social norms ,so these night gatherings were essential for activities that needed to remain hidden or required a different atmosphere for the purpose of unity and action.

Nocturnal Meetings and the Santal Hul of 1855-1856:

Historically, the nocturnal meetings played a key role in Santal Hul of 1855-1856 as these meetings were so carefully called and organized that the Company’s military and civil officials could not understand the importance and purpose of holding regular night meetings. In this contest the report of the Settlement Officer McPherson is remarkable, “The outbreak was quite unexpected and by none more so than by Mr.Pontet ,as his letters of that year disclose. A certain amount of unrest had been noticed in the cold weather of 1854-55 and Mr. Pontet in his annual report of 28th May 1855 discussed the relations of the Sonthals with their mahajans, the extortionate interest of 50 per cent

,charged by the latter and also certain complaints against the railway people ,who were making the new Loop Line from Burdwan to Rajmahal ;but so far as revenue demands were concerned there was perfect contentment ,and it never crossed Mr. Pontet's mind that the other grievances of the Sonthals would lead to open revolt .It was exactly one month after this letter was written that 10,000 Sonthals gathered together at Bhagnadih in the heart of Barhait valley under the leadership of four brothers Siddhu,Kanhu,Chand and Bhairab and proclaimed war against mahajans,zamindars and all rich Bengalis.”(McPherson1909:37) It is apparent that Mr.Pontet, the Superintendent of Damin-i-koh had no knowledge of what was being secretly done by the Santals and their compatriots in nocturnal meetings. The British civil and military officials did not even notice of these meetings. In 1854,Morgo Rajah ,a Santal Chief ,unsuccessfully attempted to organize the Santals into a separate kingdom (Datta1940:8-9).Then Bir Singh, the first prophet of the Santals declared that the god Chando Banga had appeared before him and gave him magical charms by which he could cause the sound sleep of any man whom he wished to rob of his wealth.(Datta1940:11).

The deliberations in these meetings provided an opportunity ,a kind of public platform for constructive strategy for ahead planning, exchange of ideas and reinforce the spirit of cooperation and collective stand to challenge the foreign rule. In various night-long meetings , discussions focused on sharing ideas and making public unity strong against exploiters and foreign rule. Therefore Sido and Kanhu deliberated with local elders about injustices and exploitation faced by them. They discussed over the prevailing situation in their Veramdah for two months (Guha1983:42) and unanimously decided to spread the news of Thakur appearance before them. Suspicious of the activities of the Santals, Mahajans and Zamindars asked them

of their activities, and Santal attempted to satisfy them by replying that they used to gather together for hunting and then Shiv Puja in night at Shiv Gadi near Barhait and “frustrated all the attempts of the dikus to know the secrets of their meetings.” (Datta1940:11;Datta1970:52) But Mahajans and Zamindars reported Santals' activities to Maheshlal Datta ,the Daroga of Dighi Police station. The action of police culminated in hot discussions and killing of Daroga Mahesh Lal Datta and his police by revolutionary Santals and their Heroes.(The Calcutta Review1856:246;The Calcutta Review 1860: 511-512;Ghosh1971:86)It is, therefore, obvious that these night meetings fostered solidarity among diverse groups and allowed leaders to spread news of armed challenges. A noted historian Ranajit Guha discussing (1986) inter-tribal collaboration pointed out the activities of Bhuyans and Mal Pahareehs and quoted the statements of a captured rebel Santal who said that in his contingent “ there were with us two or three thousand Pahareehs and there were of us Sonthals, seven or eight thousand.” (Guha1986:179) Ranjan Gupta rightly observed that “the Paharias, the Dhangars, the low-caste Hindus and the ordinary Mulsims etc were their allies.The Kamar, Kumar, Muchi,Mal, DomTeli, Napit, Ahir (Goala),Bairagi were some other castes sects that took part in the insurrection and helped the Santals in many ways. Among the Muslims the Momins were the participants.”(Gupta1974:145) The Commissioner of Bhagalpur in his letter dated 28 July 1855 to Secretary to the Government of Bengal also noted various kinds of support of low castes Hindus to the Santals.(Datta 1940:16)

Admittedly, the regular nocturnal meetings were significant events in the history of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. It is noteworthy that in absence of multiple kinds of facilities of modern transport and communication especially roads, telephones, mobile facility etc. the holding of nocturnal meetings proved highly significant in exchange of thoughts,

ideas, planning and final contemplation of armed strategy to be followed. It is to be noted that the darkness of night traditionally offered a reprieve from daily surveillance and social norms, so these night gatherings were essential for activities that needed to remain hidden or required a different atmosphere for the purpose of unity and combined action against exploiters and foreigners. In fact, the nocturnal meetings provided and allowed leaders to build collective resistance against foreign government and its officials. It was the night gathering that facilitated the assembly of large crowds as on 30 June 1855 ten thousand Santals gathered together at Bhagnadih (in Barhait block, Sahibganj district, now in Jharkhand) and sounded the battle cry of armed struggle against the administration of East India Company.

Conclusion:

Thus nocturnal meetings played a crucial role in the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 as it culminated in armed struggle of tribals, dalits and backwards against exploiters and British rule. The nocturnal meetings were held in jungles to escape the surveillance of government and its officials. In absence of facilities of modern transport and communication, the holding of nocturnal meetings proved highly significant in exchange of thoughts, ideas, planning clandestine activities and final contemplation of strategy to be followed. It is to be noted that the darkness of night traditionally offered a reprieve from daily surveillance and social norms, so these night gatherings were essential for activities that needed to remain hidden or required a different atmosphere for the purpose of unity and combined action against exploiters and foreigners. It is to be noted that the nocturnal meetings were also crucial to the Munda Ulgulan 1899-1900.

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