

Colonial Administrators and Challenges to British Colonialism: A Critique of C.E. Buckland's Perception of Santal Hul of 1855-1856

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ABSTRACT

Charles Edward Buckland, one of the most prominent officials and authors of Colonial India, wrote and compiled several important books in the fields of Indian History, Culture, Biography and Administration. As he served in Indian Civil Service for many years, he was profoundly under the influence of colonial system and approach and followed the academic malice set and discussed by his earlier colonial authors E.G. Man (1867) and W.W. Hunter (1868). In this study Buckland's perspective of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 is discussed and assessed. He wrote on the Hul in detail but presented a biased discussion of the great historical events. It is pointed out that as an author Buckland could not be honest as he failed to go against the wishes of his colonial fathers in India and England. It is, therefore, explained that his interpretation can not be regarded as a scientific and authentic study of the Hul.

Keywords: Bengal, England, India, Santal, Book, British, Hul.

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Introduction:

Buckland (1847-1941) was one of the most prominent officials of Colonial India. He served in Indian Civil Service (I.C.S.) primarily in the Bengal Presidency during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. He was also famous as one of the important authors and compilers of British India. He is best known for his scholarly contributions to documenting British Indian History and Administrative Affairs. He was born on 19 September, 1847. His father, Charles Thomas Buckland, was also in the Indian Civil Service. He was educated at various institutions in England and at Oxford University. After completing his education, he passed the Indian Civil Service examination in the 1860s. (Internet Archive...+2) In the 1870s, he took up administrative duties under the British Government in Bengal. He held several key positions in the Bengal Government, from a District

Officer to a high ranking Chief Secretary to the Bengal Government. During his tenure, he notably represented the Indian Government at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1886. He showcased Indian arts and manufacturing, and retired in the early 1900s. (Google Books+1)

Buckland is primarily known for his historical compilations and reference texts. He wrote and compiled several important books in the fields of Indian History and Administration. "Bengal Under Lieutenant Governors" (1901) and "Dictionary of Indian Biography" (1906) are included in his major academic writings on India. "Bengal Under Lieutenant Governors" is a historical document published in two volumes. These Volumes contain an authentic account of the History of Bengal 1854-1898. It gives a detailed account of the major public

works, public policies and events of the Bengal province from 1854 to 1898 with administrative events implemented during that period. (Wikisource.org.+1). In this book Buckland wrote on the Hul (pp 11-16) and represented colonial perception of the Hul. Another famous writing “Dictionary of Indian Biography” is his most famous and authoritative work, a concise encyclopedia of approximately 3,000 brief biographies of English, Indian, and foreign personalities connected with the History, Administration and Culture of India. After a long and active career in India, Buckland retired to England and lived a long life. He passed away in 1941. (Wikisource.org.+1) Referring historical significance of his works, it is rightly pointed out that as an English writer and colonial administrator, his writing may have been dominated by a British perspective, but his literature is still considered an important source for obtaining information about historical figures, administrators, kings and social reformers of contemporary India. However, as an author Buckland was not free from colonial perception of Man and Hunter.

Purpose:

The underlying purpose the study is to discuss the writings of Buckland in brief with an especial focus on his analysis of the Hul noted in his famous work “Bengal Under Lieutenant Governors”. Undoubtedly Buckland was a noted colonial official and author and wrote many books but he was not free from colonial thinking which is reflected in his works on Indian History and Administration. As a matter of fact, Buckland blindly followed the academic malice commenced and propounded by Man and Hunter. Buckland, therefore, overlooked most of archival and academic sources easily available to him and attempted his best to protect colonial administration and its officials. A critique of Buckland’s perspective on the Hul is included in the purposes of the study.

Methodology:

The study, therefore, 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. Even after its Indian print, the book “Bengal Under Lieutenant Governors” is available in archives and few libraries only. Bengal: Past and Present, Calcutta, The Calcutta Review 1856 (26) and the Calcutta Review 1860 (35), 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:

Before the publication of the book “Bengal Under Lieutenant Governors”, the books titled “Sonthalia and the Sonthals” by Man and “The Annals of Rural Bengal” by Hunter were important publications on regional tribal history including the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Buckland followed the same colonial perception set up by Man and Hunter, his earlier colonial authors. He also overlooked many aspects pointed out by Man and Hunter. As a writer he was clearly under colonial impression as he attempted his best to save the image of Company Government and its officials ignoring authentic historical documents that were easily available to him as he was one of the most influential colonial officials. Not only F.B. Bradley-Birt (1905), McPherson (1909) and L.S.S.O’Malley (1910, 1910, 1925), the noted colonial authors and officials but also K.K. Basu (1934), K.K. Datta (1934, 1940, 1957, 1970, 1976), Sunil Sen (1982), Ranajit Guha (1983), Suchibrata Sen (1984), J.C. Jha (1985), K.S. Singh (1985) Bipam Chandra and others (1989) S.P. Sinha (1993), R.C. Majumdar (1996-1997), Sunderlal (2000), Sekhar Banddyopadhyay (2004, 2013),

Pandit Sunderlal Suresh Mishra(2019),Tara Chand (2020), J.Troisi(2024) and other noted scholars and historians of India did not discuss and assess the colonial perception of Buckland.

C.E.Buckland and the Santal Hul of 1855-1856

Buckland wrote a detailed account of the Hul in his in “Bengal Under Lieutenant Governors” (1901: 10-16). According to Buckland, “The insurrection of the Sonthals in 1855 broke out suddenly. it was described by Lord Dalhousie in his final minute of February 1856 as a local outbreak, “little looked for.”But there had been sign of coming trouble .In the cold weather of 1854,they were in a restless excited state :their grievances were being agitated among themselves. Their tract of the countrythe Damin-i-koh , ...was under the fiscal and general management of a superintendent ,Mr. Pontet ,subordinate to the Commissioner of Bhagalpur, and in criminal matters under the Magistrate of Bhagalpur. There was only one resident Magistrate at Deoghar. To the wild Sonthal ,justice was far off and very difficult to access at the Bhagalpur Courts. Bengali grain-dealers had flocked to the Sonthal country for business purposes. it was no wonder that the ignorant helpless Sonthals should fall easy victims to the unscrupulous mahajan. Once in the clutches of usurers, they became with their families their bondslaves. And this was occurring at the time when a railway line skirting the Sonthal country for 200 miles was under construction, and creating an immense demand for labour. The bondslaves ,working to pay off debts which were never satisfied felt the contrast between themselves and the free workers. Thus it was the grinding oppression of the Bengali mahajans on the semi-savage Sonthals that was the main cause of the outbreak. The latter had no sufficient protection against the crafty Bengali ,and the machinery of the Civil Courts was employed only as an instrument to rivet the chains of servitude. Thus ,it had been said ,the Sonthals ,starting with the desire to revenge themselves on Hindu money-lenders who had taken advantage of their simplicity and independence

,found themselves arrayed to arms against the British Government. The noted leaders of the rebellion two brothers ,Seedoo and Kanoo lived with their less forward brothers, Chand and Bhairab, at a village Bhagnadihi ,half a mile from Barhait ,the capital of all the Sonthal towns and villages. There is reason to suppose that this village had been particularly oppressed. The two brothers were men of strong personal character,and brooded over the wrongs of their race. They claimed to have seen apparitions of their *Thakur*, and to have been favoured with scraps of paper ,which were distributed through the country. They also sent forth a Sal-tree branch to their brothers and others, as a sign to rouse the clans. On the 30th of June (1855) accordingly 10,000 Sonthals are supposed to have met at Bhagnadihi, ,and it was said, though it was not proved, that the assemblage, at Seedoo’s direction,addressed Government and all subordinate authorities.”(pp 11-12) After tracing the historical origin and breaking out of the Hul,Buckland observed, “The intentions of the movement were announced to be against the mahajans, zamindars and all rich Bengalis : not against Government.” (p-12) Buckland also noted the killing of Mahesh Lall Datta ,the Daroga of Thana Dighi(Borio Bazar) and other nine persons by Seedoo and the Sonthals respectively. According to Buckland,“The rebellion thus commenced with bloodshed, spread rapidly with many frightful atrocities. The whole country rose. The insurgents were armed with bows and poisoned arrows, axes, swords and a few guns only. But with these weapons they carried all before them for a time through the western districts.”(pp 12-13)

Buckland noted the sacking, destroying and burning of villages and Europeans ,atrocities, cruelties ,murders, burnings and even destroying of railway works. Then Buckland described the action taken by the Company Government and mobilization of the troops from Danapur and Calcutta to Raniganj and placed under Brigadier-General Lloyd. In an encounter on the 16th July 1855,with the Santals, the Hill Rangers were

defeated and “lost their Sergeant –major ,23 men of the corps, and an indigo –planter.” Buckland wrote, “For a time the Sonthals held possession of the country from Colgong to Palsa on the Ganges ,and nearly to Bitrbhum And Raniganj on the west.”(p-13) Then Buckland noted the clearance of Bhagalpur and Birbhum and driving of the insurgents, several engagements and partial reverses of the Company troops. Though by the 17th August 1855 quiet was restored but there were still 30,000 armed insurgents. (p-13). Buckland noted the active insurgents in Murshidabad and from Colgong to Rajmahal. The Berhampur troops under Mr. Toogood ,the Magistrate of Murshidabad, inflicted a signal defeat in which three of the brothers were wounded.(p-13).After reaching Barhait the troops beat the insurgents at Rogunathpur ,and according to Buckland, soon afterwards Seedoo was given up to the Magistrate troops though treachery, and most of the rebels fled to jungles.(p-14) According to Buckland , “Sir F. Halliday had been desirous of proclaiming martial law in August (1855) ,but the Government of India ,under the influence of Sir Barnes Peacock and Sir J.P. Grant, had refused permission. A proclamation issued by the local Government, inviting the rebels to surrender on terms, was rejected by them and in some places treated with contempt. “(p-14) Buckland observed that “though the conduct of the military operations against the Sonthals had been placed entirely in the hands of the military authorities ,still the Civil Law was the law of the disturbed country and the tactics of the military were to some extent subject to Civil control; it has been said that the military remained individual amenable to the Civil Officers for their acts. Misunderstanding constantly occurred .In September (1855), the rebels resumed activity in parts of Birbhum and Bhagalpur :and it became apparent that Martial Law was necessary. This was accordingly proclaimed on the 10th November (1855);and its effect was soon apparent.”(pp 14-15)

The insurgents, broken by the ravages of hunger and disease, were rounded by the troops under Major General Lloyd and Brigadier General

Bird ,and “on the 31st December (1855) the insurrection was officially declared to have been entirely suppressed.”(p-15) Buckland further pointed out that “a few ringleaders were executed and on the capture of Kanoo, quiet was restored to the country. A large number of Sonthal prisoners were tried and condemned ;and the further operation of Martial Law was suspended on the 3rd January 1856.” (p-16) Buckland concluded his account of the Hul and noted,“On the pacification of the country, inquiry was made into the grievances of the Sonthals,with a view to their redress. The investigation was well conducted by the Hon’ble Mr. Eden, specially deputed for the purpose. The results were that a separate non-regulation district was formed of the Sonthal Parganas: a Deputy Commissioner was placed in charge, with four assistants ,all vested with Civil as well as Criminal jurisdiction, under the Commissioner of Bhagalpur as Commissioner of the Sonthal Parganas. Laws were passed. Acts XXXVII of 1855 and X of 1857 ,making the Sonthal country independent of the jurisdiction of the Regular Courts, by removing the district called Damin-i-koh and the other districts principally inhabited by that tribe from the operation of the general laws and regulations which were found to be unsuited to so uncivilized a race .Another Act XXXVIII was passed in December 1855,to be in force for three years and provide for the speedy trial and punishment of rebellion ad other heinous crimes committed within the districts in which Martial Law was proclaimed.”(pp 15-16,see Also O’Malley1910:25-27,1910a:51-62)

Conclusion:

As Buckland belonged to the Bengal Civil Service, he had an easy access to all concerned government records especially at different places of Santal Parganas as well as Notes, Reports and Correspondences of Civil and Military Officials of the Company Government, but Buckland did not bother to view and assess all these official records, consequently he miserably failed to use facts and information of the Hul available in official records. Thus Buckland followed the same colonial

perception of Man and Hunter. He tried to trace and discuss the origin and causes of the Hul and also focused on its effects in brief and noted that “it was the grinding oppression of the Bengali mahajans on the semi-savage Sonthals that was the main cause of the outbreak.” (p-12) Undoubtedly Buckland wrote on the Hul, but overlooked many aspects pointed out by Man and Hunter. He was clearly under colonial impression as he wrote that “The intentions of the movement were announced to be against the mahajans, Zamindars and all the rich Bengalis; not against Government.” (Buckland, 1901:12-13). He utterly failed to understand the meaning of the slogans of the Hul. He overlooked the support of locals including tribal communities, Dalits and Backwards (“the rural population”. Devalle 1992:119) to the leaders of the Hul (The Calcutta Review 1856:246) and wrongly stated that the Santals used poisoned arrows against colonial forces. (Hunter 1868:248). The Hul did not break out suddenly as its roots were deeply rooted in changing times and circumstances. (Datta 1940:1-13). overlooked what was reported in The Calcutta Review of 1856 (Vol.26) and of 1860 (Vol.35) and other aspect later recorded by McPherson (1909:37-38; also Bengal: Past and Present 1974:59-73, 137-172). It was not a local outbreak, Buckland quoted the words of Lord Dalhousie, as it was not only the first mass revolution in India in the first half of the nineteenth century but also the biggest mass movement of the Asian Continent. The main heroes of the Hul actively supported by tribals, backwards and dalits that provided the Hul mass support and converted it to people’s Hul for self rule. But Buckland purposely overlooked its nature of mass participation and contemporary authentic Hul related documents including Newspapers’ reporting, confidential official dispatches and reports etc. Thus Buckland presented a biased account of the Hul, overlooked administrative lacunae and tried to save the image of colonial government and its official

ignoring authentic historical documents that were easily available to him. Buckland denounced the tribal people as he repeatedly used wild, semi-savage etc. for them. Therefore, Buckland’s interpretation can not be regarded as a scientific and authentic study of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856.

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