

Colonial Regime and Tribal Protests: Reassessing the Santal Agitation of 1861 and its Historical Significance

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ABSTRACT

The period followed the suppression of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 was not peaceful as Santals and their compatriots continued to protest colonial regime in the Santal Parganas. The colonial administration passed and implemented a number of Acts and Rules to satisfy Santals rectifying their grievances. In fact, by passing several legislation the government attempted to restrict land alienation, curb high interest rates and dismantle the exploitative systems run by moneylenders and landlords. Thus the Company government sought to address grievances of the Santals through legislation and its immediate implementation by their prompt action and direction. But moneylenders, landlords and colonial officials' staffs continued to exploit, harass and torture them. The Santals, therefore, got again discontented and agitated from 1856 that culminated in the Santal Agitation in 1861. As the Agitation is an overlooked aspect of the Regional History of the Santal Parganas, the study underscores its origin, progress and historical significance in Tribal History of the region.

Keywords: *Santal Hul, Moneylenders, Landlords, Agitation, Exploitation, Movement.*

Received : 10/9/2026 **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23096074> **Acceptance:** 15/9/2026

Introduction:

The study of Regional History is a recent phenomenon. It has witnessed a large number of studies in Regional Historiography of India. In comparison to historical studies on Chotanagpur in Bihar (now in Jharkhand), we find a very few analytical studies on the Santal Parganas, its people and culture. In the study, therefore, there is an attempt to critically study various historical aspects of the Santal Parganas, a direct and permanent outcome of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. (Datta 1940:69). However, in their studies, most of scholars overlooked significant historical events between the two great historical events i.e. the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and the first phase of the Sapha Hor Movement 1868-1871. The activities of the Santals during the National Struggle of 1857 and the Santal Agitation in 1861 are not discussed by most of scholars of Regional

History on the Santal Parganas. The study, therefore, reveals and assesses the origin and development of the Santal Agitation in 1861 with a brief focus on the activities of the Santal Community in the National Struggle of 1857. These are significant historical events of the Regional History of the Santal Parganas 1856-1868 that profoundly influenced History of the Region and transformed both its state and course. The study, therefore, reveals that the Santal community was never disassociated from the main currents of national events and kept protesting foreign regime even after the brutal suppression of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856. Their association with national events is manifested in their active activities and murmuring during the National Struggle of 1857 and their protest against exorbitant rents that culminated to the Santal Agitation in 1861.

Objectives:

The underlying objective of the study is to underscore the gap in Regional History of Santal Parganas from the suppression of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 to the origin and development of the first phase Sapha Hor Movement 1868-1871. The period of more than a decade 1856-1868 marked by the National Struggle of 1857 and the Santal Agitation of 1861 but in most of the works on the Santal Parganas, the activities of the Santals in the National Struggle of 1857 is overlooked while the Santal Agitation of 1861 is not even mentioned. In this background, the entire focus of the study is to correct the historical mistake and fulfill the gap discussing Santals' activities during 1857 in brief with reference to the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 while the Santal Agitation of 1861 is broadly discussed with its origin and historical significance in Regional History of the Santal Parganas.

Methodology:

The study is based on mainly published sources in form of edited and authored books, research papers published in journals and proceedings of academic institutions. Foreign and Google scholars' writings also provided underlying sources for the study. The compiled works by K.K.Datta (1975), T.S.Sinha (1977, 1992), Ashwin Kr.Pankaj (2021), Joseph Troisi (1976), P.N.Gaur (1982), Index to Bengal Past and Present 1907-1985 Compiled by the Bibliography Special Division of the National Library, Calcutta, 1988, Bibliography of Freedom Movement in India, West Bengal Book Fair Committee 1987-1988, Calcutta Metropolitan Library, Calcutta, 1988 etc. made easy for collection facts and data.

Review of Literature :

There is a large number of foreign and Indian scholars who wrote on various aspects of the Regional History of the Santal Parganas. R.M.Martin (1838), Reginald Heber (1861), E.G.Man (1867), W.W. Hunter (1868, 1877, 1895), C.E. Buckland

(1901), F.B. Bradley-Birt (1905, 1912), H.McPherson (1909), L.S.S. O'Malley (1910, 1910, 1925) Robert Carstairs (1912), John Houlton (1949), Stephen Fuchs (1965), J.Troisi (1979) and John MacDoudall (1985) are noted foreign scholars known for their writings on Historical events of Regional History of Santal Parganas, but they overlooked activities of the Santals during the National Struggle of 1857 and their Agitation in 1861. Even in the writings of K.K.Basu (1934), K.K. Datta (1940, 1957, 1970, 1976), Charulal Mukherjee (1943), Chaitan Koomar Hembrom (1948), D.N. Majumdar (1956), P.C. Biswas (1956), R.R.Diwakar (1959), P.C.Roy Chaudhury (1962, 1965), M.S.A.Rao (ed.1984), J.C.Jha (1985, 1985), K.S.Singh (1985), L.P.Mathur (2004), Vasudha Dhagamwar (2006), R.C.Verma (2017), Suresh Mishra (2019), Sunil Kumar Singh (2023) both aspects of Regional History of the Santal Parganas are not mentioned. In these writings the authors overlooked activities and murmuring of the Santal Community during the National Struggle of 1857 (Military Consultations 1857-1858) and the Santal Agitation in 1861 as they jumped to describe the Sapha Hor Movement after describing the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and its suppression in 1856. As this created a gap in the study of Regional History of the Santal Parganas, the present study intends to fill the gap and mainly focus on overlooked Santal Agitation in 1861.

Santal Protest Before the Santal Agitation in 1861

In view of its dimension, organization, bravery and intense battle for more than six months (The Illustrated London News 1856:195-196) the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 was an armed challenge to the administration of East India Company for the establishment of self rule. The Hul was led by Santal Heroes Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairab who were actively associated and supported by lower castes, backward classes and other tribal people (Datta 1940:16; Roy 1961:71-72) that demonstrated mass character of the Hul. But the period after its

brutal suppression was not peaceful as the Santals were highly agitated and discontent during the National Struggle of 1857. Even after five years of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856, the agitated Santals were again driven by continued intense oppression and exploitation by landlords and moneylenders. This manifested in their Agitation in 1861 against harsh economic conditions highlighting that the underlying cause of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 had not been fully addressed by the government of East India Company.

The Santal Agitation in 1861 and Colonial Administration

Thus it is obvious that even after suppression of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856, the Santal and their compatriots from tribal communities, lower and backward classes were not satisfied with the arrangements made by colonial rule and its bureaucrats as they were again subjected to the torturous nexus of money-lenders and landlords. It is to be noted that the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 was the first mass movement against the administration of East India Company and the biggest people's revolution of Asian Continent in the 19th century. Under the leadership of Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairab, the Santals, other tribal communities and weaker sections of society fought together with their traditional arms against the sophisticated modern arms of colonial police and army.

The Hul was, therefore, ruthlessly crushed and its leaders were captured and hanged, but the underlying issues of exploitation and oppression by landlords, moneylenders and the British colonial administration persisted which led to widespread discontent among Santals and others. Undoubtedly, the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 was suppressed but it highlighted deep-rooted grievances of the Santal community. After the Hul, major administrative and agrarian reforms were instituted by the Company government. But the reforms aroused opposition from moneylenders, landlords and some senior officials. The

Santal Parganas Act 37, December, 1855 that created the district of the Santal Parganas as a non-regulation district and set limits on interest charges. (MacDougall 1985:108-127). The Act removed the district from the purview of regular colonial courts and general civil regulation. The regular police force was abolished and local executive and judicial administration was given back to local village headmen (Manjhis) directly recognizing their customary tribal governance system. In December 1856 Santal Police Rules were enacted, and in the name of the Commissioner of Bhagalpur, it is also called Yule's Rules. (Dhagamwar 2006:169-171) It was first attempt to organize and construct administration in the Santal Parganas. (Besra 2003:1) After three years Civil Procedure Code, Act VIII of 1859 was also enacted. The Act compelled the courts to decree debts and the extortionate rates of interest demanded by Moneylenders.

Therefore, an order issued by Commissioner George Yule that limited the rate of interest to 25 percent. (O'Malley 1910:56-57). Moreover, the Bengal Rent Act of 1859 (Act X of 1859) was the first major colonial law designed to define tenant rights and reduce land disputes between landlords and peasants in the Bengal Presidency. It placed restrictions on the power of landlords to increase rent arbitrarily. But in spite of passing of various kinds of Acts after the Hul, the oppressive practices of landlords and moneylenders continued leading to further discontent among the Santals. In fact, the post-1856 period did not end the exploitation by Moneylenders (Mahajans), Landlords (Zamindars), police, revenue and judicial staffs who continued to demand excessive rents and inflicted torture and coercion respectively on the Santals in the Santal Parganas. In 1861, the Santals in Santal Parganas (presently in Jharkhand) and its adjoining regions organized protests and agitation mainly due to excessive rent demands and continued oppression and exploitation. A noted historian Suchibrata Sen pointed out that the Hul "both in the Damini and the

Jungle Mahals failed to attain its objective. But for the first time it drew the attention of the British authority to the untold sufferings of the Santals. It was the first conscious pre-planned resistance of the Santals against the worst possible feudal oppression. It is true that the Revolts did not bring any immediate relief for which they fought. But certainly this served as a lesson as well as an inspiration to the future movements of the Santals against the zamindar and the British.the Santals launched a mass resistance movement in 1861 against the rise in rent in Hendwa Parganas (Kurruckpur, Monghyr District)...The primary cause of the disaffection was the enhancement of rent by a local revenue farmer Charles Barnes (Sen 1984:129,134). The acting Commissioner of Burdwan Mr. Plowden deputed to look into the case Hendwa pointed out "whatever feeling exists in one part of the Santhals tract doubtless extends to every other part, though it may not be displayed everywhere to the same extent, or at all in some places; and any rising would be general....it is true that rents have been enhanced in some Estates..."(Sen 1984:134)

The British administration and its bureaucrats were alarmed and fearing once again Hul, the British official immediately took steps to pacify the agitated Santals. During the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 the Company administration and its civil and military officials ordered military force and mercilessly suppressed it, but during the Santal Agitation in 1861, the Company government and its officials were so terrorized by the possibility of another Hul that the officials took immediate steps to pacify and satisfy the agitated Santals to avoid another mass struggle against the foreign rule. The intelligence Department suggested stationing of two Regiments of native Infantry at certain places in Santal Parganas in order to secure the country against a possible rising of the Santals. (Kochuchira 2000:116). It is important to note that as late as May 1861 the authorities were not very sure of their position regarding the Santals. The Assistant Commissioner of Naya Dumka

Division had sent several letters that were sign of approaching disturbances among the Santals in his part of Santal Parganas. It was mentioned that large bodies of armed Santals were on the move with branches of Sal trees which was a signal for war when the branches were circulated.

According to the letter following might be possible causes for the renewal of disturbances in Naya Dumka : the enhancement of rent by the Zamindar, the institution of suits by Mahajans in fear of Act XIV of 1859 and a possible partial cause was a prophecy by Kanhu (one of main Heroes of the Santal Hul of 1855-1856) who just before his execution had predicted a rising about this time, at which he might reappear as a leader. As a result of several military units were deployed to Rajmahal, Suree and Bhagalpur. It was further considered desirable to station military police at other places, namely, Rampurhat, Pakur, Pirpainti, Godda and Deoghar. As Roy Chaudhury pointed out that there was no actual rising but the administrators got panicky. (Roy Chaudhury 1965:94-95) Though the Santals were pacified for a short time as it was later followed by a bigger agitation in the Santal Parganas called the Sapha Hor Movement also known as the Kharwar Movement (1868-1871) originated from socio-economic exploitation of the Santals in the Santal Parganas. It is important to note that the agitation in 1861 was less widespread and violent than the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 but still demonstrated the ongoing resentment and resistance to colonial rule by the Santal tribal community in Santal Parganas.

Historical Significance of the Agitation:

Historically the Santal Agitation of 1861 was the greatest event after the Santal Hul of 1855-1856 and their discontent, activities and attitude during the National Struggle of 1857 in Santal Parganas and Chotanagpur. (now in Jharkhand). In Santal Parganas there was continued murmuring of discontent among the Santals and Chowars. From the Military

Consultations (12-15 Oct. 1857), it is evident that the Santals were opposing foreign rule and plundering several villages (Roy Chaudhury 1959:35). After suppression of the Hul and during National Struggle of 1857. Undoubtedly, their Agitation of 1861 was smaller in scale but it clearly demonstrated the enduring nature of Santal grievances and their continued struggle for autonomy and fair treatment. It also disclosed the limitations of the colonial attempt to suppress dissent and the need for addressing the ground causes of tribal protests. The historical events of the Santal Agitation of 1861 prepared solid ground for the development of tribal consciousness. Undoubtedly the Santal Agitation of 1861 was less widespread and violent than the Santal Hul of 1855-1856, however, it highlighted the ongoing resentment and resistance to colonial rule. Historically it culminated in origin and development of Sapha Hor Movement, also known as Kharwar Movement 1868-1871. It was initially a socio-religious reform movement within the Santal community but in its later phases its tone gradually changed and the movement finally associated with main current of national struggle.

Conclusion:

Thus historically the Santal Agitation in 1861 was an important episode of the Regional History of the Santal Parganas. It was associated not only with the Santal Hul of 1855-1856, its preceding event, but also with the Sapha Hor Movement 1868-1871, its subsequent major historical event for preparing its background. The Agitation was so challenging to and caused great panic in administrative circle that the British authorities took immediate measures to rectify the grievances of the agitated Santals. Admittedly the Hul was brutally suppressed but it marked a significant shift in colonial policy and administration in the region which has been repeatedly manifested through historical events of the Santal Parganas.

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