

Santhal Rebellion – A Counter Insurgency against ‘Outsiders’ As Ordained By a ‘Thakur’

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Abstract: The Santhals were a peace loving people for whom agriculture was one of the main occupations and of great significance where forest land and the sacred grove were symbolic of their guardian spirit or protector. Due to Colonial rule and the local moneylenders, the Santhals faced undue oppression which finally led to the Santhal Rebellion of 1855. Prior to this, when the Santhals had gathered in their sacred grove, an occurrence transpired which is considered a miracle. The legend narrates the presence of a Thakur or god who guides the Santhals to divest their land of every ‘diku’ or outsider in order to retrieve the ownership of their land. It was their faith in this Protector that gave them the strength to fight against the Colonials and the Zamindars but did it finally free them from the oppression of both? This paper focuses on this legend and its outcome while tracing the Santhal movements and ascertains the outcome with reference to Acts passed media reports and Subaltern writings.

Keywords: Santhals, Santhal Rebellion, Jitu Santhal Movement, Subaltern.

I. INTRODUCTION

A popular Santhal legend of the 19th century states that two Santhal heroes, Sidhu and Kanhu claimed to have seen in a vision the Thakur or God of the Santhals who gave them a book in five batches. In this book the Thakur called upon the ‘dikus’ or outsiders and the sahibs to go away from the Santhal land to the other side of the Ganges. Santhals also professed to have the “darshan” of the “Thakur” in different form every day for some time. The Thakur appeared to the brothers every day: at one time as a flame of fire, with a book, some white paper and a knife: at another in the form of a solid cart wheel. A shrine was erected consisting of a mound of mud crowned by a cart wheel, at which the village were instructed to present offerings of grain and milk, and to sacrifice buffaloes. Here the worshippers were shown the slips of paper and the book and were told that in them were written the orders of the God. The news of the miracle spread far and wide, and messengers were sent to all the Manjhi of the Damin-I-Koh bearing a branch of Sal tree, which like the fiery cross of the Highlands, was a signal to the people to gather together. Their claims of having been commissioned by the “Thakur” to lead them against all the outsiders and to establish the rule of the Santhals was believed by the followers. [Bengal District Gazetteer, Santhal Parganas, 1980:48-82]¹

After 159 years, Santhal tribes even today remember their legacy and celebrate “Hul Festival” every year for their glorious incident of 1855 AD. They remember that major insurrection and worship their leaders – Sidhu and Kanhu. Santhal rebellion was one of the most memorable landmarks in the history of Colonial rule. Santhal tribes are one of the earliest tribes in India and by nature are simple and innocent. Regarding their origin, Revd. Skrefsurd wrote that the Santhals lived in Persia, Afghanistan and Chinese Tartary, and entered India from the North West and first settled in the Punjab and then made their way to their present habitat in Chotanagpur whereas Revd Bodding thinks that the Santhal entered India from the North Eastern part. The main language of the Santhal tribe is Santhali and traditional legends are orally current among the people. Agriculture is the main occupation while dance, music and paintings are important areas of their culture. Apart from agriculture, Santhal people are well versed in the art of hunting. They lived in the Rajmahal Hills and worshipped their land as a God or “Thakur” from the earliest times.

After the establishment of East India Company, they faced some major problems in their simple life. By the end of the 18th century, the Santhals began moving towards the forests around the Rajmahal Hills. With the imposition of the Permanent Settlement by Governor General Lord Cornwallis in 1793 AD; the entire region came under the control of the Company. They had imposed various illegal taxes and revenue systems. East India Company gave the power to Mahajans and Zamindars to collect land revenues

II. ESTABLISHMENT OF DAMIN – I - KOH

In 1832, the government demarcated an area in Damin I Koh for the Santals with the intention of reclaiming the forest region. Damin –I-Koh is a Persian name and it means the skirts of the hills, but the estate comprises not only, as might be supposed from the name, the country lying at the foot or on the slopes of the Rajmahal Hills, but almost the whole range between the Ganges on the north and the Brahmani river on the south. The tract it covers consists of hills surrounded by flat country, with fertile valleys lying, in some instances, between parallel ranges. The valleys lying at the foot of the hills were well – watered by streams, and were cultivated and inhabited for the most part of the Santhals. The latter were comparatively recent immigrants, the Damin – i – Koh having been formerly inhabited only by the Paharis, who were chiefly known and feared as freebooters and cattle lifters. [John Kochuchira. 2000.58]².

The Santhals immigrated in large numbers into Damin – i – Koh from Cuttack, Dhalbhum, Manbhum, Barabhum, Chotanagpur, Palamau, Hazaribagh, Midnapore, Bankura and Birbhum. Santhal tribe came to Damin – I- Koh to live a peaceful life but they could not live peacefully in that area. The Damin – I- Koh had always been regarded as a reserve area for the aboriginal race of the district but after the establishment of the Colonial rule, some outsiders, Mahajans, Zamindars and foreigners came to that place. The great migration of the Santhals to this district from the south and west took place during the middle part of the 19th century, and many of the persons shown as immigrants at the last census are probably the survivors of those who took part in the Santhal movement. [O'Malley.1910.63]³.

The main object of the Government in encouraging the Santhals to settle in the Damin – I –Koh had been clearly stated by Dunbar, “to ascertain what profits are now derived from the lands” [Bhagalpur Commissioner Report, 1836]⁴. Another reason behind the encouragement to come to Damin –I-Koh was to the Santhal tribe a new religious system, namely Christianity. Christian missionaries had entered Damin-I-Koh to impose their own religion on these tribal people forcefully. In Bhagalpur Commissioner Records of 1836 AD, we can find an example of that incident. “These people (Santhals) have no definite religious system to guide them.....among such people it is not too much to suppose that the labour of a devout missionary would make rapid progress and extend gradually from the flat country to the Hills where in reference to the character and religion of the Hill race the facilities for propagating the Gospel would be equally so that under God’s blessing at no very remote period we might hope that Christianity take firm root and the light of truth reveal itself, in the forest and wilds of the Rajmahal hills”. [Letter from the commissioner of Bhagalpur to the secretary of the government of Bengal. 1836]⁵

The ruthless exploitation of the hill men, Santhals and Adivasi by the money lenders, zamindars, Mahajans and Bengalis was (another) cause of the establishment of the Damin-I-Koh. These hill men in due course of time, revolted against the British rule. The Rajmahal Hills were inhabited by the Paharias and in the adjacent tracts the Santhals had gradually established their settlements from the early days of British administration by clearing the forest. In that area which was under Damin-I-Koh, some outsiders had come to settle trade and other purposes and justice was never given to Santhal tribes [R.R. Diwakar 1970:277]⁶.

Economic condition was also affected by the money lenders and the outsiders. Police, revenue officers and court amlas had also tortured tribal people economically. The administrative abuses and economic injustice were one of the major problems which drove the Santhal people towards the bloody rebellion of 1855 AD and continued for two years.

III. SANTHAL REBELLION – 1855 AD

The Santhal rebellion was one of the most remarkable landmarks in the history of tribal movement and it was the prelude of the Sepoy mutiny of 1857 AD. This was the major event which first drew the attention of the British East India Company to the Santhal region and reveals at once the nature of this relation and the strengths and limitations of Santhal solidarity. The good days of the Santhals of Damin – i – Koh were short lived. The Santhals were being stripped of their ownership rights of their lands and thus becoming tenants and even slaves of Hindus, who knew how to manipulate laws.

The Santhals wanted to be relieved of their economic plight. The impossibility for the Santhals to court redresses, their yearning for independence and increased political power, an inefficient, inexperienced and lethargic government in dealing with the Santhal's grievances against indigo planters, cattle lifting, rape of Santhal women, abnormal rise in price, the British system of fixed payments on land in cash, ill treatment meted out to the Santhal prisoners including children and women, poor geographical knowledge of British officers were some of the reasons for the Santhal rebellion, which form a dark spot on the pages of British history in India.

The chief cause of the Santhal rebellion was the oppression of the Mahajans, the Darogas and the corruption of the Amlas. These Mahajans gave the Santhals, money as loan which high interest and once he had contracted a debt he had little chance of escape, because if his creditor sued him the Santhals could not produce any authentic record, whereas the creditors had his ledgers and daybook, these Mahajans sometimes going to court to realise his capital and interest, sent his agents to take away their cattle forcibly. [Biswas 1956:7]⁷. The Santhals had raised their voice against the Indigo planters. The planters had established some kuthis in the Damin – i – Koh area and forced the Santhals to cultivate indigo, Santhals were against that cultivation system. Another reason for Santhal rebellion was the inefficiency of the English administration.

According to Ranajit Guha, in many cases adivasis were rounded up and physically thrown off the land, and were forced to become migrant labourers. Sometimes they resorted to arms and there are numerous instances of uprisings in Adivasi areas throughout the colonial period – very often over this issue. The most spectacular of the uprisings associated with British land policies was that of the Santhals in Chotanagpur in Bihar in 1855 AD [Bates 2007:47]⁸. This tribal group was tortured physically, economically and mentally day by day and the rebellion was the outburst of their anger.

The signs of the Santhal rebellion began in 1854 AD, when the Santhals robbed the Mahajans of their wealth by 'dacoities, burglaries and theft'⁹. In 1854 AD, Bir Singh, Parganait of Sasan in Lachimpur, Bir Singh Manjhi of Borio, Kaolej Pramanik of Sindree and Doman Manjhi of Hatbanda committed robberies in the houses of Isree Bhakat and Tilak Bhakat of Litipara, Jitu Kolhu of Bagsisa and in the several houses of Dariapur.

In July, 1855 AD the revolt broke out against the British. The leaders were Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairab. On the appointed day, 30th June, 1855 AD, full moon, 10,000 Santhals are said to have met at Bhagnadihi ground. The Santhals declared that their new God had directed them to collect and pay revenue to the State, at the rate of two annas on every buffalo – plough, one anna on each bullock – plough, and a half – an-anna on each cow-plough per annum. The rate of interest upon loans was to be one paisa in the rupee yearly. The Santhals were further enjoined to slaughter at once all the Mahajans and Darogas, to banish the traders and zamindars and all rich Bengalis from their country, to sever their connection with the Damin – i – Koh, and to fight all who resisted them. The Santhal rebellion soon plundered the Barhait Bazaar the place of the rich Mahajans, and then marched in different directions with bows, poisoned arrows, axes and swords and committing plunders and atrocities on their way. For fear of life, the Bengal and the non – Santhal inhabitants took to their heels, leaving their hearth and home behind. [Kochuchira.2000.88-89]¹⁰

From a letter of the Commissioner of Bhagalpur to the commanding officer at Dinapur we come to know that the Commissioner of Bhagalpur was engaged to write a letter to Magistrates and other government officials to suppress the rebellion. Rajmahal, Pakaur, Colgong, Purnea were disturbed. In fact, the movement had assumed a formidable aspect by middle of the July 1855 AD, and the insurgents had commenced murdering the inhabitants. [Letter from the Commissioner of Bhagalpur to the commanding officer at Dinapur, 15th July.1855]¹¹

Disturbances had spread rapidly in the areas of Godda, Pakaur, Maheshpur, Murshidabad and Birbhum. The rebellions raised their anger against the Colonial rule from Rajmahal Hills to entire Midnapore, Pakaur, Birbhum area. They fight against the Britishers with bow and arrows in front of cannon and guns. After a bloody rebellion, it was ended by the Britishers.

The Santhal rebellion opened a new chapter in the history of Bengal and Bihar. It convicted the Government of the necessity of adopting prompt measures to bring the Santhali areas under an effective administrative control. The Santhal insurrection made the East India Company, then engaged in consolidating its hold on India, realise this fact fully. **The Act XXXVII of 1855 AD** formed the Santali areas into a separate non – regulation district, to be known by the general designation of the Santhal Parganas. The district, being placed under the control of the Commissioner of Bhagalpur, was

divided into five jurisdictions [Letter from Mr. Grey, Secretary to the Government of Bengal to Mr. H. Stainforth, Commissioner of Bhagalpur, 7th January. 1856]¹²

IV. CONDITION OF THE SANTHALS – 1857 AD – 1932 AD

East India Company had imposed Santhal Parganas Act in 1855 AD and formed a new area for peace and harmony in the Santhal region. After the Santhal Rebellion, Sepoy Mutiny was started in 1857 AD. The revolt of 1857 AD was yet another landmark in the history of British East India Company rule. After the revolt, the power of East India Company ended and India was under the power of crown according to the **Government of India Act of 1858 AD**. It also ended the power of Board of Control and the Court of directors and their place was taken by the Secretary of State and Indian Council. In the proclamation of 1858 AD, Queen Victoria announced that the British Government would not annex the Indian States. Lord Canning was appointed as the Viceroy of India after the revolt of 1858 AD. British Government had taken the power from East India Company and British Raj was started after 1857 AD. But, establishment of peace in the Santhal Parganas was not their main objective. In the upcoming years, we can see that they had imposed several Acts related to Santhal people. **The Bengal Land Revenue Sales Act** was imposed in 1859 AD during the time of Lord Canning to improve the law relating to sales of land for arrears of revenue in the Lower provinces of Bengal Presidency in the Santhal Parganas and Chhotanagpur region of Bihar. **The Forest Act of 1865 AD** extended the British Colonial claims over the forests in India. It dominated the centuries old traditional use by tribal people of their forests that secured the Colonial governments control over the forestry. It was an enactment of the British Government that defined the rights of zamindars and their tenants in response to a widespread peasant, tribal movement that threatened the stability of British Government according to Bengal Tenancy Act. British East India Company had taken these acts to dominate tribal people and captured all tribal forest areas to use forest materials for Company's usage. **The Scheduled District Act of 1874** was imposed by Lord Northbrook in the Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas. According to this act he appointed officers to administer Civil and Criminal Justice and to superintend the settlement and collection of the public revenue, and all matters relating to rent, and otherwise to conduct the administration, within the Scheduled Districts. **The Forest Act of 1878 AD** was imposed by Lord Lytton. According to this act the forest area was divided into- Reserved, Protected and Village Forest. Tribes could not take anything from the forests even for their personal use. Tribal people were forcefully uprooted from their own lands. **The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1903 AD** was applied to the Chotanagpur region excepting Manbhum. The Santhal, Munda and other tribes were tried to be prevented from being reduced to the position of serfs. Governor General Lord Curzon imposed that act during his reign. **Government of India Act** was passed in 1919 AD during the time of Lord Chelmsford and according to this act the backward tracts were divided into two categories – Wholly excluded areas and Modified excluded areas in which the schemes/ laws could be introduced with modification. Modified areas included – Santhal Pargana, Chotanagpur area.

These were some of the acts taken by the British Raj and their main objective was to dominate tribal people socially, economically and politically. After few years of Santhal Rebellion, another Santhal Rebellion evoked in 1924 AD.

Tribal protest as that of **Jitu Santhal's movement in Malda**, north-western Bengal during 1924 AD, is a favourite theme for the Subaltern historians in *Subaltern Studies IV*. In 1924 AD, an anti landlord tenant agitation developed in Malda under Jitu Santhal's leadership and continued till 1932 AD when the leader was shot. Even bhadrak opinion as expressed in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* was sympathetic to Jitu's revolt but, as Tanika Sarkar shows, in true elitist fashion the responsibility for the revolt was taken away from the tribal leader by imputing it comfortably to the Swarajist agitator from outside. [Sreedharan 2013:495]¹³. Tanika Sarkar writes on the **Jitu Santhal's movement** that started in 1924 AD and continued till 1932 AD.

Between 1924 and 1932 AD, a series of seemingly disjointed episodes occurred among the Santals of the Barind tract in eastern Malda district in north – western Bengal. In 1924 AD an anti landlord tenant agitation developed in Malda, involving a large number of Santals. For the Bengal government the disturbing feature of the upsurge was the 'leaders of the Swaraj movement supported the tenants'¹⁴. Among the leaders at Malda was Jitu Chotka or Jitu Santhal of Kochakandar village, who had by then drawn close to the Swarajists and 'was sent to the Faridpur Congress and received instructions from them on the art of popular agitation'¹⁵. Some local Swarajist leaders at that time were also seriously involved in what they called 'reclaiming' aboriginals and untouchables into the Hindu fold through ritual purification and social reform. [Sarkar 1985:137]¹⁶

The Malda tribal agitation spanned the 1920s and 1930s in two very different agrarian contexts. The earlier round of peasant protest in the late 1920s occurred at a time when agrarian prices were still rising, making right to land and share of crops the most vital concerns and issues of conflict in rural society. In this situation the introduction of **Bengal Tenancy Act Amendment Bill** in 1923 AD acted as a kind of catalyst in agrarian relations, arousing both fears and hopes about imminent changes of great importance. During the five years that followed, these apprehensions generated suspense and caused rumours to circulate about all kinds of possible outcomes of the bill, until in 1928 AD it was finally enacted by the Council in a much watered down version. A significant and controversial aspect of the bill was to take a fresh look at the status of the sharecropper and consider whether he was to be classified as a tenant or as a farm servant/agricultural labourer and what was to be done corresponding to his status. [**Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, 30th Session, July-August 1928 Calcutta, 1929**]²²

In September 1928 AD, Jitu instructed the Santhal adhiars to loot the autumn crops from tracts of land in the Gajole-Bamangola-Habibpur Thana area that had recently been taken away from them but could be recovered through this action. They were promised that they would be put down on the coming settlement records as tenants and not as adhiars. There followed several cases of paddy looting and in one incident about 150 armed Santhals took away the entire crop from a six-*bigha* plot. The district magistrate and the superintendent of police rushed there with armed police, and Jitu Santhal, together with sixty of his men, was arrested after several clashes [**Government of India. Home poll 1-2/1928; Fortnightly reports. Second half of September 1928**]¹⁷.

When Jitu and some of his men were arrested for crop looting in 1928 AD, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (a nationalist provincial daily) which never bothered to report on so many other peasant struggles occurring all over Bengal at that time commented in some indignation: 'Sensation prevails in the town on that score as the public cannot make out the cause of these arrests. It is further reported that all the arrested Santhals are the reformed Hindu Santhals..... Public will be satisfied of the real cause of these arrests will be disclosed by the authorities'. It might have been a combination of sectarian sympathy and patriotic sentiment that led this origin of *bhadralok* opinion to locate the cause of crop-looting entirely in a succession of poor harvests and the 'near famine' conditions in the Barind 'due to which the Santhals as the worst sufferers finding no other means of subsistence, cut and looted other's crops'. [**Amrita Bazar Patrika, 24 December 1928**]²⁰.

The mid and late twenties were an active period for tenant agitation, of which the most important stream came increasingly to be constituted by strugglers between landholders and sharecroppers over the share of crops. Peasant protest after Non Cooperation got markedly detached from the Bengal Congress. Rural Gandhians concentrated on social welfare projects of marginal importance and the entire Swarajist opposition in the Council fought tooth and nail to preserve and extend all zamindari privileges and oppose any extension of sharecropper's rights. Some local Swarajists leaders who had built up peasant bases during Non Cooperation still retained them for some time, but the stand of the Council Swarajists weakened and eventually eroded them. [**Sarkar 1985:142-43**]²³

Jitu Santal was a great admirer of Gandhiji and "Gandhi Raj", although his understanding of Gandhi Raj was markedly different of what Gandhi might ever think of. This simple man dreamt that in Gandhi Raj there would be no money lenders, no Zamindars and the original tillers of the soil would retain their land. Hundreds and thousands of Santhals believed him and his words. Jitu got his strength from the local Hindu Mahasabha, a guru from the sabha brain washed him to undertake a reformation inside his community, not to eat forbidden meat, worshipping of Hindu gods, and conversion of Santhals to Hinduism. Jitu diligently followed his master and never for once understood that he was being used as a pawn in communal war game. In October 1932 the Zamindar of Kotwali demanded two-third crops from the Santhals. Following Jitu's command the Santhals refused to offer and a clash broke out among the Zamindars men and the Santhals. Police rushed to the spot to quell the situation, after the clash the Santhals were heartbroken to find that the police actually took the Zamindars side. The police protected the Capitalists as the Proletariats suffered. Jitu's effort for religious and cultural reformation did not uplift the Santhals in the eyes of the local *bhadralok* (gentleman), neither they had any sympathy for Jitu or for his movement. In fact the prominent member of the local Mahasabha vehemently supported the suppression of Jitu's revolt, which earned him Government accolades. Jitu failed, his efforts stumbled but his cause did not, another major upheaval was in the waiting. The flavour, theme and direction of this new movement were markedly different from all. [**Changing profile of a Bengal district Malda, 1932-1953, Ashim Kumar Sarkar**]²⁴

On 3 December 1932 AD, Jitu Santhal had engaged in his last combat. As had been promised since 1926 AD, a large band of Santhals, who had recently converted to Hinduism, marched up to the historic city of Pandua, occupied the ruins

of the Adina mosque and ‘conducted a debased form of Hindu worship’ in order to transform the mosque into a temple. Jitu, who now called himself Gandhi, declared the end of British Raj and proclaimed his own government from within the mosque¹⁸. A pitched battle followed between his men and a large group of armed police who opened fire after the Santhals had refused to come out. Three Santhals including Jitu himself were shot dead, while a constable was killed by a poisoned arrow¹⁹. With the death of their leader this particular variant of tribal protest came to an end in the Midnapore district. After this event of December 1932 AD, Jitu Santhal became a district legend.

The Statesman, for instance, commented somewhat uncharacteristically on the Adina Mosque incident: ‘It will be interesting to learn the reasons behind the miniature revolution in the Malda district in Bengal. The Santhals are peaceful, law abiding aboriginals, honest to a degree of gullible simplicity and thus easily got at by propagandists who seemingly induced them to invest a Mosque, and armed with bows and arrows and swords issue a challenge to all authority’. [**The Statesman, 16 December 1932**]²¹.

After the end of Jitu Santhal movement in Malda, Government of India (Ministry of Tribal Affairs) took the power to control over their lands. The forest which is mother to the tribals was taken away from them. Rigid forest laws reduced accessibility of the tribals to the forest; and made it difficult to collect fire wood and other basic necessity like gum, resins, leaves, flowers, honey etc from the forest. [**Bengal District Gazetteer .Santhal Parganas, 1985.178**]²⁵

V. CONCLUSION

The popular legend of the Thakur was established during the time of Sidhu Kanhu’s Santhal rebellion of 1855 AD to fight against the ‘dikus’ or outsiders in order to protect their own lands. Sidhu Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav fought against the Colonial rule but they were unsuccessful in retrieving the ownership of their lands. Jitu Santhal also failed to retrieve their lands from the then ruling Government. But, after 122 years, in 1977 AD Santhal people got back their land with the help of Kanu Sanyal during the time of CPIM Government in West Bengal. [**The Statesman, 9 December 1977**]²⁶

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