



The santhal rebellion of 1855-1856: Causes and result

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Abstract

There were numerous tribal uprisings, the first and largest of which was the Santhal rebellion of 1855. By 1830, the Santhals had established themselves in the low-lying areas near the Rajmahal hills (now in Jharkhand state). The presence of moneylenders from Bihar and Bengal, as well as the company's draconian legal system, made matters even worse for the Santhals. The clever moneylenders took full advantage of the indigenous' poverty and innocence, and most Santhals eventually became bonded labourers in their own country. The Santhals were commanded by two brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu, who fought the "Dikus" (outsiders, non-Santhals/landlords, moneylenders, and police) and the Sahibs (British). Around 30,000 Santhals marched towards Calcutta on the night of June 30, 1855. They were threatened along the route, and they attacked and killed police officers, Mahajans, and Zamindars, as well as destroyed their property. More than 15,000 Santhals were killed in the revolt, and scores of villages were razed. The Company quickly enacted numerous reform legislation for the Santhals, granting them the ability to reside in a territory outside of British India's bureaucratic and legal procedures, as well as special land and administrative rights.

Keywords: damin-i-koh, dikus, hul, kanhu, santhal, sidhu, tribal

Introduction

The far-reaching alterations in the Indian agrarian structure were a significant consequence of British control on India's rural and tribal regions. Under new administrative innovation, the traditional agrarian system eventually crumbled. In rural India, the new land tenures resulted in the formation of a new social class and a new type of land ownership. Land began to be traded as a commodity. Verma (2013) explicitly stated that the tribals' world was caught between myths and legends and had a cloak of invisibility (for the rest of the country) that was only revealed during various rebellions they held and counter campaigns to suppress them during the early period of British administration. During the 19th century, the tribals, who were distributed across a huge section of India, staged various militant outbursts and insurgencies, which were defined by enormous bravery and sacrifice on the part of the tribals.

The legendary 1857 Indian uprising, also known as the First War of Independence or the Sepoy Mutiny, was preceded by other tribal uprisings, the first of which was the Santhal rebellion of 1855. The main distinction between the 1857 revolt and the numerous tribal rebellions was that the 1857 uprising was against the British, but the various tribal rebellions were also against the enemy within, such as moneylenders, landlords, exploiters, and regional rivals.

Tribe perceptions as we know them today did not emerge until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. While discussing tribal movements, it's important to remember that they were not only agrarian, but also deeply connected to the forest as their habitat and a source of culture and subsistence. Furthermore, the East India Company passed rules allowing for forest exploitation for wood and land, which resulted in harassment from contractors, merchants, and forest inspectors, as well as the loss of their livelihood. The original homeland of Santhal tribe was around Hazaribagh district (Ahuri) of Bengal province, from where they migrated to Chota Nagpur region probably to avoid or after the attack of the Delhi Sultanate. Here they were outsmarted by the influx of farmers who practiced settled agriculture. Then came the great famine of Bengal in 1770, this triggered mass migration of people from the south-west, lowland Mandipur region of Bengal initiating heavy loss of revenue to the East India Company. The Company after introducing the Permanent Settlement Act of 1790 directed the Santals to clear and repopulate this fertile region of Mandipur, around Jungal Mahal and Rajmahal hills. By 1830, the Santhals were well settled, in the low lying regions around the Rajmahal hills, designating it as *Damin-i-koh* meaning "Skirts of the Hills" which in 1832 was declared as the land of the Santhals (keeping the Mal Paharias tribe restricted to the hilly region). The land was fenced with boundary pillars separating the settled agriculturist of the plains and the Mal Paharias of the hills. This development increased the revenue of the British by more than 20 times. But then the Government got greedier and started imposing heavy taxes on the Santhals. With the arrival of moneylenders from Bihar and Bengal, and draconian system of laws put up by the company things got from bad to worse for the Santhals. The cunning moneylenders took total advantage of the poverty and innocence of the natives and trapped them by offering loans; initially at a normal interest and once the tribals were caught in this web, the interest on loan started increasing and reached upto 50 percent. They

even started manipulating the loan documents, until the debt ridden tribal had no out but to sell their land. This not only wrecked their life but they become bonded laborers in their own land. This unending cycle now continued and they could barely survive in these torturous conditions. They were pulled in as laborers at indigo plantations and railway constructions but not given wages and treated as slaves. The contractors did not pay for the food, eggs, fowls and milk provided by the Santhals, instead they abducted their women, raped and even murdered them. The moneylenders, landlords, bureaucrats and court were hand in glove and became richer and richer by exploiting the Santhals. The Santhals were a close knit community, naive and had not yet learnt to lie. Their low literacy made them easy victims.

The situation was well described in *Calcutta Review*- “*Zamindars*, the police, the revenue and court alas have exercised a combined system of extortions, oppressive exactions, forcible dispossession of property, abuse and personal violence and a variety of petty tyrannies upon the timid and yielding Santhals. Very high interest on loans of money ranging from 50 to 500 percent; false measures at the *haut* and the market; willful and uncharitable trespass by the rich by means of their untethered cattle, ponies and even elephants, on the growing crops of the poorer race; and such like illegalities have been prevalent.”

The historian H.H. Hunter commented that “The Santhal country came to be regarded as a country where a fortune was to be made, no matter by what measures, so that it was made rapidly”. “Redress was out of question; the court sat in the civil station perhaps a hundred miles off. The English Judge, engrossed with the collection of the revenue, had no time for petty grievances of his people. The native underlings, one and all, had taken the pay of the oppressor: the police shared in the spoil, “God is great, but He is too far off” said the Santhal; and the poor cried, and there was none to help him”.

Verma and Das (2020) [23] concluded that it is, therefore, evident that the combined oppression and exploitation of the Santhals by the landlords, the money lenders, traders, contractors, Europeans and government officers-Civil, Judicial and Revenue, were the underlying cause of the insurrection.

In 1854, the *Majihis* and *Parganites*, leaders and heads of Santhal villages started meeting to discuss this issue of exploitation and how to rebel against the inhuman treatment by the *Dikus* (outsiders). Stray cases of robbing of moneylenders and *Zamindars* begun to occur. Bir Singh Parganait of Sasan, Bir Singh Manjhi of Borio, Kaolej Pramanik of Sindree and Doma Manjhi of Hatbanda were responsible for the robbery at the houses of *Zamindar*, Isree Bhakat, Tilak Bhakat, and Jitu Kolhu along with some houses of *Zamindars* of Dariapur

The Preperation

As per the legend, two brothers Sidhu and Kanhu saw the vision of their God ‘Thakur’ who ordered them to overthrow the “*Dikus*” (outsiders, non-Santhals/landlords, moneylenders, police) and the Sahibs (British) to leave the Santhal region across the river Ganga. They had the vision of “Thakur” in various forms- as a fire flame, a book, white paper, knife and a solid cart wheel too. They erected a shrine of mud crowning it with a cart wheel and the villagers were instructed to pray and present offerings in the form of grain, milk and sacrifices of domestic animals. The books and papers written by Thakur were displayed at this shrine. The news of this miracle spread all over. Soon “a small leafy branch of Sal tree” was passed in all the village heads. This was the secret code for all the Santhals to gather at the shrine as per the will of “Thakur” and throw out the *Dikus* from their Santhal land. According to various Historians (A.K. Biswas, S.P Sinha, A.K. Sinha), it was necessary for the leaders to give a religious reorientations to the leaders political mission to make the movement not only more appealing and popular but as a divine will from God to be followed”.

The HUL (Revolution)

On the night of 30th June 1855 under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu about 10,000 Santhals gathered at Bhagnadihi and agreed to send letters to commissioners, collectors and magistrate of Birbhum apart from several *Darogas* and *Zamindars*.

This gathering got massive when it was joined by more men, women and children. Under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu around 30,000 Santhals marched towards Calcutta to inform Lieutenant Governor about their miserable condition. The Leaders mobilized the Santhals men and women by organizing huge procession through the Village accompanied by drummers and other musicians. The leader’s rode at the head on horses and elephants and *Palkis*, all moving together on a deputation to the Lieutenant Governor in Calcutta.

Natrajan (1981) commented “With hope in their hearts, a song on their lips and bows and arrows in their hands, the Santhal peasants raised the flag of open armed insurrection against the unholy trinity of their oppressors- the *Zamindars*, the *Mahajans* and the government”.

How did the revolt begin? What sparked the violence? Which was the last straw which broke the camel’s back? There are various stories put forwarded by several workers- Badal Sarkar claims that it was the diminishing supply of food which forced them to violence and plunder. According to A.K. Sinha, the local *Daroga* Maheshlal Dutta and his subordinates intercepted them and tried to stop their advance. They threatened to arrest their leader, but the crowd now well motivated attacked and beheaded the *Daroga*. A.K. Biswas says that the *Daroga* came to arrest the leaders on a false charge, but was beheaded by Sidhu.

S.P. Sinha records that the multitude of Santhals moved from Bhogadih to the Barhati Bazar of Panchkathia where they worshipped their local deity and then started the violence, killing five local moneylenders. Here they also killed Dindayal Roy the biggest moneylender of the region by chopping his limbs bit by bit, saying “with

those fingers you counted your interest, with this hand you snatched away food from the mouth of the hungry poor". Then they started marching in groups along different directions plundering and killing all the *Dikus*. Forming bands of 1,500 and 2,000 but rolling in many thousands at the call of drums, they attacked the *Mahajans* and *Zamindars* and their houses, police stations, railways construction sites, the *dak* (post) carriers- all the symbols of *Dikus* exploitation and colonial power.

To suppress the Santhal rebellion, the British army was put under the command of Brigadier General Lyod. On 15th August, through a public declaration the Santhals were warned to surrender within 10 days or face severe punishment. The government moved with ruthless determinations to suppress the rebellion. In August, A.C. Bidwell Commissioner of the Nadia Division was appointed a Special Commissioner to carry out the measures necessary for the suppression the insurrection. Martial law was introduced on 10th of November 1855 which lasted till 3rd January 1956. Troops from the 7th and 40th Native Infantry Regiments along with other detachments were called into action.

Unable to face the company's musketry, the rebel took shelter in the thick jungles and carried of their struggle. One typical instance of the heroism of Santhal rebels has been narrated by O'Malley, "They showed the most reckless courage, never knowing when they were beaten and refusing to surrender, on one occasion, forty five Santhals took refuge in a mud hut - which they held against the *sepoys*. Volley after volley was fired into it... each time the Santhals replied with discharge of arrows. At last, when the fire ceased, the *sepoys* entered the hut and found only one old man was left alive. A *sepoys* called him to surrender, whereupon the old men rushed upon him and cut him with his battle axe".

The British Major Jervis remarked "As long as the drums beat, the whole party of Santhals would stand, and allow themselves to be shot down. Their arrows often killed our men, and so we had to fire on them as long as they stood. When the drums ceased, they would move off a quarter mile; then the drums beat again, they calmly stood till we came up and poured a few volleys in them. There was not a *sepoys* in the war who did not feel ashamed of himself". The rebellion was crushed ruthlessly with more than 15,000 Santhals killed and tens of villages destroyed. Sidhu was betrayed and captured and killed in August 1855. Kanhu was arrested and killed in Feb. 1856.

The Effect

The Company soon formed many reform laws for the Santhals, since the revenue from them was quite substantial. The entire region where Santhals lived was grouped into a single territory "The Santhal Parganas". This region was beyond the bureaucratic and judicial procedure of British India. They were given special land rights and it was against the law for a Santhal to sell his land to a non-Santhal. The head of the Santhal of every Santhal village was given the charge to manage and administrate the village.

The *Dikus* (moneylenders and landowners) became aware that they could no more misuse the Santhals. This rebellion had a rippling effect as the other tribals of the country, who also started uniting and resisting against their exploitation by the *Dikus*.

Some historians are of the opinion that the *Hul* should be called as the first war of Independence. But as Hembrom states "The uprising started against the *zamindars*, traders moneylenders and police, and it was the king of Murshidabad and other princely regions which send large Calvary to crush the Santhal rebellion". The *Hul* resulted in the death of thousands of Santhals, with their villages razed to the ground, many fled to the surrounding regions of Assam and east Bengal. The spirit of *Hul* is passed on from generations to generations through songs, drama and poems, keeping the Santhals united for their just cause.

The famous "*Kabi Guru*" poet of Santhali literature Sadhu Ramchand Mumur (1897-1955) in his song book entitled 'Let Us Stand Together' (*Debon Tingum Adivasi Bir*) has a poetry on the *Hul* ...

"Revolt, O Santhals, Mahlis and Mundas
We are all tigers here
Let's not abandon our lands
And be forced to enter the forest
Let us stand together, O Adivasi forester
We will not be driven out
We will not be afraid
We will gather courage in our souls
Till blood runs in our veins
Let us stand together, O Adivasi forester"

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