



REVISITING THE SANTHAL PROTEST MOVEMENT IN BRITISH COLONIAL PERIOD: A CASE STUDY ON SANTHAL PARGANAS & DAMIN-I-KOH

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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.

KEYWORDS: *Santhals, Santhal Rebellion, Jitu Santhal Movement, Subaltern.*

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.

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.

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.

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.

SANTHAL PROTEST MOVEMENT

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.

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.

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 bhadralok 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.

Between 1924 and 1932 AD, a series of seemingly disjoined episodes occurred among the Santhals 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 Santhals. For the Bengal government the disturbing feature of the upsurge was the

„leaders of the Swaraj movement supported the tenants“.

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. 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.

DISCUSSION

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”. 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”.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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