

India's Inheritance of Resistance and Opposition: Santal Hool

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The first sustained resistance to colonial rule from the toiling people of India came from adivasis. Bourgeois nationalist historiography tried to marginalise these struggles, and when that was no longer viable, to portray these as somehow 'primitive' and therefore not worthy of being considered proper parts of the national struggle. If however the Indian nation is to be seen as a modern creation, forged out of anti-colonial struggles, then the struggles of adivasis from Baba Tilka Majhi (Tilka Murmu), through the Kolhan revolt, all the way to Birsa Munda's resistance, or the Tana Bhagats, must be given their due. Among these struggles, few match in scope, valour and audacity the great Santal Hool of 1855.

On 30 June 1855, the children of Chunar Murmu - Sidhu, Kanhu, Phulo, Jhano, Chand, Bhairo, sent out the shal gira (branches of the shal tree) to mobilize within a very short period of time some ten thousand Santals of Damin-i-Koh, Birbhum, Bankura, Chhotanagpur, and Hazaribagh areas to proclaim the Santal Hool or revolt. By doing this, they had indeed shown the road ahead for resistance. It was indeed a novel revolutionary effort, to face the cavalry, the infantry, the cannons and the elephant forces of the Dikus (the oppressive money lenders, zamindars, jotedars and their chief patron, the British Government), in an exceedingly unequal war, with only bows and arrows and pole-axes for weapons.

The History, In Brief

Let us try to find out why the peace-loving Santals were angered enough to organize the Hool. The Governor General William Bentinck had invited the Santal adivasis from Birbhum, Singbhum, Dhalbhum, Shikharbhum, Odisha, Bardhaman, Palamau, Chhotanagpur, Hazaribag, Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia to settle in the densely forested Damin-i-Koh area and make it fit for cultivation. The memories of the Santals were filled with eternal evictions and a nomadic life - an eternal story of travelling from the land of Chai Champa. So they hoped that now at last that was coming to an end. Bentinck announced that for the first few years the Santals would be allowed to enjoy the land without any tax. But by 1854-55 the annual revenue had mounted to Rs. 58,000. So during the Hool, the demand of Sidhu and Kanhu was that since the Santals themselves had cleared the forests and turned them into cultivable habitations, the time had come to snatch the power away from the British government and establish an independent Santal Raj.

However, it would be erroneous to imagine that the rebellion was caused by this enhanced revenue demand alone. The trader-like mentality of the East India Company and the monetized economy they had introduced, encouraged the influx of Bengali, Panjabi, Rajasthani, and western (Indian) usurers and traders who all hit hard at the barter based Santal economy. The Santals, accustomed all these years to an egalitarian and equal rights based society, were not prepared for the discipline of a commercialized economy and polity. They had dreamt of a social-cultural life and an administrative structure under their own Majhis and Morols. In trying to keep pace with the fast changing world the Santals fell into the honey-trap of the consumer goods brought by the trades. In exchange for

token amounts of money, tobacco, salt and clothes, they sold ample paddy, rice, mustard, linseed, bora and other oil seeds. These traders resold goods bought from Damin at higher prices in Kolkata or Murshidabad, and much of the mustard would be re-exported to England. The traders with their sharp practices would often use rigged scales to cheat the Santals over weight, using heavy weights when weighing the goods of the Santals and lighter weights when weighing their goods, and they would also buy things from the Santals at prices much below market rates. Often, in order to buy what they wanted to buy, the Santals had to borrow from the moneylenders, and they would not be able to repay those loans. When they failed to repay the loans, the moneylenders would loot their cows, buffalos, goats, hens, their pots and pans, iron ornaments, and other household implements. In the same way, they got enmeshed in a debt-trap when they were unable to pay the enhanced revenue demands or taxes to the landlords. If they were unable to pay the taxes, the landlords would unleash cattle, donkeys, horses, goats, even elephants to destroy their growing crops.

And the Santals did not only lose their crops, their ploughs and their buffaloes due to indebtedness. Both personally and through inheritance they would become bond labourers, virtually slaves. These people were called kamias. However much labour they put in round the year, the interest ranging between 50% and 500% could never be paid off. There was of course the custom of writing a bigger loan amount than what had actually been given, and getting the Santals to affix their thumb prints to those. If someone sought redress in the courts, complications increased rather than the problems being solved. Accustomed to the humane and arbitration-based justice of the village council, the harassment of the Santals only increased when they confronted the bureaucratic and harsh justice of the British. To all this was added the abduction and rape of Santal women by British administrators, engineers and staff engaged in extending the railways, moneylenders and zamindars.

Sidhu and Kanhu demanded that in the Damin area every Santal family was entitled to equal amounts of land. Since no revenues had been fixed in a proper way, so the zamindars must be evicted from all land apart from their residential land. When the independent Santal rule was to be established, all dikus or outsiders would have to pay a tax of five rupees. Only lower caste Hindus, like the Chamars, Kamars, Hadis, Bagdis, Dhangors, Goalas, Bhunyias, Doms and the Muslim weavers would be allowed to live in tax free land. Sidhu and Kanhu also declared that the unjust burden of interests that moneylenders and traders had imposed on the Santals for all these years would be cancelled, and henceforth an interest of 1 paisa per rupee would suffice.

It was also decided that the local administrators must be accountable to a Santal court for the sustained repressions. Kirta, Bhadoo and Soona Majhi, recognised figures in the Santal society, were entrusted with the task of writing formal complaints against the Commissioners of Bhagalpur and Birbhum, the Collector, the Darogas of the Dighi and the Tikri Police Stations, and also against some zamindars. Sending an official letter of complaint is evidence that in their own way the Santals attempted one final time to arrive at a mutually agreed settlement. Since no responses came from the local authorities, on 7 July 1855 it was decided that a demonstration would set out from Bhagnadihi to Kolkata to the Governor General, seeking to know how oppression by European administrators, mahajans (moneylenders), traders and zamindars can to be contained.

Hearing about the Santals gathering, mahajans brought false charges of theft against Sidhu and Kanhu to the notorious Daroga of the Dighi Thana, Maheshlal Dutta. The Daroga was killed when he came to arrest Sidhu. Five notorious Bengali mahajans – Manik Chowdhury, Gorachand Sen, Sarthak Rakshit, Nema Dutta and Haru Dutta were also killed. The flames of the rebellion spread across Godda, Pakur, Maheshpur and Bhagalpur in Bihar, and Birbhum, Bankura and Murshidabad in Bengal.

Something worth a special mention is the moral stance of the Santals even while facing unspeakable repression and destruction. One must not forget that when Trivuban Majhi led an attack that killed

two European women and children, Sidhu and Kanhu meted out stern punishment. E. G. Mann writes that Santals despite being accustomed to using poisoned arrows, did not use them against the British during the conflict.

Against that there is the acknowledgement of British atrocities in Major Vincent Jarvis' diary, where he wrote: "It was not war; they did not understand yielding. As long as their national drum beat, the whole party 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 their drum ceased, they would move off a quarter of a mile; then their drums beat again, and they calmly stood till we came up and poured a few volleys into them. There was not a sepoy in the war who did not feel ashamed of himself."

During the second week of February 1856 Sidhu was shot dead. Some hold a different position and say that he was hanged. Chand and Bhairo died in a confrontation with the British troops in Bhagalpur. A woman Santal leader, dressed like a man, also died. More recent research says Jano and Phulo Murmu, sisters of Sidhu-Kanhu-Chand- Bhairo, killed 21 British troopers. On the third week of February, Kanhu was arrested and hanged in broad daylight. An Englishman has written that an extensive area from Birbhum to Bhagalpur was bathed in the blood of between fifteen thousand and twenty-five thousand Santals.

Bengali intellectuals wrote in the papers Friend of India and Calcutta Review, that the revenge for the defeats and killings of the British should be so terrible that in future the Santals should never in the future show the guts to assert themselves through rebellions. Such opinions were also expressed as, the 'uncivilized', 'ugly', 'black ghosts' of Santals should be sent off to the forests of Burma in exile, or that they should be shot or hanged till death. In courts, 251 persons were convicted, of whom 191 were Santals and the rest from oppressed caste Hindus. 76 of the accused were boys aged eight to ten, who were ordered to be whipped. The rest were sent to the Andamans or to imprisonment for between seven and fourteen years.

Results, Contemporary Relevance

Let us move on to the material results. The Santal rebellion led to the emergence of a Non-Regulation district named Santal Pargana in the map of India. By the Act XXXVII of December 1855, this Pargana was created out of parts of Damin-i-Koh, Birbhum and Bhagalpur. It was self-governing. Owing to the tremendous power of the revolt, the rulers realised that a people who could be defeated in a trial of arms but would not surrender but give up their lives, should not be allowed to mix freely with people from other parts of India lest the sprouts of rebellion raise their heads elsewhere too. This separate district was given to the charge of George Yule, the Commissioner of Bhagalpur. It was divided into five administrative sub-units, in charge of five Assistant Commissioners and four Sub Assistant Commissioners. But acknowledging the traditional structures of Santal society, revenue collection and administration of justice were handed over to Morols or Majhis. For this district, stamp duties were waived for private as well as revenue related transactions. The police control was toned down. The need for intermediaries between complainant and the Assistant Commissioner was abolished. Courts were set up in Dumka, Rajmahal and Godda. Santals were given the responsibility of producing the accused and the witnesses. Both interest on loans, and revenue rates, were lowered. In order to overcome the economic uncertainty faced by Santals, land transfer to non-advantaged was cancelled, and most of the land was restored to the previous Santal inhabitants. But though their traditional culture was saved, the Santal dream of a permanent homeland could not be realised in practice. Livelihood needs compelled many to accept the life of 'coolies' in the tea gardens of Assam.

But that does not reduce an iota of the significance of the Santal Hool. Research shows that Santals continued to protest repeatedly against social-economic inequality and repressive policies

afterwards too. The united Santals, representing the toiling masses, did not only create the first peoples' army against the powerful British government, but also initiated a long term nationalist awakening. The banner of mass struggles that the Santal rebellion of 1855 had raised, the drums of revolt they had sounded, provided inspirations to the Great Rebellion of 1857, to the Indigo Rebellion of 1860, to the peasant struggles of Maharashtra of 1875-76. This revolt teaches that it is the resistance to colonial and feudal rule that is the most important thing, not the periodic defeats.

In Santal folk songs, folk tales, bardic songs Hool talks about both a present that is full of possibilities as well as holding out the promise of a dream of renaissance. This revolt brought about a transformation in the daily life of the Santal community. It became a part of their daily existence to be prepared to join in any revolt or opposition. In the revolt of 1857, Santals of Chhotanagur, Odisha and South Bengal Santals took part. In 1858, despite it not being a declared day of the shikar, huge numbers of Santals gathered at Deoghar with bows and arrows. In 1871-72, they resisted the enumeration process of the Census. In 1874-81, they started the socio-economic and religious reformist Kherwal movement. In 1917, when the British were recruiting Santal workers in Mayurbhanj, the Santals protested.

And, the Present

The fires of that revolt have never died down in the 74 years of independent India. The Supreme Court in its order dated February 13, 2019, had directed the eviction of more than 11.8 lakh adivasis from forestlands in 16 states of India under the Forest Rights Act 2019. This virtual repeat of the colonial Act of 1927 is aimed to hand over the mineral rich adivasi dominated areas to Indian and foreign big corporate capital. This violates the Constitutional safeguard of full autonomy to adivasis in these areas. Moreover according to the Panchayat Act of 1996 in these areas, the adivasi gram sabhas or village communities wielding the highest administrative powers have the sole power to decide and sanction the sale or transfer of land to any non adivasis. Adivasis built up utmost levels of resistance to this government assisted corporate loot. In 2013-2014, we find how the Odisha government agreed to the proposals of Vedanta Aluminium Limited to dig the Niyamagiri hill in Lanjigarh in Kalahandi district to procure bauxite. Local Dongria Kondh adivasis built up a tremendous resistance to that. In 2016-17, when the Jharkhand government brought in an amendment to the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act to transfer adivasi land for commercial profits, adivasis of Khunti, Gumla, Singbhu and West Simdega created the novel Patalgarhi agitation to resist the loot of water, forest and soil. They inscribed on stone slabs the part of the constitution dealing with the areas inhabited by people from the Scheduled Tribes.

In West Bengal, on 16 August 1992, the first graduate of the Lodha Sabar community, Chuni Kotal, took the path of ending her life in order to free herself from continuous casteist repression. Nobody has been punished in all these years under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989. According to a news of 16 October 2017, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes brought a charge against the government of West Bengal, that in terms of crimes against Dalits and adivasis, this state ranks second, and the government is not merely indifferent to this, but indeed irresponsible. Facts reveal clearly that the adivasi communities of West Bengal are neglected in terms of education, livelihood, financial conditions, and standards of living, and their standing is in most cases below the all India average. On one hand the cases of violence against adivasis has been growing, and on the other hand the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act is being diluted.

The mentality of 'social distancing', which has struck deep roots in the quotidian life in this society, dominated by Brahminical hegemonism and its aggressive caste discrimination, may not be fully extirpated even from a Covid-19 less life. The thousands of years of deprivation, defrauding, exploitation and domination faced by adivasis may not change in the near future. But an

uncompromising attitude is built into the outlook of the adivasis. So their deathless valour and resistance will persist against social and state repression. Thousands of Thangjam Manoramas and Soni Soris will keep alive through the ages the spirit of resistance of Phulo Murmu and Jhano Murmu. This I firmly believe.

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P.S.

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