

# One Hundred and Fifty Years of the Santal Uprising

Anirban Biswas

In 2005, the historic santal Uprising has completed its 150th anniversary. There have been various types of celebrations in the form of seminars, publication of books at government expense, cultural festivals etc. Remembering the Santal Uprising is welcome, but what is more necessary is to analyze the characteristics of the rebellion, the aspirations of the Santals and the attitude of the contemporary bhadrakalok and their descendants.

The formal inauguration of the Santal uprising, as per historical evidence, was made on 30 June 1855, at the village Bhagnadihi that fell within the district of Bhagalpur. At a gathering of some ten thousands of people, led by Kanhu and Sido, Santals took the pledge to put an end to the alien rule and to set up their own raj. The first militant action by the Santals was done on 7 July under rather curious circumstances. The local usurers who had fattened themselves at the expense of this tribal population complained to the officer-in-charge of Dighi police station that Sido and Kanhu were collecting men to commit a dacoity. On 7 July, when the two brothers, accompanied by about 40-50 men, were going out for a *shikar* (game hunting), they were met on the way by the officer-in-charge, Mahesh Datta, and some mahajans who had with them two cartloads of rope. (There is an alternative version suggesting that they had stopped at a local market at Panchkhetia in course of a march to Calcutta. The march was intended to communicate to the English Governor-General the grievances of the Santals. At Panchkhetia, the Santal leaders had their first armed encounter with the usurers and the daroga)<sup>1</sup>. After some altercations, the usurers (mahajans) began to tie Sido. Kanhu then drew his sword. The mahajans let off tying Sido. Kanhu killed a mahajan and Sido killed Mahesh Datta. This incident produced the much needed electrifying impact, common to all popular uprisings, and the rebellion spread with tremendous velocity. On the episode of the event of 7 July, a competent analyst of peasant uprisings in colonial India has aptly commented, "Mahesh Daroga was thus a martyr to his own incomprehension. He could not understand that by refusing to submit to starvation or seek relief in gang robbery, the Santals had transformed themselves into rebels and their consciousness changed codes. This is why the 'cartloads of rope', a punitive message meant to intimidate dacoits and meaningful only in terms of the old penal code, failed to frighten those who had just constituted themselves into an 'army' and were about to declare the war against the raj itself."<sup>2</sup> The rebellion rapidly spread to engulf a wide area from Bhagalpur to Birbhum, and the rebels won many local battles against the troops of the Company. But finally the superior armed strength and organization of the troops proved too much for them. The two brothers were hanged and many others tortured and killed. The 'civilized' British

administration took revenge on the tribals in the severest possible way. It needs to be pointed out that the Santal Rebellion was not an uprising of the Santals alone, nor was it indiscriminately directed against all non-Santals. This is amply proved by the names of the exempted castes mentioned in the official records of the uprising.

As the same analyst put it, 'the total would amount nearly to the entire non-Santal population of Domin-I-Koh minus the handful of the elite made up of zamindars and mahajans.'<sup>3</sup> It might be surmised that all these exempted castes fraternized in varying degrees with the rebels. It might also be argued that the solidarity thus forged was the precursor of the later Jharkhandi identity.<sup>4</sup> In many villages, the Santals burnt the houses of usurers and spared those of ryots. The fact of assertion of identity by the Santals in this way shows that there was an incipient form of class consciousness in the uprising, and it also shows that by announcing their determination to have a raj of their own, the leaders of the uprising proved themselves above the narrow economism that has been characteristic of many of the self-professed communist peasant leaders of India. Studying the rebellion as a whole, one must not be led astray by the thought that it was a spontaneous revolt.

The role of the local landlords and moneylenders was naturally to help the authorities. Bipracharan Chakrabarty, the largest landlord of the district and founder of the raj family of Hetampur, raised a private army at his own cost and placed it under the government.<sup>5</sup>

What, however, should be mentioned that among the enlightened voices of Bengal, there was none to speak on behalf of Santals. For the indigo-cultivators, there was Harish Mukherjee, the editor of the *Hindu Patriot* : the oppressed Santals did not have even that bit of support. The renaissance luminaries did not raise a voice of protest. There is no evidence that even Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the foremost scholar and social reformer of that period, who spent the last years of his life in the Santal inhabited area of Karmatar, said anything against the ruthless cruelty of the Government. The babu bhadralok was in general averse to the 'barbaric' Santals, although some of them noticed the intense exploitation of them by the landlords and moneylenders. This aversion exposed the limited nature of the outlook of the educated gentry.

The rapacious exploitation by the landlords, moneylenders and the police was noted also by British administrators including one military administrator, Captain Sherwil.<sup>6</sup> W W Hunter wrote of the ruthlessness of this exploitation in the following language, 'From the moment the peasant touched the borrowed rice, he and his merchant were the serfs of the corn merchant. No matter what economy the family practised, no matter what effort they made to extricate themselves; stint as they might, toil as they might the Hindu claimed the whole crop. And carried on a balance to be paid out of the next harvest. Year after year, the Santal sweated for his oppressor.'<sup>7</sup> On the courage displayed by Santals,

Hunter quoted one officer in charge of the suppression of the rebellion, 'It was not war, they did not understand yielding. As long as their national drums 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. ... There was not a Sepoy in the war who did not feel ashamed of himself. The prisoners were for the most part wounded men. They upbraided us with fighting against them. They always said it was with the Bengalis they were at war, not with the English.'<sup>8</sup> The commanding officer's narrative, which need not be a false one, establishes that the Santals failed to perceive correctly the relation between outsiders (dikus, i.e mainly Bengali outsiders having exploitative relationship with the Santals) and the colonial administration. This failure was conceivably one of the reasons why the rebellion could not assume a protracted character. It also denotes a kind of ambiguity in the consciousness of the Santal leaders. They dreamt of a raj of their own, while they did not realize it clearly that without demolishing the power of the government this raj could not be a reality. They fought the British eventually, but possibly did not have any prior idea that they would have to prepare themselves for fighting British troops. But with their entering into the relation of conflict with the colonial administration and their troops, the rebellion assumed objectively an anti-imperialist character. This anti-imperialism was no less sharp than the later 'nationalism' of the middle-class gentry. The cruelty with which the rebels were punished provided ample testimony of this.

The Santal Rebellion broke out in a period of widespread popular discontent. The Kol rebellion took place two decades earlier. And two years later, British India witnessed the emergence of the Great Rebellion, the largest armed uprising of British India.

The Santal uprising was put down, but the fighting spirit remained. A second rebellion, although far less in terms of breadth, broke out in 1871. But the Government now acted more prudently and succeeded in quelling the rebellion by promising to restore to the Santals their land and villages.<sup>9</sup> Sido and Kanhu continued to remain alive. In order to arouse Santals to rebellion, they had resorted to myths, such as, the instruction of Thacoor. But they themselves became mythical figures later on. They continued to remain in the minds of the Santals. Even in 1971, during the Naxalite- led armed revolt in Birbhum and Santal Pargana, a song got wide publicity in Naxalite-influenced pockets, saying that Mao Tse-tung and Charu Majumdar would successfully carry forward the revolution left unfinished by Sido, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairab. Chand and Bhairab were the younger brothers of Sido and Kanhu, who died in the battle.

After one hundred and fifty years, one can look at the conditions of the Santals and adivasis in general in terms of occupational status, literacy etc. For the time being one may also note that in Kokrajhar, Assam, lakhs of Santals are living in refugee camps under extremely miserable conditions. Regarding the Palestinian refugees, it may also be said that there are people all around the world to speak for them. But there is none for these hapless Santals. Over the last ten to twelve

years, many Santals in Assam have been murdered by Bodo chauvinists, but there is little stir in the country as a whole.

The literacy rate among the adivasis, as per the census of 2001, was 47.10 percent in India as a whole, as against the general figure of 64.84 percent. The leftist ruled West Bengal does not fare much better in this respect; the respective figures here was 43.40 percent and 68.64 percent. For the Santals it is a reasonable guess that for them the figures won't differ much from the rest of the adivasis. So, although the Santal uprising and its legacy have been able to acquire some formal respect for the Santals and the Esplanade East area has been named *Sido-Kanhu Dohor*, this is far less reflected in the spread of education among the Santals. Besides poverty, one of the barriers to the spread of education among the Santals was that of language. In West Bengal, there are many places where Santal boys have to learn three languages, none of which is his mother language. Recently, the Government of West Bengal has taken some steps for teaching Santali as a first language in some schools. It is interesting to learn that in Assam, Bodo was accepted in the school syllabus as a language many years before. In this connection, it may be noted that both Bodo and Santali were included in the eighth schedule of the constitution in 2003. Very recently, the Government of West Bengal has set up some resident schools for adivasi students. This is a welcome step, but it could have been taken many years ago. Very recently a tribal language department has been reportedly opened in the North Bengal University. But such a department has long been functioning in Ranchi University.

About higher education, it can be established with facts that the representation of this community is incredibly low. One event can illustrate the attitude of the government in this respect. Since 2001, a regulation was enforced saying that for tribal candidates a minimum of forty percent marks in the Joint Entrance Examination was necessary for admission into the medical course. Owing to this regulation, most of the seats reserved for tribals are remaining vacant. But the Government, in 2004, allowed admissions into this course at a fee of seven lakhs of rupees per student, and the fortunate students were not required to sit for any Joint Entrance Examination. The Supreme Court ordered the cancellation of such admission. Finally, these students after a good deal of wrangling managed to continue their studies. Anybody can guess that these students included no tribal boy. The Government could have started a preparatory course for training tribal students for studying medical and engineering courses. But they did not, ostensibly because they were wary of incurring the wrath of the babu bhadralok, to whom the Salims and the Tatas are more acceptable. It should again be pointed out that notwithstanding some superstitions, such as witch-hunting, among the Santals, this community is in many respects more advanced than the bhadralok. Superstition in the form of wearing amulets and 'auspicious' rings is not an uncommon practice among the educated gentry, which shows that the latter is not less superstitious than Santals. The social structure of the Santals is democratic, and not stratified. Besides, among the Santals, that awful dowry system, the symbol of man's domination over women, is absent.

The so-called civilized world is unwilling to learn from the Santals and other adivasis, although an attitude of learning would have benefited both the gentry and the adivasis. But the adivasis have their own problems. Assertion among them sometimes throw up leaders who are often prone to be purchased by the lures of power and pelf. Countless examples of this may be given. There has been a slow stratification, mainly based on class division, among the Santals, although it is not comparable in terms of magnitude to that among the caste Hindus. The upper echelon of the Santal community seems to be always ready to compromise the interests of the community for narrow selfish ends. There is, however, no easy solution to this problem. Identity fulfilment, which, in the final analysis, is synonymous with the emergence as a class, is a protracted affair. So the Santals, the inheritors of the tradition set up by those intrepid fighters, have yet to go a long way ahead.

**Footnotes and references:**

1. Ranjan Gupta : *Rader Samaj Arthaniti O Ganabidroha* (Society Economy and Civil Rebellions of Rad), Kolkata 2001 pp 409-11 W.W.Hunter : *Annals of Rural Bengal*, reprint, Kolkata 1996, pp 166-67
2. Ranajit Guha : *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp 101-101
3. Idem : Ibid, pp 182-183. The participation of non-Santals in the Rebellion has been more fully discussed in Gupta's book.
4. Alope Mukherjee, in his small booklet *Marxbadi Dristite Jharkhand Andolan* (The Jharkhand Movement through Marxist eyes) has argued in this vein. Vide Mukhrejee, Ibid, Krantipath Prakashani, Kolkata 1988
5. Gupta Op.Cit, pp 137-138
6. Idem: Ibid, p 388
7. Hunter, Op cit, pp 158-159
8. Ibid, p 171
9. Gupta, Op.Cit, pp 442-45