

# The Literary (Re)Presentation of the Tribal Heroes: Sidhu and Kanhu

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## Abstract

The Santhal Revolt of 1855-56, also considered as the first peasant movement, was led by two young Santhals- Sidhu and Kanhu. This revolt which was believed to be guided by their God- 'Thakur' was aimed to get rid of the clutches of oppressive 'Dikus' and the Outsiders viz. Britishers. These two leaders, who have now acquired the status of gods and are worshipped by their tribesmen, have been extensively researched and written about. Even, they have been significantly mentioned in the stories, novels, poems, and songs. Although, they have been highly venerated by their tribesmen, some authors, and administrators of Colonial period differ in their opinion of these heroes. They have pointed out some drawbacks in their character and tried to showcase them merely as common men.

This paper is aimed to critically analyze the personality of these two tribal leaders- Sidhu and Kanhu with the help of their portrayal in the available literature. This would lead us to draw a transparent and authentic image of these leaders.

**Keywords:** Tribals, Revolt, Leaders, Hero-worship, Literature.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Every year on 30<sup>th</sup> June Santhal folks celebrate *Hool* diwas commemorating their brave leaders of 'Santhal Rebellion' of 1855, Sidhu and Kanhu. Thousands of Santhals gather at Bhognadih, the birth place of Sidhu and Kanhu, and the Santhal rebellion. Here, at Bhognadih on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1855 on these leaders call, around 10,000 Santhals had gathered and a war against their oppressors had been declared. (Sinha, 1983; Sinha, 1991). The Santhal rebellion commonly known as *Santhal Hool* was an indigenous rebellion in present-day Jharkhand by the Santhals against the British colonial authority, zamindari system and local non-tribals. This rebellion was led by four Murmu brothers- Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav, but Sidhu and Kanhu have more popularity to their credit. The rebellion was declared on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1855 but it actually began on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1855. (Sinha, 1983). To suppress this rebellion the Martial Law was proclaimed on Nov. 1855, which lasted until January 3, 1856. (Sinha, 1983). The movement was brutally ended by troops loyal to the British, and more than 30,000 Santhals were brutally killed and tens of villages were destroyed. (Sinha, 1991).

This rebellion, led by Sidhu and Kanhu refers back to 1793 when Lord Cornwallis introduced a settlement between the British East India Company and the Landlords (Zamindars) of Bengal to settle the Land Revenue to be raised. This settlement known as the Permanent Settlement of Land Revenue in Bengal (1793) allowed Landlords to have perpetual and hereditary rights over the Land, as long as they pay the fixed revenue to the British govt. (wikipedia). Santhals were severely affected by this settlement. The Landlords became owners of the lands which Santhals had been cultivating traditionally. A new landlord class emerged and also a new set of regulations, which replaced customs by contract introducing the money economy. The tribesmen called Santhals were induced to migrate to the southern parts of the district of Birbhum in Bengal to clear the jungles and drive the wild beasts. (Hunter quoted by O'Malley, 1910). But here they were ill-treated of the local landlords and many moved to the neighbouring areas later called 'Damin-i-Koh' and the 'Santhal Parganas' after the Rebellion.

History tells us that it all began with the creation of Damin-i-koh, the area surrounding the Rajmahal hills. In 1832, British authorities made an effort to separate the territories of the local zamindars and that of the hillmen (Paharias). (Bradley-Birt, 2001). They constructed masonry pillars to mark the areas of these two territories, that of the plain land, which belonged to the landlords, and the hill which belonged to the hillmen. Between these two territories, there was a huge portion of afforested land unused and unoccupied, the skirts of the hills. The East India Company, in order to earn revenue from the unused, unpopulated land invited the Santhals to occupy it. Initially they lived happily but soon after they realized their exposure to enemies.

## II. WHAT IGNITED THE INSURRECTION?

There were many oppressive agents that forced simple Santhals to take up arms. N. Kaviraj in his book *Santal Village Community and The Santal Rebellion of 1855* writes in detail about these agents that compelled these tribals to revolt. He mentions five primary agents who used every means to oppress them.

- I. The moneylenders cum traders were the nearest agents who tempted Santhals with their colourful items such as cloths, spices, jewelries, etc. and allured them to take loan to pay for those desired items. When they couldn't pay their loans that was because the interest was very high or even if they succeed to pay off their debts, moneylenders' record never mentions it, and illiterate Santhals end up being bonded labour to usurers since he had exhausted all his belongings- lands, cattle, vessels, etc. to pay for his loan.
- II. The law court which was meant to provide justice was lamed and manipulated by the munshis, Amlas, Mokhtars, Chowkidars, and others. They restricted poor Santhals from getting justice in favour of their partners in crime-the usurers. They extorted heavy tips for the most minor favour from Santhals. The tedious and no result process of the judicial machinery discouraged them and failed to safeguard them from their extortioners. Instead having manipulated it supported usurers

and protected them. Often misguided by the petty officers it tortured innocent Santhals and put them in jail for no crime.

- III. Railways on the other hand, not only violated their peaceful dwellings and their resource of livelihood, it also exploited their lives. The railway contractors and officers sometimes did not pay the proper wages to the Santhal labourers employed by them. They did not pay for the eggs, fowls, milk etc., they took from the Santhals. Some officers of railways molested the Santhal women. These women were abducted and even murdered.
- IV. Rack-renting by landlords (zamindars) was another source of dissatisfaction for the Santals. Santals have been allowed nothing but enough to live on, the surplus produce being taken by the zamindar. They raised the rent of land four or five times more per bigha than it used to be. The zamindar or his agents screwed out every pice on every possible pretext. They extorted for *salami* also. The purchase of a horse or an elephant, the arrival of friends, the celebration of any *pujah*, a marriage or a burial in the zamindar's family etc. – all called for *salami* from the villages in his block. They looked upon and treated the Santals as slaves rather than as tenants – slaves from whom they might exact any amount of labour at pleasure of paying them little or nothing. If buildings, were required, a conscription of so many Santals per village was called and enforced until their work on hand was complete, payments were made consisting generally of one small measure of parched rice daily and nothing more.
- V. British administration through its policies and inefficiency to administer the country took part in oppressing these simple living honest people. Their policies gave birth to oppressive Landlord class and protected culprits like moneylenders and traders through Law-courts. Besides this, over-taxation of rent on the part of the Government was unfair. Govt. has been raising rents and requiring a *salami* of twenty rupees for every *pattah* renewed on the expiration of its term. In some places the increase had amounted to 50%, in other 100%". This continual increase of Government taxation compelled these poor people (as their circumstances are too low) to go to those mahajans/moneylenders for loan at an exorbitant rate of interest.

### III. THE ROLE OF THE LEADERS- SIDHU AND KANHU

Since the inception of rebellion, Sidhu and Kanhu were instrumental in carrying out the revolt against oppressive governance of outsiders. They gathered thousands of Santhals and united them to fight against the injustice. During the period of 1855, social unrest was prevailing the country but it got momentum with the declaration made by Sidhu and Kanhu, of divine order from their God 'Thakur' to overthrow the foreign rule and setup their own Raj (state).

"They proclaimed themselves as kings of their country and gave out that they had witnessed a divine apparition and had been charged with a divine message. The story runs that a Thakur or

God appeared to them in the form of a white man, dressed like a native, with ten fingers on each hand. He wrote in a book, which he gave to Sidhu-Kanhu brothers together with 20 pieces of paper in five batches. He then ascended upward then disappeared, after which two men appeared, each with six fingers on each hand, and having told them the purport of the Thakur's order, likewise vanished. For sometimes the God appeared to the two brothers every day at one time as a flame of fire, with a book, some white paper and a knife, at another time in the form of a solid cart wheel. This news spread like fire among the Santhals. The innocent Santhals among whom falsehood prevails like a dense fog believed that a 'parwana' (order) had fallen from heaven giving Sidhu and Kanhu permission to take possession of the country, that the rule of the company was at an end and the reign of their people had begun." (Sinha, 1983)

A shrine was erected at Bhognadih which consists of a mound of mud crowned by a cart wheel, at which the villagers were instructed to present offerings of grain and milk and to sacrifice animals. Hundreds of Santhals, began to pay their reverence to this shrine at Bhognadih who were shown the slips of paper and the book and were told that in them were written the orders of the God. It was a signal to the Santhals to gather together.

This act of bringing in their religious faith for political issue has been observed differently by different scholars. A.K.Biswas writes-

"...the leaders of the insurrection have called religion to their aid, and the deluded Santhals verily believe that Kaloo Thakoor and Suda Thakoor will mark them independent of oppressive taxers, extortionate landlords and licentious European neighbours."

Dr. S.P.Sinha writes:

"...the political mission of the Santhals, while these leaders were already carrying on, got a religious re-orientation and thus it could make the movement all the more appealing and popular".

A K Sinha shows his high regards for these leaders and justifying their religious aid writes:

"These four brothers knew the fact that there is prevalence of falsehood among the Santhals so that they made up a story of seeing the Thakur (God) and became the God's angle. But the main motto behind all these falsehood was to oust the newcomers (British) from their soil".

Pertaining to their role as leaders of Santhals we are further informed from the various sources that in organizing the rebellion, Sidhu and Kanhu used Sal leaves to send message to the fellow Santhals. Emissaries were sent by them to every mountain valley with Sal branch which is respected as their national emblem. On

their call, more than 10,000 Santhals were gathered in Bhognadih on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1855 and vowed to overthrow the alien rule and establish peace and justice. (Sinha, 1991)

In this regard Badal Sircar in his play 'Stale News' which is an extraordinary retelling of the Santhal revolt and resistance, puts forth his high opinion. He believes that this revolt could be seen as a model for all those oppressed class who silently suffer and never protest. He writes: "Ten thousand Santhals took a vow to throw out all exploiters and oppressors from Santhal country and to reclaim all their land. Vowed to establish an independent Santhal state." 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. (Biswas, 1995)

#### IV. THE ACTUAL BEGINNING OF THE REBELLION

We have varied accounts related to the actual beginning of Santhal Rebellion. However, three points which are common in all records are – the date of occurrence, the name of their leaders and the victims of this revolt. According to Badal Sircar, 30,000 Santhals joined on a deputation to the lieutenant-Governor in Calcutta. They carried their traditional weapons with them-the bow and the arrow, the battle-axe and the spear. They were disciplined and peaceable as long as their supplies of food lasted. Then they plundered the market at Panchkatia and killed five notorious Bengali Dikus. A K Sinha gives an account of *Hool's* inception-

"The local daroga Maheshlal Dutta along with the barakandazes rushed to suppress this rebellion and reached the spot on 7<sup>th</sup> July. The Santals directed the daroga to levy tax of rupees five on every Bengali family in the neighbourhood. The daroga out of anger ordered the barakandazes to arrest the leaders, the Santals fell upon them and chopped off the daroga's head. It was the beginning of the Santal Insurrection."

Another account is recorded by Dr. S P Sinha He writes-

"The Santhal mob proceeded from Bhognadih to the neighbouring bazar at Panchkathia to worship a local goddess there, and thereafter started killing. They killed 5 local mahajans. When on 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1855 the Daroga of Thana Dighee or Borio Bazar, who had already attained notoriety reached the place with his party, he was soon killed by Siddu along with a few others. (9 in all) with the result that the police party fled away."

According to AK Biswas Daroga on 7<sup>th</sup> July had come to arrest their leaders Sidhu and Kanhu, after the usurers had bribed him to get up a false case of burglary, and bring in their leaders bound, which he initially denied and told that he had come to investigate an accidental death from snake bite. Then after a heated discussion followed by threatening Sidhu-Kanhu and tying them, the whole mass rushed upon daroga and bound him. He was then beheaded by Sidhu.

Interestingly we have a very distinct account of the beginning of *Hool* from Robert Carstairs, ICS. In his novel '*Harma's village*', Carstairs provides the incident of Garbhu Manjhi and Harma Manjhi who fell in trap of a usurer Kenaram Bhagat. The former had taken a new types of alcohol and hardly realized that he was getting into the trap while the latter's bond was forged. On kenaram Bhagat's false complaint Mahesh Lal Daroga had arrested the two men mentioned above. To rescue them Harma's friend Lokhon and son Champai came to Daroga but instead of listening to them he arrests them. This incident happened just after the great gathering of 10,000 Santhals on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1855 at Bhognadih (that is missing in Carstairs novel) under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu who declared war against the oppressive outsiders and exploiters. The news of arrest of Harma and three others was a sign of Thakur for action, according to Sidhu and Kanhu. They checked Kenaram and Maheshlal Daroga on their way to Bhagalpur along with the prisoners. It was at the Bhognadih itself where a huge crowd of Santhals blocked their way and demanded release of the prisoners as they were innocent. Santhals were agreed to let the Kenaram Bhagat and Maheshlal Daroga, had they released the prisoners. But the stubborn Daroga threatened them to put them in jail which instantly enraged Santhals. Garbhu, who was just freed by the rebels was greatly tortured by Kenaram and the Daroga. He suddenly snatched a weapon from a man standing by and chops Kenaram's head and then Daroga's head. And thus began the *Hool* i.e. Santhal rebellion.

This account has been supported by many scholars and writers. In the play '*Sengel Dak*' playwright J J Soren portrays the similar scene of *Hool's* beginning.

## V. CONCLUSION

This rebellion which included plundering, looting and murder was finally suppressed by introducing Martial Law on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1855 which lasted till 3<sup>rd</sup> Jan 1856. The rebellion was declared to be ended when these two leaders were arrested finally which is followed by their death sentence. Though defeated in battlefield, the rebels were rewarded with a separate district 'Santhal Pargana' along with some privileges like selling and buying tribal land was completely forbidden in Santhal Parganas and their direct access to govt. There were no mediator anymore.

Hence, we can conclude after these analysis that Sidhu and Kanhu were the central force during this whole time, from the beginning till the end, they were the inspiration and guiding spirit. They drove Santhals to rebellion and brought out their miserable and exploited life to the forefront. And therefore dismisses all the arguments put by Carstairs that they were mere rulers who projected themselves as kings and were intoxicated with power. His arguments that they loved to live in kingly style adorned with nice cloths and throne, and they treated themselves as above from the ordinary people, admiring their buttering, cannot be trusted. He portrays Sidhu as garrulous, someone who lacks his own conscience and imitates kanhu's ideas. He is jealous of Kanhu who gives orders and behaves as if he is the only king often neglecting Sidhu. In his portrayal of these leaders Carstairs tries to project a rivalry between the two brothers which is altogether

misleading. Instead as in the eyes of Santhals, they were great leaders and brave martyrs, A K Sinha thinks positively about them. For him, they were full of patriotism, they might have been illiterate but were courageous and the true sons of their soil.

Badal Sircar also praises them: “All the leaders, Chanrai, Bhairo, Sido, Kanhu died one by one. They died, but were not defeated. Not a single Santhal rebel surrendered. As long as their drums rolled, they would stand and fight, fall under the rain of bullets.”

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