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Revisiting Santhal Rebellion

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The Santhal rebellion (also known as the Santhal revolt or the Santhal Hool), was a rebellion against both the British East India Company (BEIC) and the zamindari system by the Santhal.

The main reason for the Santhal rebellion was to get freedom from the oppression of Hindus and the exploitation of poor people by the British. After the establishment of the permanent settlement, or the Zamindari system established by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 CE the Santhals lost their own lands. As under this 'settlement', it was agreed that landlords would have perpetual and hereditary rights over the land, so long as they paid a fixed revenue to the British Government.

The British auctioned off large tracts of land belonging to the Santhals, which would give them these fixed revenues. Many rich Indians living in the cities bought lands in the forest areas. They became zamindar in these distant forests and soon started exploiting the people there. So, with the introduction of the Zamindari system, the Santhals lost all rights over their land. They were reduced to hired laborers working in the fields for these new landlords. This also brought to an end, the old tribal systems and political structures that had continued here for generations. The Zamindar and his men were in control.

Another great blow to the Santhals was the introduction of currency. Santhals followed the barter system, but the Zamindars had to be paid in cash. This meant that they had to borrow money at very high interest



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rates from money lenders. The tweezers grip of money lenders and the loss of identity, created a deep sense of resentment among the Santhals.

The Santhal people left their areas and started living in the hills of Rajmahal. They made the land here suitable for agriculture, cut forests and built houses. This area of the Santhals came to be known as "Damin-i-koh" (skirts of the hills).

Later the British people also rushed on Damin-i-koh to collect the rent or tax and then zamindari was established there. Now the dominance of landlords, moneylenders, moneylenders and government employees started increasing in that area.

The amount of rent on the Santhals was kept so much that they were scattered under the burden of rent. The orgy of repression was such that interest ranging from 50 to 500 per cent started being collected on the loan given by Mahajan.

They were unable to pay the rent. Due to all these reasons, the poverty of the Santhal farmers increased. Due to non-payment of loans, their fields, and cattle were snatched away. The Santhals had to become the slaves of the landlords and moneylenders.

Santhals were not going to get justice from anywhere. Government servants, police, thanedars, etc. used to take the side of moneylenders. Far from thinking about the interests of the Santhals, the wealth of the Santhals was looted by them, the respect of tribal women was looted. There was no one to take the Santhals out of all this. Eventually, this despair of his life broke out as havoc on the government one day.

As years passed, things got worse. The exploitation at the hands of the local zamindars and the British led to an armed revolt. In 1855, the limits of anger of the Santhals were crossed. Four brothers of the Murmu clan - Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav and their two sisters Phulo and Jhano were came forward for justice. They united the Santhals

On June 30, 1855, the rebellion was headed by these brothers called a general meeting of Sathals in which 10,000 Santhals participated. In this meeting, the Santhals were assured that it was the desire of Lord



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Thakur himself that the Santhal sect should protest against the zamindari, Mahajani and government atrocities. The British rule should be abolished.

In July 1855 AD, the Sathals sounded the trumpet of the rebellion. Initially this movement was not an anti-government movement, but when the Santhals saw that the government was also taking the side of the landlords and moneylenders, their anger broke out on the government too. The Santhals killed the tyrannical police officer Mahesh Lal. Markets, shops were all destroyed and police stations were set on fire.

Many government offices, employees and moneylenders were attacked by the Santhals. Due to this many innocent people were also killed. Rail, postal, telegraph service etc. were suspended between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal. The Santhals took an oath to end the British rule. Apart from the Santhal Rebellion, it was spreading like a fire in places like Hazaribagh, Bankura, Purnia, Bhagalpur, Munger.

The British government was shaken from inside seeing the aggression of the Santhals. The government announced to suppress this violent action strictly. A manifesto was issued by the government from Bhagalpur and Purnia in Bihar that now the Santhal rebellion should be crushed as soon as possible. A detachment of army was sent from Calcutta to Kejar Barron and Purnia to suppress the Santhals. Then after that the naked-dance of Daman started. The Santhals did not have much power and did not have enough weapons. How long would they last with only arrows and bows? Nevertheless, he gave the pressure of this repression very bravely.

Eventually many Santhals were arrested and killed. Over 15,000 Santhal soldiers, leaders were also arrested and killed. The arrest of their leader broke the morale of the Santhals and by February 1856, the Santhal Rebellion was put to an end.

Even though thousands of Santhals sacrificed for their rights, they proved that even innocent people cannot tolerate oppression and atrocities to an extent. Efforts were being made to fulfill the demands of the Santhals to the government later. Later, the government made Santhalpargana a district. Still, the tribals continued to be repressed. Taking the inspiration of the Santhal Rebellion, the tribals further revolted against the government.



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Cause of Rebellion:

The land tax was increased and oppressed the common peasantry by groups of zamindars and moneylenders, as well as organisations of Europeans and government officials. The Zamindars, moneylenders, and traders of the Santhals had been tamed to such an extent that the Santhals resolved to rise up against them.

Earlier, the Santhals in Bihar did not oppose much following the implementation of Permanent Land Settlement (PLS). There were times when they pushed the limits of retreat, retrenchment, and even retreated to a point where the competition for land and rents was at its most intense. The Santhals couldn't bear it. Insurrection was their only option.

- 1) Extortion was carried out by the police, the revenue, and the court in a coordinated effort. The Santhals were compelled to pay a wide range of taxes and levies, which they were required to do. In the end, they were evicted from their home. They were harmed by others.
- 2) Personal violence was inflicted on Santhals by representatives of the Zamindars, i.e., Karendais. The timid and obedient Santhals were subjected to a range of petty tyrannies.
- 3) The wealthier peasants trespassed on the land of the tenants, which was owned by the Santhals. They kidnapped their livestock.
- 4) Extremely High Interest Rates: The interest rates charged by the moneylenders were exorbitant. The Santhal referred to these money lenders as diku, or exploiters. They were referred to as "dikus" by the Santhal people because of this.
- 5) European oppression: The construction of the railways in Bihar was done by Europeans. Forced abduction of Santhal women and even murder and other unjust acts of oppression were frequently committed by Europeans. For all this, the Europeans working on the railway line were not paid a penny. In this way, the Santhal peasants were oppressed to the point where they had no choice but to resort to uprising against the zamindars, moneylenders, businessmen, and European employees.



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