

From British Raj to Independent India: The Santal Hul Drum still Echoes

by Boro Baski

Every year on 30th June, Santals of India, Bangladesh and Nepal remember the Santal Insurrection (1855-56), popularly known as the Santal Hul, with great pride and emotion. The Governments of West Bengal and Jharkhand also commemorate this event in Santal populated districts. They organize seminars, rallies and cultural programmes with great publicity.

Damin-i-koh is a Persian word meaning the skirt of hills, presently in the Indian state of Jharkhand, it was a densely forested and hilly area. The Santals migrated to this area of Rajmahal hills towards the end of the 18th century from the adjacent lowlands. They cleared the jungle and improved the productivity of the land. They were happy in Damin and thought that they would be able to preserve their Santal identity, free from any contaminations with the Hindus. Their population also increased about a hundred thousand within 25 years.

The announcement of the Permanent Settlement in 1790 by the then British government affected the Santals. Their predominantly non-monetary economic and traditional social system 'Majhi Pargana' got disrupted by the new land revenue administration and legal and judicial machinery system of the settlement. The landlords, money-lenders and merchants took advantage of the uneducated Santals to grab their lands under the protection of the local administration. In this confusion, Santals became helpless victims. At this juncture, Sido Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, two Santal brothers, declared war against the zamindars and the police in order to resist rampant exploitation. This was on 30th June 1855 at Bhagnadihi village. The mighty British army suppressed the revolt and in this unequal encounter more than ten thousand Santals lost their lives. According to the 'Bengal District Gazetteers Santal Parganas', the British army officer, Major Jervis, observed,

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 volley into them. There was not a sepoy in the war who did not feel ashamed of himself. ^[1]

Though the Santals lost the battle, the British rulers were impressed by their extraordinary courage and resolve, and as a consequence the district of Santal Parganas was created and later the 'Santal Parganas Tenancy Act 1949' was written for the safety and special identity of the area. Hul has been closely followed by many contemporary intellectuals in Europe and England. For example, Charles Dickens made remarks on Hul in 'Household Words' (Volume 35)^[2] and Karl Marx in 'Notes on Indian History'. ^[3]

Hul is considered as the one major event which ignited Santal pride and formed the identity of Santals. However, Jugia Haram who had been a participant of Hul, made a statement about the post-Hul situation which needs to be pondered upon.

We lost everything in Hul, our houses were burnt down, our children, cattle and wives were lost wandering in search of food and shelter. After Hul we had to come back to the same money-lenders and merchants against whom we initiated the war for rice and begged for loan to cultivate our lands that were abandoned in the battle. ^[4]

Hul forced many Santals to leave their homeland Damin-i-koh and take refuge in present Bengal, Assam and in present Bangladesh. In these alien lands Santals re-organized themselves helped by the strength of their traditional social system, ‘Manjhi Pargana’, and started a new life.

Incidentally, in the last few years the men and women from our organization ‘Ghosaldanga Bishnubati Adibasi Trust’ participated in and organized several Santal programmes at places that have been established during the British Raj. In 2017, our cultural team presented a programme on ‘Baha Parab, the Santal Flower Festival’, on the splendour lawn of *Indian Museum*, Kolkata (estd.1814). In June of the same year, senior teachers of the organization presented a Santal dance and musical programme on the lawn of *The Indian Institute of Advanced Study*, Shimla (estd.1884-88) which used to be the summer residence of the viceroys and governor generals of India during the British Raj. In 2019, I on behalf of the organization was invited to participate in the programme titled “Adivasis in West Bengal: a socio –economic report” at The Asiatic Society (estd.1784), Kolkata. The workshop was organized by *The Asiatic Society* and Pratichi Institute.

All the three institutes where we talked, danced and sang Santali songs with drums and flutes were built by the British in the nineteenth century when Santals were happily living in their homeland Damin-i-koh or recovering from the wounds of their lost battle. We were known to the world as a ‘half-savage tribe’ as Karl Marx described us^[5], though we do not believe so. Our message through these programmes were straight and simple. We wanted to share our joyful way of life with our audiences through our songs and drums. The same drums we played during the Hul. In joy and sorrow it is the sound of our drums that keeps our life going.

The song that is presented here is considered to be one of the oldest songs composed on Santal Hul. I first heard this song from my mother and it is still sung by the people of our village. The interesting part of this song is, like many old, traditional and religious songs and mantras, several Bangla words have been used. The reason for using Bangla words in traditional Santali songs can be an area to be studied.

The old photos of Santal life that are used at the background of the song are of hundred years old. Some of the photos are exhibited in our Santal cultural museum at Bishnubati. We have received them as donations from the Santal Collection of the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

I dedicate this song to the warriors of Hul.

Link of the video song-

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bSmQ-Sh6xI

^[1] Quoted from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santhal_rebellion

^[2] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santhal_rebellion

^[3] <http://www.thedailystar.net/in-focus/when-the-santhals-rebelled-1245196>

^[4] Bodding, P.O (1887), The Traditions and Institutions of the Santals, p-265.

^[5] Quoted from: <http://www.thedailystar.net/in-focus/when-the-santhals-rebelled-1245196>