

ISSN: 0976-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)

UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Kherwar Movement: Continuity and Contrast

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Article History: Submitted-23/07/2017, Revised-04/09/2017, Accepted-05/09/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

“Kherwar” is an ancient name of the Santhal tribe, and carries overtones of the tribal golden age. The term was used after 1875 to describe any person who practised the new Santhal religion. The Kherwar also called themselves "SaphaHor", or pure Santhals. The Kherwar movement is not related to the hinduized Kharwar tribe of Palamu district adjoining Ranchi district to the northwest. Kherwar movement refers to all concerted, political and religious activities by the Santhals between 1858 and 1900 for the sake of convenience. The Kherwar abandoned the violence of 1855 rebellion as a way to restore Santhal solidarity and continued their efforts in post-independence era too despite issues of divergence owing to inter-tribal and intra-tribal conflicts. The continuity is reflective of the recoil capacity of their tradition and persistence.

Keywords: Kherwar, Santhal, Diku, adivasis, peasantization, tribe, caste, continuity.

The Kherwar movement in nineteenth century consisted of sporadic and imperfectly-coordinated activities. Its participants shared certain beliefs. It consisted of religious revitalization, political challenges to the British, and agrarian struggle. The religious and political activities were linked to the idea that certain individuals had received a divine calling to reform Santhal religious practices. Religious reforms were often seen as a way to improve Santhals' material lives, and sometimes as a precursor to a millennium. The commonest ritual innovations were Hindu in nature, for instance, the slaughter of pigs and fowls, and abstention from eating them. Large meetings were held and many Santhals went on pilgrimages to their leaders' homes. However, the Kherwar devotees and their Hindu preceptors did not have a lasting relation of mutual dependence, so it cannot be said that this was an embryonic caste relationship. Defiance to British authorities took concrete shape only in the resistance to the census of 1881 and their agrarian protests involved the belief that they were the original tillers of the soil and as such entitled to pay at most, a low rent. They frequently refused to pay rent and complained about the landlords to the local officials. However, to systematically describe movements among the tribes of Jharkhand after 1895 is a tedious task. To compare them with Kherwar movement is even more cumbersome. A brief

sketch of some post-1895 movements will help us to gauge the Kherwar movement in a broader perspective and its linkage with the Jharkhand movement in time and space.

The Birsa movement was the first agitation that took place in Ranchi immediately after the Sardari movement in Ranchi and the Kherwar movement in the Santhal Parganas. This was a complex movement that sought the religious revitalization of the Mundas as the Kherwars earlier sought for the Santhals. The restoration of rent-free Munda lands was sought, in the same way as the Kherwars wished to achieve it for the Santhals during the agitation against land alienation. However, the Kherwars never sought to drive out the Europeans, Officials and Missionaries violently out of Santhals' homeland as sought by Birsa from the Munda homeland; otherwise most of the activities were the same as those indulged by the Sardars in Ranchi and the Kherwars in the Santhal Parganas. An unprecedented degree of personal charisma combined with a higher degree of conscious organization in the Birsa movement seem to me as a natural corollary in time, never witnessed in any previous Munda, Oraon or Santhal movements.

The TanaBhagat movement of the Oraons, that reached its peak during the First World War also engaged in religious and cultural revitalization. It was in part attributable to the special conditions of the war, in which the Oraons believed that the German Kaiser would save them. As the Kherwars did earlier, the Tana Bhagats also refused to pay rents and taxes, exorcised traditional Oraon spirits as did the Kherwars; abstained from meat, alcohol, dancing and hunting, and adopted the Hindu sacred thread and Hindu rituals. However, in the early 1920s, the TanaBhagats became fervent supporters of Gandhiji in the National movement. It is striking that ending land-alienation was not a major goal, even of the Jharkhand movement – land reform was not even an objective for most of the Jharkhand parties before the formation of Jharkhand state, but that religious and cultural revitalization figure prominently on the movement's agenda, partly as a way of uniting disparate tribal and economic groups.¹

If we compare the above mentioned movements with the earlier Kherwar movement, one question arises as to why was the Birsa movement more complex? The Adivasi, Diku and the European systems were no different in 1895-1900 than between 1858-1895. The two exceptions being the occurrence of two serious famines in 1896 and 1900 which aggravated the tribal hostility towards the Europeans and made many of them feel that tribal solidarity was threatened in the same way as was the impact of the famine of 1874 on the Santhals earlier. The other exception is that it is possible that by 1895, a new generation of more European-oriented, educated adivasis was coming up. It is striking that the Birsa movement was actively supported by many former Sardars, and was in contact with the Kherwar movement. It is also likely that over several decades since 1858, village markets, travel to tea plantations, and divisions between Christians and non-Christians had had sufficient impact on rank and file Mundas and Oraons so that a significant number of them had acquired radically new ideas and values. Birsa's own life history suggests that he had been in close contact with Missions, Scholars, Hindu gurus and the British, and he drew on symbols and techniques learned from all these sources in the same way as Bhagirath did in the Kherwar movement. Birsa underwent a personal religious awakening commonly found among many charismatic

leaders of revitalization movements.² Thus can be explained the comparative complexities of the Birsa movement.

In Ranchi at least, significant steps were taken to reverse land alienation, in response to the Birsa movement. Two thorough land settlements were conducted between 1900 and 1940, but as in the Santhal Parganas after 1872, the settlement by no means restored all the ancient egalitarian village land-holdings. Not only class but religious cleavages in adivasi society have become more serious in the twentieth century, because of industrialization, urbanization and western education. Divisions between Christians and non-Christians, Catholics and Protestants have deepened. Some adivasis have become more hinduized than the Kherwars were in the late nineteenth century: for instance, some Santhals have their own priests and barbers and some Oraons have forgotten tribal traditions.³

During the twentieth century, the adivasis of Jharkhand were exposed to non-adivasi movements of national scope and associational form. The independence movement drew support from Hindus living in the tribal belt. Among the adivasis, its only adherents were the Tana Bhagats and the Sapha Hors (successors of the Kherwars). Adivasis in both of these movements were more heavily exposed to Hindu ideologies than their fellow-tribesmen, and no doubt because of this the Sapha Hor and the Tana Bhagats were more receptive to the largely- Hindu Gandhian ideology. Other adivasis were neutral or hostile towards the nationalist movement. Partly no doubt may be because they considered the national movement a diku one, or at least a Hindu movement of no benefit to them. Perhaps the Sapha Hor and the Tana Bhagats willingly joined the nationalist movements because they had strong collective memories of direct opposition to the rule of the British.⁴

The Sapha Hor or clean Santhals were to be especially strict in avoiding eating together with non-Sapha Hors and to exclude them from ceremonies and life cycle events. It was also especially the Sapha Hors who kept away from eating fowls, pigs and drinking of rice-beer. Instead of doing what common Santhals did they had to bathe in the morning before they could take any food.⁵ The Samra's sacrifices consisted of sugar and sweetmeats as they met regularly on one evening a week.⁶ Definitely a new practice which could be seen as a step towards parochial organization of religious life.

As far as Hindu influences are concerned the Kherwars have been seen as divided in three branches, SaphaHor, Samra and Babaji, out of which the Kherwars are usually seen as the original group which the other three have split away from.⁷ There is a general agreement on the existence of these three groups and some of their characteristics among the scholars. It is, however, difficult to know when they originated, and whether they can be seen as the product of schisms in one movement or as different developments in an open network of religious leaders which Santhals and non-Santhals could attend according to their choice. Troisi, who follows a chronological frame as to when the different branches appeared, stresses that the division in the three branches took place after the Kherwar movement went underground after their activities in 1897 were suppressed. The three branches had already been described in 1880 by Rev. Skrefsrud who described them with some of the same characteristics as they were later known for.⁸ In 1906, Bodding's Santhal informant used Kherwar as a designation

for the people who joined the babajis, but he named the story after the leaders, the babas. Hodne inscribed the Kherwars in a general movement of the Santhals towards Hinduism. A position which he argued from the general Census figures as the Kherwars had only been counted in 1881. In 1901, 11 percent of the 663000 Santhals in Santhal Parganas were returned as Hindus, a figure which in 1931 had grown to about 50percent of the 754004 Santhals in Santhal Parganas and 796656 in Bengal. The Bihar Census of 1931 only recorded that the Santhals “are being gradually ‘Hinduized’ and the further this process is carried, the more they are in danger of becoming identified with the depressed classes.”⁹ That the Kherwars had been on the decline at least since 1930s is evidence that new forms of religious and political organizations have taken over. The Jharkhand movement is one of them. In the late nineteenth century, there was neither the social learning nor the industrializing environment of the twentieth century, and hence a century ago there was virtually no debate among adivasi on the relative merits of agrarian versus religious strategies of tribal defence.¹⁰ However, some twentieth century movements, especially the religious-revitalization ones, were no more associational than the Kherwar movement reflective of the fact that many basic features of adivasi society hardly changed during at least the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Some of the ideas developed by the nineteenth century movements are still alive today. Many adivasis feel that it is imperative for them to assert their cultural distinctiveness. Nineteenth century leaders like Birsa, Sidhu and Kanhu, Bhagirath and Dubia are still revered. The old desire for control over a distinctively adivasi piece of territory is very much alive as expressed in the concept of greater Jharkhand. A strong consciousness in the minds of many adivasis that the tribal people of Bihar and Jharkhand have always resisted what they saw as oppression, and that this resistance has sometimes been successful reflective of the fact that many basic aspects of tribal society hardly changed between 1770 and about 1930. It is not therefore, surprising that some Mundas and Oraons turned after 1895 to religious revitalization, as some Santhals had before 1895.

The Paharia tribe underwent virtually no peasantization in the nineteenth century and did not engage in any acts of collective protest because there was no great threat to its economic or cultural autonomy.

The Bhumij, before British rule were similar to the Mundas. Bhumij were more peasantized by the time the British rule began. They experienced serious exploitation by dikus in the early years of British rule culminating in a violent revolt under a charismatic leader in 1836. The Bhumij became thoroughly peasantized thereafter and undertook no agrarian, religious or political movement in the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, however, the Bhumij were well on the way to becoming a Hindu caste, and their only movements were concerned with speeding up or reversing the process of Sanskritization.¹¹ Perhaps adivasi movements are likely if Hindu systems put some pressure on the adivasi systems, but not too much pressure.

The “non-regulation” philosophy was supposed to guide British administrators between 1858 and 1895. But in practice, many aspects of the philosophy were not enforced in the Santhal

Parganas between 1858 and 1872.¹² The Regulation of 1886, unlike that of 1872, allowed the Lieutenant-Governor to notify that any regulation or Act was not in force in the Santhal Parganas. Why was the non-regulation system not fully implemented in the Santhal Parganas? The main reasons seem to be that policies on non-Santhal matters sometimes conflicted with the policy of protecting the Santhal society. Unexpected difficulties arose in implementing the philosophy, such as the unwillingness of many villagers to collectively set their rent levels, as required in the settlement of 1872-78 after the early Kherwar unrest. Also, after the Santhal protests against the Census of 1881, the non-regulation perspective lost some of its support in government circles. After the reforms of 1872, the Civil Procedure Code was no longer applied in the Santhal Parganas. Local officers were expected to conduct court enquiries orally and to make a record of the proceedings themselves. Arbitration was popular with the Santhals.¹³ The volume of litigation grew between 1872 and 1895, partly because of the land settlements. In 1887, it was reported that petition-writers and brokers (dalals) physically barred tenants from complaining in a court about land alienation.¹⁴ The Deputy Commissioner could, after 1872, try all criminal cases not punishable with death. Appeals could be made to the Commissioner of Bhagalpur division. In the Santhal Parganas, the Santhali language was used in Court, and at least in the preliminary phase of criminal trials, Santhals could use interpreters when the judge did not speak Santhali.¹⁵ After the census troubles of 1880-81, regular plains-type policemen were introduced in most of the district outside the Damin-i-Koh. But village headmen retained their police powers, and could still refer cases directly to senior local “Santhal” officers as was the practice earlier.

In practice, it was reported, throughout the period 1858-95, petty crimes were competently investigated and promptly punished by Santhal village headmen. But this was not always true of more serious crimes. From the late 1880s on, many village crimes except serious crimes were apparently reported by Santhal headmen to subordinate officials such as head Constables. Junior officials were inefficient, but “Santhal” officers were getting increasingly dependent on them, as they became more burdened with paperwork.¹⁶

Administrative structures had impact on the form of adivasi movements. In the Santhal Parganas, the personal style of government was no doubt one reason why Santhal leaders directly challenged British officials on issues of land rights and governmental authority. Yet at the same time the intimate relationship between officials and Santhal enabled some officials to end Santhal resistance to the Census of 1881. As we have seen earlier, there were several agrarian acts and regulations in force in the Santhal Parganas in the late nineteenth century, all came into being in the immediate aftermath of a rebellion or a movement whenever it took place. The Act of 1855, that created the district, made it a non-regulation district and set limits on interest charges; came into force after the Santhal Hull. The Bengal Tenancy Act of 1859 which was increasingly applied to the Santhal Parganas between 1865 and 1871 was superseded by the Settlement Regulation of 1872, after the initial outburst by the Kherwars. This Settlement Regulation of 1872 was backed by an Act of the British Parliament, and led to the land settlement of 1872-78 outside the Damin-i-Koh; the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 was supposed to apply to Santhal Parganas, but was superseded by a new Settlement Regulation of 1886 under which another round of land settlements were

conducted in about a third of the non-Damin tract: landlords or tenants could apply for these settlements and settlement-officers decided on the distribution of rents among tenants.¹⁷

Some of the laws and regulations were inconsistent with each other, for we have seen that before 1871, they increasingly favoured dikus and though the balance was somewhat redressed in favour of the Santhals in 1872, the application of the Bengal Rent Act of 1859 to Santhal occupancy rights contributed to the alienation of Santhal lands in the late 1870s and the early 1880s. The government felt the reform of the 1870s met all the Santhal's agrarian demands and that if new agrarian grievances arose, the Santhals should bring them to the authorities and accept whatever decision was made.

In the Santhal Parganas, during 1858 and 1871, about ten percent of the Santhal secular headmen outside the Damin-i-Koh were replaced by dikus. However, during the land settlement of 1872-78, many Santhal headmen were reinstated in the non-Damin tracts. Santhal Officers had the authority over the appointment and dismissal of village headmen, and took his authority very seriously. While the position of headmen was hereditary, a headman had to be acceptable to the tenants and the landlord before he could be appointed.¹⁸

The position of dikus vis-à-vis Santhals in the aftermath of the movement deserves much attention as that was the crux of all the tribal movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We see that after 1872, Santhal headmen gained new prerogatives and perquisites, but they also became weaker in important respects in relation to the villagers. Santhal headmen tended to behave more individualistically during the last decades of the nineteenth century. During the unrest of 1880-81, several headmen were deposed by their villagers, apparently more as a punishment for supporting the British than for their treatment of their villagers.

A santhal told the missionary Skrefsrud in 1871 that there were rivalries between the manjhis (secular village headmen) and godets (officials who called the village meetings, carried messages and, like the manjhis, possessed police powers). Some headmen were dismissed in the Damin-i-Koh for conniving with diku activities. The Santhal headmen rarely demonstrated any strong loyalty to communities above their villages even in the twentieth century after the Kherwar movement.¹⁹ However, traditional Santhal leaders continued to perform many traditional rituals. In 1910, young Santhals were said to be still confiding in their jag-manjhis (guardians of the village youth's morals). According to Bodding, the guardians of the villages' youths were careless.

Dikus occupied most of the lower positions in the administrative hierarchies of the Santhal Parganas. They replaced adivasis as village officials sometimes. Dikus power increased in the 1880s and 1890s to the extent that the Santhals became more indebted to the dikus, district administration became more bureaucratic, Santhals more often resorted to the courts for settling their disputes, and non-Santhal policemen were more widely used for solving Santhals' crimes. Occasionally dikus did employ thugs to intimidate tenants and debtors. But in most cases, they exercised power over the adivasis not through crude coercion but through their control over tribal economy and over local administration. Dikus took full advantage of

the willingness of some adivasi headmen to exploit their offices for personal gains. However, they did not often ally themselves with one tribal group against another.²⁰

The Kherwar abandoned the violence of 1855 rebellion as a way to restore Santhal solidarity not only because the State sector of European system had demonstrated its repressiveness against violent rebellion, but also because it became more responsive to the agrarian demands the Santhals had been pressing since 1855 and that has continued ever since even in the post independent era.

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