



A Review on Role of Tribal Leaders in Resistance Movement of Odisha during Colonial Period



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Abstract

Tribal resistance in the anticolonial movement in Odisha is accentuated as offensive by the Britishers, it is perhaps shocking as that label perpetuated throughout the anti-colonial India. This is intended to examine the history of Tribal resistance in Britishers reign and shifts to focusing on their resistance in the contemporary India in relation to globalization, also concerning questions of identity and nation, power politics in criminalizing them, narratives of forgotten history of past and present. Tribals have resisted the Britisher's authority and local power confiscators like the Zamindars, Thakhedars, Christian missionaries, and other exploiters. For many centuries, tribals were isolated, scattered in forests. Each tribe has established its own socio cultural diversity. They were distinguished from this nation. They launched movements against their oppressors in their respective regions. Their agitations against the outsiders could be called anti-colonial. They revolted against them because of their exploitation in the form of encroachment on their land, eviction from their land, annulment of the traditional legal and social rights and customs, against enhancement of rent, for transfer of land to the tiller; abolition of feudal and semi-feudal form of ownership.

On the whole, these movements had social and religious overtone. But they were directed against the issues related to their existence. Tribal Resistance Movement was an integral part of Freedom movement of Odisha. In this historic struggle, the heroic role played by some distinguished tribal leaders like Laxman Naik (Koraput), Birsa Munda and Veer Surendra Sai (Sambalpur). The objective of this paper is to highlight the role of tribal leaders of Odisha in the Freedom Movement against the British Imperialism. Nothing could be more inspiring and edifying than saga of heroic struggle and sacrifice of galaxy of these tribal personalities. The most dominant characteristic of the tribal resistance movement was that it was essentially an uprising against the foreign rulers and in that sense could be constructed to be the precursor of the national liberation movement which took a definite shape and gathered momentum under the inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi nearly one century later. It is immaterial as to what were the compulsions or motivations behind this resistance movement; it is immaterial if the tribal revolutionaries had no formal education and training in staging armed rebellions and had no common leadership to guide and spur them to action. The unmistakable fact remains that they could no longer meekly submit to the intervention of the foreign rulers in their habitat, age old customs, rituals and cultural moors.

Keywords: Tribes; Movement; Odisha; Colonial period; British raj; Independence; Struggle

Introduction

Tribal resistance in the anti-colonial movement in Odisha is accentuated as offensive by the Britishers, it is perhaps shocking as that label perpetuated throughout the anti-colonial India. This is intended to examine the history of Tribal resistance in Britishers reign and shifts to focusing on their resistance in the contemporary India in relation to globalization, also concerning questions of identity and nation, power politics in criminalizing them, narratives of forgotten history of past and present. Tribals have resisted the Britisher's authority and local power confiscators like the Zamindars, Thakhedars, Christian missionaries, and other exploiters. For many centuries, tribals were isolated, scattered in forests. Each tribe has established its own socio cultural diversity. They were distinguished from this nation [1,2]. They launched movements against their oppressors in their respective regions. Their agitations against the outsiders could be called anti-colonial. They revolted against them because of their exploitation in the form of encroachment on their land, eviction from their land,

annulment of the traditional legal and social rights and customs, against enhancement of rent, for transfer of land to the tiller; abolition of feudal and semi-feudal form of ownership. On the whole, these movements had social and religious overtone. But they were directed against the issues related to their existence. Tribal Resistance Movement was an integral part of Freedom movement of Odisha. In this historic struggle, the heroic role played by some distinguished tribal leaders like Laxman Naik, Birsa Munda and Veer Surendra Sai. The objective of this paper is to highlight the role of tribal leaders of Odisha in the Freedom Movement against the British Imperialism [3].

The most dominant characteristic of the tribal resistance movement was that it was essentially an uprising against the foreign rulers and in that sense could be constructed to be the precursor of the national liberation movement which took a definite shape and gathered momentum under the inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi nearly one century later. It is immaterial as to what were the

compulsions or motivations behind this resistance movement; it is immaterial if the tribal revolutionaries had no formal education and training in staging armed rebellions and had no common leadership to guide and spur them to action. The unmistakable fact remains that they could no longer meekly submit to the intervention of the foreign rulers in their habitat, age old customs, rituals and cultural moors [4]. Some of the tribal uprisings were directed against the mal-administration of the numerous feudal chiefs, the so-called Rajas, Maharajas who held ownership of large estates and lived on a policy of extortion and coercion. They acted as the stooges of the imperial power and all their action and conduct were directed at cementing the foundations of the foreign rule.

Tribal resistance movement was an integral part of Freedom movement of Odisha. In this historic movement the heroic role played by some distinguished tribal leaders like Laxman Naik of Koraput, Ratan Naik of Keonjhar, Dora Bisoyee and Chakra Bisoyee of Ghumsur and Veer Surendra Sai of Sambalpur. There are few important aspects of the tribal resistance movement which deserve mention. One is that the tribals have their own social, cultural and religious identity, their own taboos, make beliefs and peculiar compulsion of life style and therefore, any attempt of the administration of an alien rule to make an inroad into the tribal society by way of reformatory and correctional changes, however laudable, is bound to be resisted by the tribals with all their individual and collective might [5-7]. This is what precisely happened to the Khonds of Ganjam during the period 1836-1861 who rose against what they considered to be a foreign incursion into some of their age old rites like offering human sacrifice on turmeric fields to propitiate the goddess of mother earth, with the make belief that such offering caused redness of turmeric, female infanticide based more on deep rooted social prejudices against women rather than on the relative utility of male offerings vis-a-vis female ones, etc [8].

The Khonds of Ghumsur protested the British, as the latter tried to stop the heinous practices by the formers. The British could not dare to enter into the remote hilly areas of the Khonds, because, the latters launched guerilla warfare. The Khond Chief Dora Bisoyee was the main target of the English soldiers [9-11]. The British declared handsome reward to arrest the Chief. The Khonds killed a group of British troops, as the farmers were misbehaved and troubled by the latters. Chakra Bisoyee another tribal leader of Ghumsur dared to fight against the British troops. Although the British offered him pardon, if he would surrender butthere was no positive response. The British could not capture Chakra, as he escaped from place to place such as Angul to Ghumsur, then Sonpur, Kandhmal, Ganjam and Parlakhemundi.

Role of Various Leaders in Movement

Laxman Naik was born on 22nd November 1899 in Tentuligumma of Malkangiri. His father was Padlam Naik. He belonged to a Bhuyan tribe. He fought single-handed against the oppressive foreign rulers with consummate skill and rare passion and fervour of a fighter. He was the very fountain of grit, courage, and strength to countless followers and co-workers and shone by rare brilliance. He sacrificed all worldly comforts and did not bow down before

the pressure of the British Imperialism. This tribal hero was not well educated, yet fully aware about the national movement. He was crying dyeing for the freedom of this country. He became more active, when Gandhi's message reached Koraput [12-15]. He became an active member of the congress in enrolling as Fouranna orcharanna member of the Indian National Congress. He played a key role to popularize congress programme in Koraput. The people of Koraput and its surrounding areas like Malkangiri, Tentulipada, accepted him as the real hero and devoted themselves for the cause of national Freedom. He promoted Khadi and made people aware of the congress plan of action. He took the charge of President of the Congress Primary Committee at Mathili in Koraput in 1942 [16]. He managed to mobilize the tribal people for various development works like constructing roads, building bridges and establishing schools. He asked the villagers not to pay the taxes. During the Quit India Movement 1942, he was nominated to represent Mathili. He also offered individual Satyagraha with other seven friends in 1941 in Mathili Police Station area. He used non-violence as a main weapon against colonial power. The tribal people called him Gandhi of Malkangiri. The Bonda tribes of this region were violent and belligerent and seized Mathili Police Station under the leadership of him. The angry demonstrators raised patriotic slogans [17,18]. The police lathi charged on the innocent tribal people of this area and as Laxman Nayak was their leader he was involved in a murder case of a Forest guard Gantta Ramayya. He along with his sons and Congress workers were sent to Koraput Jail. His trial was taken by the Additional Sessions Judge V. Ramnathan of Koraput session court. He sentenced him to death under Section 302 of I.P.C.10. He was then sent to Berhampur Jail for execution. At the break of dawn on March 29, 1943, by 5.30a.m. He gallantly marched towards the gallows. In this way, this great tribal leader resisted against the British Imperialism and sacrificed his life.

The battle fought between Veer Surendra Sai and his compatriots on the one side and the agents of the British Imperialism on the other for nearly four decades falls in this category. It was an unequal battle fought by Surendra Sai and his brother Udanta Sai and a band of dedicated follower-fighters under the most adverse and excruciatingly painful circumstances. They did not have regular and trained armed forces, they did not have the equipments and ammunition which the British had in their possession in abundance. Besides, the British had the formidable authority of a paramount sovereign power at their command [19-21]. As against this, he and his brother Udant Sai had practically nothing. Butthey were master strategists and adept in the art of guerilla warfare. They were thoroughly conversant with the topography and geography of Sambalpur and adjoining tracts. Almost all the tribal Zamindars and the village headmen of the district were on their side. The manner in which they escaped from Hazaribagh Jail after long seventeen years of detention, the fortitude with which they braved the hazards of intractable forests and hills with an extreme and inhospitable climate and the manner in which they with stood all the onslaughts un-leashed by the British are matters of history.

In 1857, the Sepoys rose in Hazaribagh. They broke open the jails and liberated the prisoners. After that, the Sai brothers proceeded to their native district to reorganize the tribal people and

the Zamindars. Captain Leigh, the senior Assistant Commissioner of Sambalpur, gotal armed at the approach of him and immediately brought some new forces from Cuttack to meet the situation. The rebellion of Sambalpur in 1857 was mainly a tribal rebellion. The tribal Zamindars of Ghens, Kolabira, Kodabaga, Lakhanpur, Loisinga, Laida, Patkhulanda, etc. had joined it espousing the cause of Surendra [22]. They gave up their comforts and resorted to jungle life. Some of them lost their estates, some were killed in the battle, some were arrested and hanged and many were imprisoned. The tribal people were noted for their sacrifice and heroism. He could challenge the mighty British Power relying solely on their strength and support. He organized the rebels into several groups. One group under Udanta stayed at Jharghaty Pass where they cut off the connection of Sambalpur with Hazaribagh and Ranchi. Another group under the Zamindar of Loising of Loisinga was in charge of Barhapati Pass where they obstructed the road to Cuttack. The Zamindar of Ghens, Madho Singh, guarded the Singhora Pass on the road to Nagpur. Although Madho Singh, who had guarded Singhora Pass on the road to Nagpur was hanged in the later part of 1858, but his 3 brave sons Kamal Singh, Nilambar Singh, and Khageswar Singh extended their support to him and remained in charge of Debrigarh, Barhpati, Papanga, Paharsingira etc., the strategic centres of the rebels. These strategic posts were further fortified by constructing high and thick walls with mud and boulders and advance guards were posted in each place to watch the movement of enemy [23-25]. The walls were so built as to facilitate the troops from beyond the top most wall to correctly visualize the lower walls. All the trees lining the pass were moved so that there was no obstruction in spotting the enemy within the firing range. It bears eloquent testimony to the sound organizational ability. The revolution of 1857-58 marked the end of the regime of the East India Company and the consequent assumption of the direct administration of this country by the Crown. It is a matter of pride and distinction that although the Indian rebellion rightly described by many as the First War of Indian Independence collapsed by the end of 1858, he and his band of followers carried on the relentless fight against the imperialist forces with heavy odds. When the agents of British imperialism found that he was determined to fight them till the last in the face of all tribulations they in connivance with the Rulers of some of the ex-states like Sonapur, Rairakhol, Sundergarh, Balangir Patna and few Zamindars adopted a policy of isolation of Sai from the sympathy and support of these interests reinforced by a policy of coercion and torture of sympathizers of the rebels [26]. As his supporters swelled in number he pursued his cause from 1858 to 1862, like Tanta Topa, with a rugged tenacity. For the first time, he could successfully mobilize the resources of the tribal people of Sambalpur. The Gonds, the Sauras, the Birjals and other sagainst the British.

The master strategist in him always got the better of his adversaries and as a matter of fact, he often eluded and baffled them. It was simply incredible. Bereft of the placidity of home life and family life and living amidst the harshness of a hilly terrain, like Rana Pratap, Sai and his followers had also undergone untold suffering. His brother was killed in enemy action. But he was unruffled. In April 1861, Major Impey was appointed Deputy

Commissioner of Sambalpur in place of Col. Forster. On studying the situation, Impey believed that conciliatory measures and not military operations, would only induce the rebels to surrender [27]. The policy of Major Impey was at last crowned with success. Mitrabhanu, the only son of him, was the first man in the Sai family to lay down arms. In the summer of 1862, he cried halt after nearly three and half decades of relentless fight. He along with his close followers was put under arrest two years after grant of amnesty. He was lodged in the Fort of Asirgarh on the Satpura hill range in Madhya Pradesh, where he breathed his last on 28th February 1884, after a long and agonisingly painful detention of 20 years.

Birsa Munda (1875-1900) was an Indian tribal freedom fighter, religious leader and folk hero who belonged to the Munda tribe. He spearheaded an Indian tribal indigenous religious millenarian movement that rose in the tribal belt of modern day Bihar and Jharkhand in the late 19th century, during the British Raj, thereby making him an important figure in the history of the Indian independence movement. His achievements are even more remarkable for having been accomplished before the age of 25. He was born on 15 November 1875 at Ulihatu, Ranchi District, in what was then Bihar, and hence was named after the day of his birth according to the then prevalent Munda custom. The folk songs reflect popular confusion and refer to both Ulihatu and Chalkad as his birthplace. Ulihatu was the birthplace of Sugana Munda, father of Birsa. The claim of Ulihatu rests on Birsa's elder brother Komta Munda living in the village and on his house which still exists albeit in a dilapidated condition. Birsa's father, mother Karmi Hatu, and younger brother, Pansa Munda, left Ulihatu and proceeded to Kurumbda near Birbanki in search of employment as labourers or crop-sharers (saajhedaar) or ryots. At Kurumbda Birsa's elder brother, Komta, and his sister, Daskir, were born. From there the family moved to Bamba where Birsa's elder sister Champa was born followed by himself. His call against the British Raj, "Abua raj stejana, maharani raj tandujana" (Let the kingdom of queen be ended and our kingdom be established.) is remembered today in tribal areas of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar.

The British colonial system intensified the transformation of the tribal agrarian system into feudal state. As the tribals with their primitive technology could not generate a surplus, non-tribal peasantry were invited by the chiefs in Chhotanagpur to settle on and cultivate the land. This led to the alienation of the lands held by the tribals. The new class of Thikadars were of a more rapacious kind and eager to make most of their possessions. In 1856 Jagirdars stood at about 600, and they held from a village to 150 villages. By 1874, the authority of the old Munda or Ora on chiefs had been almost entirely effaced by that of the farmers, introduced by the superior landlord. In some villages the aborigines had completely lost their proprietary rights and had been reduced to the position of farm labourers. To the twin challenges of agrarian breakdown and culture change, he along with the Munda responded through a series of revolts and uprisings under his leadership. The movement sought to assert rights of the Mundas as the real proprietors of the soil, and the expulsion of middlemen and the British. He was treacherously caught on 3 February 1900 and died in mysterious conditions on 9 June 1900 in Ranchi Jail. He didn't show any

symptoms of cholera though British government declared that he died because of cholera. Though he lived for a very short span of 25 years, he aroused the mind-set of the tribals and mobilized them in a small town of Chotanagpur and was a terror to the British rulers. After his death the movement faded out. However, the movement was significant in at least two ways.

First it forced the colonial government to introduce laws so that the land of the tribals could not be easily taken away by the dikus. Second it showed once again that the tribal people had the capacity to protest against injustice and express their anger against colonial rule. They did this in their own way, inventing their own rituals and symbols of struggle. He was arrested on 3rd March 1900 in Jamkopai forest, Chakradharpur while he was sleeping along his tribal guerrilla army which was fighting against British forces. About 460 tribal people were arrested of which one was given with capital punishment, 39 were awarded for transportation for life and 23 for 14 years jail. He died in Ranchi Jail on 9th June 1900 from cholera.

Conclusion

History of Odisha has recorded scores of instances of such unequal battles that became inevitable when imperialist forces came out with their mad craze for acquiring other's territories through the use of brute force, destroying the sovereignty and freedom of free people and bringing in the process a holocaust to the lives of innumerable men, women and children. It is a battle between the evil designs of expansionism and the powerful instinct of self-presentation [28]. The second aspect of the resistance movement could be attributed to immigration of a chain of resourceful peasants, money-lenders and scribes from the coastal plains to the tribal hinter land and the process of forced assimilation of the tribals with the economic policies pursued by the immigrants such as improvement of land, introduction of improved agricultural practices in places of the primitive agricultural system pursued by tribals. Alienation of land ownership of tribal riots and eviction of tribal tenants was the direct and inevitable outcome of this process of invasion of crafty and unscrupulous traders and money lenders and prosperous peasants from the plains into tribal areas and forced induction of the tribals into their ways.

The most dominant characteristic of the tribal resistance movement was that it was essentially an uprising against the foreign rulers and in that sense could be constructed to be the precursor of the national liberation movement which took a definite shape and gathered momentum under the inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi nearly one century later. The new policy introduced brought a radical change in the concept of land ownership. Tradition had conferred ownership or title to land on the basis of membership of a clan or tribe. The new policy put an end to this; it also put an end to attempts at land-grabbing by the leaders of a clan or tribe by force. Prima facie fair and equitable, this policy caused the replacement of the clan leader by a new elite as an intermediary between the tribesmen and the alien government; it destroyed the traditional balance between the tribals and non-tribals. It also destroyed the traditional tribal economy and shattered the bonds which knit the different segments of a tribal society together [29].

Such an unfortunate situation could have been avoided, had the foreign rulers pursued an enlightened and equitable land reforms policy which would have assured land to the tiller and protected his proprietary rights while discouraging grack renting and absentee landlordism. Instead, the land revenue policy of the British Govt. based on frequent settlement and revision of rent provided a phillip to the process of tribal land alienation, pauperization of the tribal peasantry and resultant unrest and violence in the tribal society. If alienation of tribal lands in favour of non-tribal immigrants constituted an important factor of tribal unrest and uprising in the early part of the nineteenth century [30], it is no less today. It has no doubt enacted laudable legislative enactments like the Tribal Land Alienation Regulation of 1956 to arrest the process of grabbing of land of tribals by non-tribals but the process is going on unabated and often unnoticed. The crafty and resourceful members of the non-tribal community are responsible for such land-grabbing.

Land alienation coupled with denial of a fair and equitable return on the products of their hard labour have been responsible for misery and privation of members of the scheduled tribe community on an increasing scale. These injustices or deprivations could possibly have been compounded if industrialization of tribal areas on a scale or manner commensurate with their needs and conducive to their interests could have taken place by paying them just and fair compensation for acquisition of their land and by providing employment to them and their family members in the industrial establishments. Unfortunately the reverse has happened leading to the total detriment of social and economic interests of tribals. This can be illustrated with few examples. An area is given for prospecting and mining lease and the tribal loses his surface rights on the land he was used hitherto to cultivate for his own biological survival [31-33]. His habitat is destroyed and he is pushed to the background to work under the mining contractor, under conditions akin to bondage. These contractors usurp the tribal property, outrage the modesty of tribal women and destroy the very foundation of a quiet and placid tribal existence.

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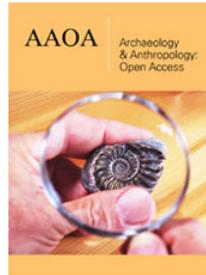
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