



A BLOW TO THE BRITISH HEGEMONY IN ODISHA: THE SANTALA UPRISING OF MAYURBHANJ:- A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract:

The Tribal uprising in Odisha in the second half of the nineteenth century was a great challenge to the British hegemony. Among these revolts, the Kandha uprising of Ghumsar and Nayagarh, the Bhuyan and Juang uprising in Keonjhar and the Gond and the Bhinjal uprising of Sambalpur were very famous. However, the Santala uprising of Mayurbhanj had given a threat to British Imperialism during that period. Since not much discussion has been made on that topic, this paper attempts at a close study of the Santala uprising of Mayurbhanj and its consequences.

KEYWORDS:

British Hegemony , great challenge , typical race.

INTRODUCTION:

Genesis

The Santalas are a typical race of aboriginal stock and are akin to the bhumijis, Hos and Mundas. Their complexion varies from very dark brown to an almost charcoal dark black and their features are negritic. They worship various dieties including Marang Buru, Orak Bonga, Abie Bonga and others. Their principal festival is shral (Harvesting festival) after the reaping of the chief rice crop. As early as 1866, disturbances broke out in Bamanghati, the northern extremity of Mayurbhanj and bordering on Singhbhum. For a pretty long time, the land was in a disturbed condition. The apathy of the British Government towards the Santalas and the exploitative rule of the local ruler of Mayurbhanj protected by the British prompted them to be revolutionary. They rose in revolt against the Raj with their traditional weapons like the bow and arrow with poisonous edges, tangi (curved sling) and many other primitive weapons.

Causes of the uprising; Exploitation

The Santalas rose to revolt primarily because of the inefficiency of the king of Mayurbhanj. Raja Srinath Bhanj was a brutal, foolish and cruel person without foresight. He was surrounded by a number of worthless royal servants. T. E. Ravenshaw, the superintendent of Tributary mahal, commented that the Raja had not one single officer to conduct the affairs of the state and he himself was totally ignorant of everything that went on inside the state. In such a condition, administration became careless and the common people were exploited by the royal officers to the extreme possible extent. The king's amlas forcibly took money from the ignorant tribal mass by various means. If the people were unable to pay, they took money by selling their cows, oxen and buffaloes. Even the forest products which the Santalas stored to meet their yearly need was plundered and taken away by the officers who collected the revenue. The Bamanghati Santalas

suffered considerably from the Raja's vacillation and from the oppression and exactions of his amlas.

Bad Revenue Policy

Another reason of the disturbance among the Santalas was the bad revenue policy of the king. The frequent change of revenue policy by the raja created confusion among the Santalas. In every settlement, revenue was increased. This gave constant pain to the uneducated Santalas. The Santalas with their manageable economy were hard hit by the increased revenue as a result which the Santalas became poorer and poorer day by day. This increased the volume of discontent of the Santalas. The hungry bellies made them angry who planned to attack the Raja and his amlas.

Disregard to Santali customs

Another most important cause of dispute between the Raja and his subjects was that the Raja disregarded the age old customs of the Santalas. Certain dues were payable to the Santala chiefs by the people which they could not forego without losing caste. The Raja demanded those dues from the cultivators. Though the Raja was instructed by the Superintendent of the Tributary Mahals not to violate any customs of the Santalas but the Raja did not do that. On the other hand, he collected various illegal cess from the Santalas which multiplied their plight.

Tyranny during 1866 famine

In 1860, the Government of India conferred upon Maharaja Jadunath Bhanja the title of 'Maharaja Bahadur' with a valuable Khillat, in recognition of his service during the revolt of 1857. He died in 1863 and his son Maharaja Srinath Bhanja succeeded him and ruled till 1867. During his time, the 'Na Anka' famine broke out in 1866 and the condition of the Santalas became worst. Still, during that period, the raja collected revenue from them which prompted them to be rebellious. T.E. Ravenshaw, who spent ten days at Bamanghati during the famine of 1866 has written that it was not a wise step by the Raja to collect revenue from the Santalas of Bamanghati.

Course

Being harassed by the Raja, ryots of Bamanghati who were mostly the tribal Santalas solicited the kind co-operation of Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant-Governor in 1865 to save them from the tyranny of the king. At the instance of the Lieutenant-Governor, Babu Harekrishna Das from the Tributary Mahal was sent to enquire into the grievances of the ryots. He stayed about six weeks at the Raja's capital at Baripada and succeeded in effecting an agreement between the Raja and his subjects. With the departure of Shri Das, the king again became oppressive and exacted taxes from the Santalas of Bamanghati. Now the Santalas became furious and violated law and order of the state.

The state of Mayurbhanja was plundered in all directions by two tribal Santala leaders, Bhunda and Kartik, assisted by a large number of followers. They resorted to robbery in broad daylight. Their insurrective actions increased the misery of the common people. The king collected around thousand armed followers and marched from Baripada to Bamanghati to suppress the rebels. E.T. Dalton, the commissioner of Chhotanagpur wrote to the Government of Bengal that any attempt on the part of the king to enter Bamanghati with force would flare up the fire of rebellion. T.E. Ravenshaw, instructed the king not to move to Bamanghati. This direction of the superintendent brought back the king to his capital.

At this juncture, prompt action was required for the British Government to put an end to the Santala uprising at Bamanghati. Dr W. Hayes, the Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum was directed to proceed with Police force on 7th July 1866 towards Bamanghati. The authority of the King was suspended. Dr Hayes showed courage, tact and judgement in dealing with the situation. He chalked out a master plan and captured Bhandu, Kartik, Chakra and others. Much of the plundered property was captured. A lot of arms were also captured. He made all efforts to re-establish peace and order. Dr Hayes wrote to the Government of Bengal:

It is impossible to restore the Raja's authority. If it is attempted, the people will rise against it and I would therefore, suggest that, for the present I may be vested with the civil and criminal administration of the pergunah to be carried out with a small body of police of one jamadar and 8 men located at Bamanghati guruh and supplemented by the Sirdars and Majis of the Pargana and other rural police.

The Lieutenant-Governor accepted his suggestion and accordingly Dr W. Hayes was vested the same civil and criminal powers in Bamanghati. The Raja's request for withdrawing Dr Hayes was turned

down by the the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal.

Reformative measures

Since the Santala uprising was a challenge to the British hegemony and to the local ruler as well, Dr Hayes wanted to adopt certain reformative measures in Bamanghati to appease the Santalas. A complete settlement of land revenue was effected and care was taken not to provoke the dissatisfaction of the Santalas. The system of Bethi and Begari was lifted all in a sudden which rendered completed freedom to them. They were allowed to bring all the waste lands under cultivation free of assessment which pacified them. The settlement was fixed for ten years with effect from 1867. In 1868, the raja of Mayurbhanj became desirous of assuming the management of Bamanghati. The British Government, however, was not prepared to give it to the Raja because it had felt a great difficulty to suppress the rebels. When 10 years were over after the settlement, Dr Hayes now agreed to hand over the administration of Bamanghati to the Raja of Mayurbhanj.

Dr Hayes suggested the restoration of Bamanghati to the King of mayurbhanj on the following conditions-

- 1) One of the Raja's younger brother should live in Bamanghati as his representative, and be vested in power in subordination to him
- 2) The headman of the village should continue to be vested with police power to investigate cases of crime and arrest offenders.

To the above recommendations of Dr Hayes, Ravenshaw added one more point, ie, the Raja should maintain the settlement of the estate for ten years and agree to maintain existing schools. He also directed the raja to adopt a sympathetic attitude to the Santala population of the state. The Raja agreed to the conditions and Bamanghati was restored to him on 1 April 1878.

Maharaja Srinath Bhanja died on 10 November 1867. He was succeeded by Krushna Chandra Bhanja, the son of his younger brother. After his death, Sriram Chandra Bhanjadeo succeeded to the throne after long eleven years because he was a minor and the state had come under the administration of the court of wards. He became friendly to the Santalas and maintained good relation with them. He died on 22 February 1912.

Uprising Again

Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo was succeeded by his son, Purna Chandra Bhanjadeo. As he was a minor, the state came under the administration of the Court of Wards. It was during this administration that a Santala uprising took place in Bamanghati in May 1917. The immediate cause of the rising was the attempt to recruit tribals for a labour corps in France for the World War I. The Santalas assaulted some officials who were in charge of recruitment. Though the rising was temporarily crushed, the tribals continued to hold mass meetings and protests against the co-operative administration.

In June 1917, a fresh Santala rising occurred in Bamanghati sub-division where the Bazar of Rairangpur was looted and burnt and a state constable was murdered. Law and order was restored by the help of military and police. Many Santalas were convicted and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. The state of Mayurbhanj returned to normalcy. Maharaja Purna Chandra Bhanja was formally installed on the gaddi on 13 November 1920. Like his father, he was enlightened and generous ruler. He took welfare measures for the Santalas and pacified them.

Results

The results of the Santala rebellion can be viewed as follows:

At first, the ruler of Mayurbhanj could understand that the Santalas could be a potent threat to the state. That is why in the subsequent period, no harsh step was taken by the rulers to harass the Santalas. Economic measures, favourable to them, were undertaken by the rulers of Mayurbhanj to appease them.

Secondly, the rulers of Mayurbhanj understood it quite well that under the pretext of the Santala uprising, the British government took the charge of administration of Bamanghati. This was an encroachment of power of the king and a humiliation to him. That is why; situation was created in future not to handover the charge of the administration of the state to the British Government.

Finally, the British Government also became cautious. It knew that the tribals should be kept in good humour. Otherwise, they could rise against the Government and put it in problem. That is why the British had to take the administration of Bamanghati into its own hand.

Nature

The Santala uprising at Bamanghati in Mayurbhanj was anti-ruler and anti-British in nature. The tribals targeted the Raja of Mayurbhanj who wanted to crush them. Here, the British did not come to help the Raja but crushed the uprising in its own way- first by crushing it with force and secondly by showing sympathy to the tribals through welfare measures. Of course, the nature of this Santala uprising was not so much violent as compared to the Kandha uprising at Ghumsar at Nayagarh or Bhuyan uprising at Keonjhar, Odisha. However, undoubtedly, this uprising was anti-colonial in nature.

Be that it may, the Santala uprising was a blow to the British imperialism in Odisha. It could keep busy the ruler of Mayurbhanj and the British authority for quite some years. Since, the British had got some setbacks from other tribal uprisings in Odisha, in case of Mayurbhanj, it softened its attitude and got over with the problem. The ruler of Mayurbhanj also understood the fact that the Santalas could not be supported by brutal force. That is why; the Rajas changed their attitude for the Santalas and put an end to the uprising.

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