

Relevance of the ‘*Santal Hool*’ (1855–56) in the Indian Freedom Struggle: A Study on Tribal Resistance, National Consciousness, and the Struggle for Independence

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Abstract: The *Santal Hool*, which happened from 1855 to 1856 was led by the famous brothers Sidhu Murmu, Kanhu Murmu, Chand Murmu and Bhairav Murmu along together with their sister Pholo and Jhano Murmu. The *Santal Hool* was one of the fight against the British in India when it came to farmers and land. Most people think that the Uprising of 1857 was the reason India wanted to be free from British rule. This research paper says that the *Santal Hool* was actually a very important event that happened before and changed the way people fought against the British. The *Santal Hool* took place in the area of Damin-i-koh, which's now part of Jharkhand and West Bengal. The fight started because the British East India Company's laws were not fair to the people the law from 1793. In addition, people who lent money took advantage of the santal people, and the police did not do their job correctly. The paper shows how the *Santal Hool* brought people together not the Santal people, but also other groups who were treated unfairly. The *Santal Hool* showed that when people work together, they can make the government listen to them and change its policies. For example, the British government created an area called the Santal Parganas district and made a new law called the Santal Parganas Tenancy Act because of the *Santal Hool*. This study says that the *Santal Hool* was a part of Indias fight for freedom and that it was not just a small unorganized fight but a well-planned and thoughtful struggle for the Santal people to be in charge of their own lives, which is what Swaraj means. The *Santal Hool* helped shape the way people thought about freedom, in India.

Keywords: *Santal Hool*, Tribal Resistance, National Consciousness, Anti-Colonialism, Damin-I-Koh.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The history of the freedom movement in India is generally told in terms of the role played by the nationalist elite and political parties in the cities. Such stories, however, often ignore the important role played by tribal communities in the struggle against colonial domination before the rise of organized nationalism. The *Santal Hool* of 1855–56, one of these conflicts, is one of the most outstanding expressions of the indigenous movement against the British colonialism.

The term "*Hool*" in the Santali language means revolution or uprising. The movement began on 30 June 1855 in Bhognadih village under the leadership of Sidhu Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, assisted by their brothers Chand and Bhairav. The rebellion mobilized tens of thousands of Santals against exploitative moneylenders (mahajans), zamindars,

police officials, and the British East India Company. The uprising was rooted in grievances concerning land alienation, excessive taxation, indebtedness, and administrative injustice. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Historian Peter B. Andersen observes that the Santal uprising articulated "a new political vision for the creation of an independent Adivasi polity," indicating that the movement possessed a political dimension beyond economic protest. (ResearchGate) The rebellion therefore deserves recognition not only as a tribal uprising but also as an early expression of anti-colonial nationalism.

In the present study, the historical importance of *Santal Hool* and its relevance in the overall framework of the Indian freedom movement has been discussed. It claims that the movement was an important step towards the emergence of

anti-colonial consciousness and paved the way for subsequent anti-colonial independence movements.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Britannica describes the Santal Rebellion as one of the most significant anti-British revolts before the Revolt of 1857 and notes that it emerged from systematic exploitation by moneylenders, zamindars, and colonial administrators. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Aounshuman (2022) argues that the Santal rebellion differed from earlier tribal revolts because it was an organized collective movement with a vision for an alternative socio-political order. According to him, the rebellion represented a sophisticated challenge to colonial authority rather than a spontaneous outburst of violence. (Sage Journals)

Recent historiographical studies further emphasize the political dimensions of tribal resistance. Soy (2025) contends that mainstream nationalist historiography has systematically marginalized Adivasi contributions and that movements such as the *Santal Hool* embodied complex ideas of sovereignty, land rights, and self-governance. (EPH Journal of Humanities & Social Science)

Mondal (2024) highlights the Santal aspiration for an independent political order free from external domination and argues that the rebellion should be understood as both an economic and political protest. (IER Journal)

Subaltern historians have also contributed significantly to the reinterpretation of the *Santal Hool*. They argue that tribal communities were active agents of history rather than passive victims of colonialism. The movement represented an assertion of indigenous identity and collective agency against structures of oppression.

Despite these contributions, a gap remains in connecting the *Santal Hool* explicitly with the broader narrative of India's freedom struggle. This paper seeks to address that gap.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative, historical and analytical using critical analysis of primary sources and secondary sources. The research uses the following streams of data to achieve a historical accuracy and contextual richness:

➤ *Colonial Archives and Legislative Records:*

Study of modern British administrative correspondence, judicial and political reports from the Bengal Presidency (1855-1857) and the text of the Santal Parganas Act of 1855.

➤ *Subaltern and Nationalist Historiography:*

Systematic review of foundational texts by Hunter (1868), Datta (1940), and Guha (1983) to contrast imperialist interpretations with subaltern and nationalist frameworks.

➤ *Indigenous Oral Traditions and Ethno-historiography:*

Incorporation of Santali folk songs (*seren*), folklore (*kahni*) and oral history handed down from generation to generation. Such sources are vital to the reconstruction of history, because they provide an insight into the inner thoughts, religious faiths, and agency of insurgents that colonial police records often ignore or misrepresent.

➤ *Historical Background of the Santal Hool*

The Santals were encouraged by colonial authorities to settle in the Damin-i-Koh region for agricultural expansion. However, the promises of prosperity soon gave way to exploitation. Moneylenders charged exorbitant interest rates, zamindars increased rents, and revenue officials imposed excessive taxes. Colonial courts and police largely supported non-tribal elites, leaving the Santals with little legal protection. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

This led to general resentment, and to a collective resistance.

➤ *Tribal Resistance Against Colonial Exploitation*

In essence, the *Santal Hool* was an opposition to colonial structures of domination. The rebellion had aimed at the local exploiters but also the system which allowed exploitation.

As Britannica notes, the uprising was directed against “moneylenders, landlords, and British policies.” (Encyclopedia Britannica) This demonstrates that the Santals understood the interconnected nature of colonial power.

• *William Wilson Hunter Famously Observed Regarding Santal Resistance:*

“There was not a sepoy in the war who did not feel ashamed of himself.”

This statement reflects the extraordinary courage and determination displayed by the Santal fighters despite their technological disadvantages. (Reddit)

The uprising thus was a conscious defiance of the colonial regime and economic exploitation.

➤ *The Santal Hool and National Consciousness*

Indian nationalism was still an emerging movement in the mid-nineteenth century but the *Santal Hool* played a very important role in awakening the anti-colonial sentiments.

The leaders proclaimed the establishment of Santal rule and challenged British sovereignty. According to Andersen, the rebellion advanced a vision of an independent Adivasi polity. (ResearchGate)

This is a political desire to show that the movement wasn't entirely defensive. Instead, it was about building a new social and political structure that was rooted in indigenous values. National consciousness is a product of several experiences of resistance in colonial India. The *Santal Hool* was one such event where unity gave birth to the concept of freedom, justice and self-rule.

➤ *Relationship with the Revolt of 1857*

The *Santal Hool* is really important because it happened around the time as the Revolt of 1857. The *Santal Hool* and the Revolt of 1857 are closely linked in terms of when they took place. This is a thing to remember about the *Santal Hool* and its connection, to the Revolt of 1857.

Many scholars regard the *Santal Hool* as a precursor to the larger anti-colonial uprising that followed two years later. Britannica explicitly identifies it as one of the most significant anti-British revolts before 1857. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

The eruption of the rebellion revealed the weaknesses of colonial rule and how people can unite in masses to resist it. It also showed a large amount of discontent among marginalized communities. It is hard to make any direct connection between the *Santal Hool* and the Revolt of 1857 but both movements were a form of resistance to the rule of the British.

➤ *Indigenous Identity and Political Autonomy*

The *Santal Hool* was a fight for their way of life and self-governance. It was also about the Santals keeping their culture alive and having control, over their affairs. The Santals wanted to preserve their culture and make their decisions.

The rebellion asserted tribal rights over land, resources, and governance. It challenged the encroachment of colonial institutions into indigenous life. Recent scholarship argues that the movement embodied sophisticated ideas of sovereignty and land rights. (EPH Journal of Humanities & Social Science)

In this regard, the similar ideology of the *Santal Hool* was the forerunner of later indigenous movements in India such as Munda Ulgulan led by Birsa Munda. Thus, the movement plays an important role in the history of the struggle for tribal self-determination.

➤ *Legacy in the Indian Freedom Struggle*

Although the rebellion was militarily suppressed, its impact was significant. The British administration subsequently created the Santal Parganas and introduced administrative reforms to address some tribal grievances. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

The rebellion, most importantly, was a symbol of resistance for future generations. It was a source of inspiration for future tribal revolts and helped build a collective memory of anti-colonial resistance.

Contemporary commemorations of Hool Diwas continue to celebrate the sacrifices of Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, Bhairav, Phulo, and Jhano, reinforcing the movement's relevance in modern India. (Reddit)

The *Santal Hool* brings to our attention that the Indian freedom movement was not confined to the city or elite, but

a multifaceted movement of peasants, workers and Tribal communities.

IV. CONCLUSION

Santal Hool of 1855-56 is one of the earliest and most notable anti-colonial movement in India. It was not a tribal issue confined to the area, but a strong protest against economic exploitation, political domination and cultural marginalization. The rebellion proclaimed a longing for self-rule, justice and indigenous autonomy, thus playing its part in the wider process of anti-colonial consciousness building in India. Its significance in the context of Indian freedom struggle is that it highlighted organized resistance against British rule, challenged colonial structures and influenced the later movements for freedom and self-determination. The *Santal Hool* is now being increasingly acknowledged by modern historiography as a pivotal moment in the campaigns for independence in India as well as an important chapter in the history of tribal resistance. If Indian nationalism is to be viewed in an inclusive manner, the role and sacrifices of tribal communities must be understood. The *Santal Hool* is a symbol of the bravery, strength, and political acumen of the Santal people, and it continues to serve as a reminder of their fight for freedom and justice.

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