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Interpreting the Santal Rebellion. From 1855 till the End of the Nineteenth Century

Abstract: Postcolonial studies have interpreted the Santal Rebellion, the *hul* of 1855, as a peasant rebellion that the colonial power construed as an ethnic rebellion (R. Guha). Anthropologists and historians have stressed the near-complete mobilisation of the Santals, whereas a later colonial historian (W. W. Hunter), who opposed the exploitation of the Santals by the East India Company, regarded the rebellion as a peaceful demonstration gone astray. This article argues that the rebellion was a socially and religiously motivated rebellion against the East India Company and that its leaders sought unsuccessfully to mobilise Hindu landlords to join the rebellion, as documented in their letters. The reinterpretation of the objects and events that went astray dates to the court case and conviction of one of the leaders after the rebellion was lost, yet his defence was carried much further by a colonial historian (Hunter). The mobilisation of the Santals and the later religious reinterpretation of the lost rebellion are investigated from archives and contemporary Santal eyewitnesses who described the horror of the events.

Keywords: *hul*, *peasant insurgency*, *tribal insurgency*, *Santal rebellion*

Postcolonial studies have tended to offer sweeping conclusions that colonial history is a simple product of the colonial situation,[1] thereby glossing over historical details that they dislike from the perspective of present-day morality[2] or projecting their own ideologies onto the study of the past. For this article, a relevant case is Ranajit Guha's seminal work on *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983). Here, Guha presents the Santals during the Santal Rebellion of 1855-1856 as peasants participating in a peasant rebellion rather than as isolated tribespeople who could mobilise alliances neither with other tribes, nor with Bengali peasants in the areas of the rebellion.[3] This article argues against Guha by engaging with his study of peasant insurgency as well as with other aspects of his discursive method, including his 'prose of counter-insurgency' – that is to say, the language of government and its suppression of insurgencies in late-colonial South Asia.[4]

It may be relevant to introduce the background to the Santal Rebellion, the *hul* of 1855-56, before turning to our central argument. The Santal Rebellion broke out during the rainy season of 1855 in the core of the Damin-i-Koh, an area just south of the Ganges, which had recently been settled by Santal agriculturalists. There is evidence of a steep rise in the East India Company's (EIC) earnings in the area in the period leading up to the rebellion. When two Santal brothers Sidu and Kanhu, living in a village in the core of the Damin-i-Koh, began receiving messages from the god Thakur that he would help them expel the unjust Europeans and

[1] The critique of Ranajit Guha and post-modern positions forwarded in this paper is in continuation of other debates where the author has been part of arguing for the continuation of the use of the concept of tribe in the Indian context (Peter B. Andersen et al., eds., *From Fire Rain to Rebellion: Reasserting Ethnic Identity through Narrative* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2011), and has been critical towards the utilisation of the concept of discourse (Peter Andersen and Susanne Foss, "Christian Missionaries and Orientalist Discourse: Illustrated by Materials on the Santals after 1855", in Robert Eric Frykenberg, ed., *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, 295-314). Parts of the historical analysis of the Santal Rebellion of 1855 published in this article has also been forwarded in P. B. Andersen "Rituel legitimering af santaloprøret", in Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein, eds., *Den sammenklappelige Tid: Festskrift til Jørgen Podemann Sørensen* (København: Forlaget Chaos, 2011), 129-139. Besides Ranajit Guha's eminent analysis of insurgencies (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi: Oxford U. P., 1983) of which this article is partly critical, there are a number of excellent studies of the Santal Rebellion published since 1940. For this article Kalikinkar Datta, *The Santal Insurrection of 1855-57* (Calcutta: Calcutta U. P., 1940) and Narahari Kaviraj, *Santal Village Community and the Santal Rebellion of 1855* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 2001) has also been utilised together with archival studies at the India Office Library at the British Library during a sabbatical for six months in 2010. I wish to thank the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen for the sabbatical.

[2] The exaggerated deconstruction of *thugee* activities (for references and positions, see Kim A. Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2014 [2007])), 3-4, represent an Indian case.

[3] Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983) is directed towards 'insurgencies', and in some cases it has been necessary to retain this word, even if the present concept for the Santal *hul* is a 'rebellion'. N. Kaviraj (2001) is basically in agreement with Guha's position, regarding the Santals as peasants seeking alliances with similar groups of peasants among the lower castes.

[4] Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern* Studies (New York & Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1988), 45-86.

moneylenders, other Santals joined them, and the movement developed into a rebellion which was in turn severely suppressed by European and Indian soldiers during the autumn and winter of 1855-1856. The Santals tended the soil like other peasants, and other peasants might have allied with the Santals if they had conceived of them as fellow peasants of their own stock.

This debate with Guha addresses one point in the history of the ongoing discussion of distinctions between tribes and peasants in India.[5] A number of scholars have stressed the significant differences between tribal societies and peasant culture as a whole.[6] Guha's strong distinction between peasant society and higher strata of Indian society finds a new incarnation in P. Chatterjee's and Sinha's distinction between political and civil society.[7] Here Chatterjee assigns the term 'civil society' to peaceful interaction between the state and society, which he finds in the upper strata of society, whereas he assumes that the lower strata of society interact with the state through less peaceful means – hence the term 'political'. This assumption leads to the same kind of conjecture regarding the identity of tribespeople and peasants as the conjecture underlying Guha's argument. The tribespeople, here the Santals, were much more open to address the state than such a conjecture assumes. One may even argue that the rebellion could have been avoided if the lines of communication to the EIC's government in Calcutta had been open to receive the complaints forwarded by the lower strata of the rural population. This was, however, not the case in the years leading up to the Santal Rebellion.[8]

The present article stresses that assumptions regarding the difference between peasants and tribespeople have led Guha and other scholars in his line of argument to rely on untenable discursive arguments, resulting in their misinterpretation of other kinds of historical evidence. In this respect, the article follows the criticisms that have been raised in India against parts of post-colonial studies. One is the critique that S. Sarkar has forwarded in the line of E. P. Thomson.[9] Both have argued against the kind of evidence that is produced when historical studies turn to a discursive level, thereby ignoring actual social conditions. The other interrelated part of the critique is when post-colonial studies fails to make a full-fledged investigation of the social circumstances of events but only focuses on those circumstances that support that point for which the scholar wishes to argue.

In many ways, this is a factual approach to the study and must be investigated from case to case, but in the case of the Santal Rebellion, one can contrast the argument for a peasant rebellion with the numerous studies into insurgencies against the EIC from 1765 until the beginning of the 20th century.[10] In this case, Guha's focus on the structure of the insurgencies, the 'elementary aspects', causes him to lump the Santal Rebellion together with a number of other 'insurgencies' under the common heading of 'peasant insurgencies' even if it is near impossible to label them as such. These include a) insurgencies carried out by the forces of the landlords (*zamindars*), who had collected rent (taxes) and ruled the countryside

[5] See for instance, Uday Chandra, "Rethinking Subaltern Resistance", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45.4 (2015), 563-573; Alf Gunvald Nielsen and Srila Roy, "Introduction: Reconceptualizing Subaltern Politics in Contemporary India", in Alf Gunvald Nielsen and Srila Roy, eds., *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford U. P. 2015), 1-27; Alf Gunvald Nilsen, "For a Historical Sociology of State-Society Relations in the Study of Subaltern Politics", in Alf Gunvald Nielsen and Srila Roy, eds., *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford U. P., 2015), 31-53.

[6] For instance, Shashank Kela, "Adivasi and Peasant: Reflections on Indian Social History", in Shashank Kela, ed., *Adivasi and Peasant: Reflections on Indian Social History*, special issue of *Journal of Peasant Studies* 33.3 (2006), 502-525; Shashank Kela, *A Rogue and Peasant Slave: Adivasi Resistance, 1800-2000* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2012).

[7] Partha Chatterjee, "On Civil and Political Society in Postcolonial Democracies", in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, eds., *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2001), 165-178; Subir Sinha, "On the Edge of Civil Society in Contemporary India", in Alf Gunvald Nielsen and Srila Roy, eds., *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford U. P., 2015), 225-253.

[8] Peter B. Andersen, "Den u-civile informationsudveksling mellem en kolonial stat og stammesamfund illustreret ud fra santaloprøret i Indien i 1855", in Margaretha Järvinen et al., eds., *Festskrift for professor Peter Gundelach* (working title) (in press).

[9] Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford U. P., 1998). Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London: Merlin Press, 1995) presented a strong attack on the Marxist theoretical position of Louis Althusser and his followers in social history, who had begun to "declare that history was a non-discipline" (Dorothy Thompson, "'Introduction' to E. P. Thompson", *The Poverty of Theory* , xi) with the implication that they placed theory before empirical study.

[10] Kela, *A Rogue and Peasant Slave.*

under the Mughals, and b) insurgencies carried out with their support.[11] When peasants are led by landlords, they are not part of any peasant insurgency but are acting in relation to the hierarchical structures of the society in which they live.[12] As had already been pointed out, prior to Guha's argument[13] and also afterwards,[14] tribal rebellions differed from peasant rebellions. This has to do with the fact that the tribes of India form distinct social structures and are kept at distance by the majority populations of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh groups. Sometimes this exclusion includes low-caste groups of Hindus, sometimes not, but at the time of the Santal Rebellion, the concept of 'Hinduism' was only construed as referring to a community, so the fact remains that the Santals did not succeed in establishing alliances among other ethnic groups.[15] To a certain degree, Guha himself admits this, stating that: "When … an official document speaks of *badmash*es [rascals] as participants in rural disturbances, this does not mean (going by the normal sense of that Urdu word) any ordinary collection of rascals but peasants involved in militant agrarian struggle".[16] The difference between Guha's argument and the argument in the present article involves addressing "the dialogue between social being and social consciousness", as E. P. Thomsen has formulated it.[17]

Guha has also developed his eminent readings of the historical sources into a discursive classification in his study of 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency' (1988) in colonial India.[18] Here he divides the discourse into primary, secondary, and tertiary categories in relation to its distance from the events and the degree to which additional layers of interpretation have been added to the original sources. Guha's study has convincingly documented that the original correspondence from the EIC officers during the rebellion were strongly loaded against the rebellion (primary). The next level "draws on the primary discourse as materiel but transforms it at the same time".[19] Participants in the events wrote down their memoirs at a later point in time, adding information to frame the events. In Guha's analysis, they typically also added colonial reflections in retrospect, so the values in the discourse often become more evident (secondary). Then come the later histories, which look back at the events. Guha demonstrates how the attitudes of the early historians to the sack of Delhi in 1857 were indistinguishable from the state's official attitudes in their eagerness for revenge.[20] With regard to the Santals, he demonstrates that W. W. Hunter's essay on the Santal Rebellion, to which this article will return, attempted to offer an objective account of the events even Hunter's sympathy with the government can easily be documented (tertiary).[21] Hunter was in the service of the British Crown, but even Indian historians writing after Independence have to a great degree accepted the prose of the former colonial power's counter-insurgency when writing about the Santal Rebellion and other cases of insurgency against the EIC.

Guha is correct in his critique of the loaded colonial discourse when writing about insurgencies, and he offers proper evidence of later Indian historians who have been caught up in the colonial discourse when presenting insurgencies against

[11] One example may be the outbreaks of the rebellious Chuars or Choars in Midnapur and Bankura at the end of the 18th century. Amiya Kumar Banerji, *Bankura*, West Bengal District Gazetteers (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1968), 123-124.

[12] The other side of the argument is that the expansion of commercial agriculture led to these problems. One case to support this may be the farmers and agricultural workers in indigo production, who rebelled at a time when indigo production faced particular difficulty. In this case, there is no doubt that the rebels are peasants, but they are specifically peasants undertaking early commercial agriculture (e.g. Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal Since 1770*, The New Cambridge History of India III: 2, Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1993, 47-52).

[13] For example, Binod Sankar Das, *Civil Rebellion in the Frontier Bengal, 1760-1805* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1973).

[14] See for instance, K. S. Singh, "Tribal Movements" Kamal K. Mishra and G. Jayaprakasan, eds., *Tribal Movements in India: Visions of Dr. K. S. Singh* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012).

[15] Peter B. Andersen, "Revival, Syncretism, and the Anticolonial Discourse of the Kherwar Movement, 1871-1910", in Richard Fox Young, ed., *India and the Indianness of Christianity: Essays on Understanding – Historical, Theological, and Bibliographical – in Honor of Robert Eric Frykenberg* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 127-143.

[16] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 16.

[17] Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, eds., *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford, New York: Oxford U. P., 2011).

[18] D. J. Rycroft, *Representing Rebellion: Visual Aspects of Counter-insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford U. P., 2006) has utilised Guha's (1988) typology in an elegant analysis of the contemporary illustrations of the Santal Rebellion.

[19] Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", 50.

[20] Thomson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 12.

[21] Ibid., 65.

the EIC, but in this case he blinds himself to the differences between the diverse colonial sources. There had been a change in the ways in which the Santals were perceived between the rebellion in 1855-1856 and when Hunter published his account in 1868. Part of this change was due to the shift in government from that of the EIC to that of the British Crown. The Santal Rebellion took place under the colonial government of the EIC, but India came directly under the control of the Crown in 1858, ten years before Hunter arrived there in 1862 and joined the Indian Civil Service. This may be an underlying element in his 'objective' presentation of the Santal Rebellion, as he was critical of the EIC's policies – a consideration that Guha's narrow focus on the prose of counter-insurgency may have prevented him from recognising.

These critical remarks on Guha's approach should not, however, cause us to forget that his investigation into the religious reasons behind a number of insurgencies, including the Santal Rebellion, offers a new and coherent view of how insurgents "turned the world upside down" (*The Acts of the Apostles* 17.6) in a number of brilliant juxtapositions of carnivals, insurrections, and revolutions from around the world.[22] He has thus placed the oft-neglected and misunderstood religious legitimation of the rebellion in its proper and meaningful context.

[22] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency.*

The Santals and the Santal RebellionTitle of Paragraph

The Santals were not reported about before the 1790s when the EIC changed its rent (i.e. revenue or tax) collection due to an acute need for increased revenue. The reform was called the Permanent Settlement (Land Revenue) (1793), and it made the job of collectors of the land rent inheritable as well as froze the land rent at an unchangeable amount of money. The reform was based on the rather naive idea that the collectors (the *zamindars*) would invest in the soil as soon as they were sure that they would not be evicted from it and would thus lead to an increase in the EIC's revenue from other sources. Just to be sure of its immediate income, however, the EIC set the land rent at an amount that was many times higher than any land rent collected before the reform, and afterwards the land rent was increased at irregular intervals.[23] For this reason, collectors of the land rent had to employ Santals to clear the jungles of cultivable soil. The Santals were reported in the eastern part of the Bengal Suba in 1795 (Ramgarh), and an increasing number of them migrated slightly to the north (crossing Godda between 1818 and 1827) to the Damin-i-Koh (the line of hills, 1827). This area had been demarcated for another tribal group, the Sauria Paharias, which, however, did not increase agricultural outputs there.[24] By 1851, the Santal population had increased to 83,265, distributed across 1,473 villages in the Damin-i-Koh.[25] Over the period from 1837 to 1854-55, the EIC's income increased from Rupees 6,682 to Rupees 58,033 (Fig. 1).

[23] Peter B. Andersen, *Santals: Glimpses of Culture and Identity* (Bhubaneswar: NISWSS, 2005), 2.

[24] Lewis Sydney Steward O'Malley, *Santal Parganas*, Bengal District Gazetteers (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1910), 95-98.

[25] Ibid, 44, 99.

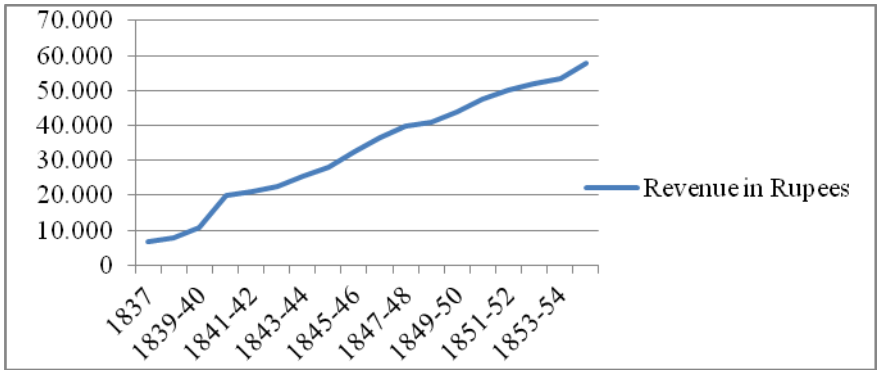

Fig. 1: Revenue of the Damin-i-Koh, 1837-1854-1855. Drawn on the basis of A. C. Bidwell's "Report on the Santal Rebellion", 14 February 1856. ©P. B. Andersen, "Rituel legitimering af santaloprøret", in Tim Jensen & Mikael Rothstein, eds., *Den sammenklappelige Tid. Festskrift til Jørgen Podemann Sørensen* (København: Forlaget Chaos, 2011).

We do not have figures for the Santals elsewhere before the Census of 1872, but a number of stray reports document that there were Santals in other parts of the Bhaugalpur and Birbhum Districts, and a contemporary letter assumes the presence of around 100,000 Santals in Midnapur District in 1855. There is also evidence that Santals has already crossed the Ganges and settled there before 1855.

When the Santals were employed to clear the soil for agriculture, it was the leader of the group of Santals, the *manjhi* (or *manki* in Bengali), who was appointed to negotiate on behalf of the group and to collect the rent for the *zamindar*.[26] As the Santals needed to borrow money for seeds and living expenses for the first year of their residence, they were soon trapped in debt to the *zamindar* or to Bengali money lenders.

The rebellion or the *hul*, as it is called in Santali. began on 9 July 1855 in the village Bhognadi, located a short distance to the north of Burhait, the main *bazar* or town in Damin-i-Koh.[27] The political event was that the two leaders of the rebellion, Sidu and Kanhu killed the local *daroga* (inspector of police), some of his constables, and a moneylender when they arrived to investigate the crowd that had assembled around the rebel leaders. After the killing, Sidu and Kanhu led some of the Santals in plundering and burning of the moneylenders' archives in the Damin-i-Koh and the surrounding areas of the province of Bengal. The rebellion soon spread northwards during the Damin-i-Koh to Rajmahal at the Ganges River, across the hills to the west towards Colong and to the district town Bhaugalpur, both at the Ganges River, to the southeast into the Birbhum District, and towards Suri, the district town and military camp.

On 26 July 1855, the Calcutta newspaper *Friend of India* reported that "within a hundred and twenty miles of the capital, an insurrection has been in full vigour for three weeks, almost out of check".[28] The rebellion was not defeated until early spring 1856. Besides plundering, the rebels abused and killed a significant number

[26] In the later surviving descriptions, this means of representing the group is sometimes implicitly recorded as a part of Santal culture, but it is also stated that the *manjhi* was appointed for this purpose alone. See, M. C. McAlpin, *Report on the Condition of the Sonthals in the Districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore and North Balasore* (Calcutta: Firma Mukhopadhyay, 1981 [1909]), 13-14; A. K. Banerji, *Bankura*, West Bengal District Gazetteers, 170. The acceptance of the actural *manjhi* is still ritually played out every January in the 'new year' ritual (*jom sim bonga*) of the Santals, even if changes to the now-hereditary post of *manjhi* seem to be carried out by other means.

[27] 9 July 1855 is usually regarded as the date on which the *daroga* was killed, but it is in fact the date of the letter in which the magistrate of Bhaugulpore, H. Richardson, reported the event to W. Grey, Secretary to the Government of Bengal. Magistrate of Bhaugulpore H. Richardson to W. Grey dated 9 July 1855, No. 5 of 25 July 1855, Bengal Judicial Proceedings, India Office Records, British Library (henceforth *BJP*), P/145/14.

[28] *Friend of India*, Calcutta, 26 July 1855, No. 1074, Vol. XXI (anonymous).

of Bengals, some people from other tribes, a few European men, and two European women.[29] Martial law was declared from 10 November 1855 until 3 January 1856. It is significant that atrocities – such as unnecessary violence and revenge – were carried out by soldiers under command and by Bengali civilians who took part in the military operations before, during, and after the period of Martial Law. During the full military operation, the EIC government in Calcutta was firm that violations of the law and crimes against the Santals were forbidden and should be avoided. At different points during the suppression of the rebellion, the EIC government promised amnesty for those Santals who laid down their weapons, and during the court cases following the rebellion, only a few Santals were convicted.[30] All of the central leaders of the rebellion were killed in fighting or hanged.

[29] Only the killings of the Europeans are formally counted. For all other groups, there is only the summary statement that "crimes might have been counted by thousands". Anonymous, "Sonthal Rebellion", *The Calcutta Review* (March 1856), 254.

[30] In March 1856, it was reported that 130 people had been convicted and sentenced to various punishments. Ibid., 252.

Primary Discourse

The *perwannahs* (proclamations) of Kanhu and Sidu, who led the rebellion, are preserved in translation, together with the sizeable correspondence concerning the repression of the rebellion in the *Bengal Judicial Proceedings* (*BJP*). This allows us to better understand the political aims of the rebellion, how participants imagined obtaining them, and how their thoughts developed over time depending on the situation. Early on in the rebellion, Kanhu and Sidu issued a proclamation on 25 July 1855[31] and sent it to the resident of Rajmahal. Here they stated that the 'Sahebs' had to leave the area and move to "the other side of the Ganges". In case the Europeans disobeyed this order and remained "on this side of the Ganges," they would be destroyed by a rain of fire sent by the god Thakur, and the bullets of the European soldiers' guns would "not strike the Sonthals".[32]

The *perwannah* also stated that: "Kanoo & Sidoo Manjee are not fighting.... The Thacoor himself will fight. Therefore you Sahibs and Soldiers fight with the Thacoor himself. Mother Ganges will come to the Thacoor's (assistance) Fire will rain from Heaven". Politically, the two leaders of the rebellion sought to collect taxes, as evidenced by their statement that: "The Thacoor has ordered the Sonthals that for a bullock plough 4 *anna* is to paid for revenue. Buffaloo plough 2 *anna*", and that "the reign of truth has began" (*sic*). This kingdom of truth was further explained in another formulation, which stressed that: "The compassion of religion and investigation of religion will commence". It continued with information on the punishment for those who responded incorrectly: "He that will act treacherously (*bedharm*) will not be able to stay on earth".[33] Sidu and Kanhu thus worked for the introduction of new and more abstract notions of morality than those which had hitherto been known among the Santals.

When the rebellion began to go wrong, its local leaders reported this in a number of undated letters to Sidu and Kanhu, stating that soldiers had fought down the Santals and requesting Sidu and Kanhu to rejoin the fight.[34]

[31] '10th Sowan 1262' or 10 Sravana 1262 B.S., which corresponds to 25 July 1855 AD (Datta, *The Santal Insurrection,* 8.

[32] Sidoo Manjhee and Kanoo Manjee, "This is he who sends the Thakoors Perwannah", attached to a letter from H. Richardson, Magistrate of Bhaugulpore to W. Grey, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated Rajmehal 24 July 1855. This letter is filed as No. 222 of 23 August 1855, *BJP*. Most of these letters were written in Hindi in a script typical of the commercial correspondence at the Gangetic plain. One of the letters is in Persian characters, as for Urdu. Some of the other letters were written in Bengali. As most of the leaders of the rebellion were unable to write, the *perwannahs* were primarily written by people employed or forced to do so at the court they set up around themselves.

[33] Ibid.

[34] For example, Papers Nos 8, 9, *BJP* 23rd to 30th August 1855, P/145/16, inserted as a Special File number among Oct. Toogood's reports of his campaign.

In the court case following his arrest, Kanhu toned down the intention of the rebellion and stated that he had only sought to collect money in order to pay it directly to the Government (*Sirkar*) rather than through the Indian intermediaries, namely the "*darogha* or the *izaradar* '*Pulteen*' Sahebs".[35] With regard to the beginning of the rebellion, he explained that he had sent a *perwannah* to the *darogah* who was killed when the rebellion began. Here, Kanhu had ordered the *darogah* to come to him, but the *darogah* had not acted in accordance with Kanhu's command, as the moneylenders (*mahajans*) had bribed him to instead arrest Kanhu and his brothers. So the *darogah* had provoked Kanhu and the other Santals, which had led to a heated argument in which the money lenders – according to Kanhu – had offered the *darogah* an increased bribe: "The *mahajans* said if it costs us 1000 rupees. we will do that to get you imprisoned". In the end, Kanhu admitted that he had cut the leading moneylender "Manick Mudie's head off and Seedoo killed the *Darogah* and my army killed 5 men whose names I do not know, then we all returned to Bhagnadee". Except for this killing, Kanhu denied having killed other people or having ordered the Santals to kill anyone. He also stressed that he did not order the killing of the two European women who were killed during the rebellion.[36] In contrast to Kanhu's deposition, two *barkandazes* (constables or armed retainers) and a *pyada* (sepoy) who had escaped the events stressed that the *daroga* had behaved correctly, and they did not mention the alleged attempt to bribe the *daroga*.[37] During the examinations, Kanhu explained that the god Thakur did not keep his promise to protect the Santals by turning the bullets of the muskets into water because, "my troops committed some crime therefore the Thacoors prediction were not fulfilled".[38]

During the rebellion, the officers of the EIC investigated whether the Santal leaders had managed to extend the rebellion beyond their own ethnic group. First, the Santals had sent emissaries to the former Amir (Emir), Meer Abbas Ali Khan as well as other dignitaries in the hope that they would support the rebellion. Neither the former Amir[39] nor any other dignitary from among the *zamindars* supported the rebellion. Although it is true that: "Certain castes like *kumars* (potters), *telis* (oilmen), blacksmiths, *momins* (Muhammadan weavers), *chamars* (shoemakers) and *domes*, who were obedient to the Santals and helped them in several ways",[40] these people were exceptions and can simply be regarded as people from other groups living among the Santals in the villages. Bengalis who lived elsewhere were reported to have feared the rebellion and fled from it. Among the individuals responsible for capturing Kanoo were Ghatwals, Gwalla, and a Chowkidar.[41]

Secondary discourse

During the rebellion, some EIC officers supported revenge on the Santals and even suggested mass deportation, but afterwards the officers who participated in

[35] Examination by F. S. Bird Brigadier, at Camp Ranegunge 1st Dec. 1855, Statement of Insurgent Sonthals, 1 Kanoo Manjee Soobah 2 Chand Manjee 3. Bhyroo Manjee & Kamoo alias Intha Soobah, *BJP*.

[36] Examination of Kanoo Sonthal, by A. Eden, Dated Camp Koomrabad 12th December 1855. No. 132 of 20th December 1855, *BJP*.

[37] Datta, *The Santal Insurrection,* 17.

[38] Examination of Kanoo Sonthal, by A. Eden, Dated Camp Koomrabad 12th December 1855, No. 132 of 20th December 1855, *BJP*.

[39] Mr. J. Allan, Commissionar of Chotanagpur to William Grey, Esq., Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Fort William, dated Hazaribagh, the 17th December, 1855, printed ad Appendix A1, in Datta, *The Santal Insurrection,* 81-85.

[40] Datta, *The Santal Insurrection,*16.

[41] No. 4 Kamoo, in the Examination by F. S. Bird Brigadier, at Camp Ranegunge 1st Dec. 1855, Statement of Insurgent Sonthals, 1 Kanoo Manjee Soobah 2 Chand Manjee 3. Bhyroo Manjee & Kamoo alias Intha Soobah, *BJP*.

the suppression stated how valiantly the leaders of and participants in the rebellion had behaved, contributing to the general re-legitimation of Santal culture and society in the eyes of the government.

The Santal participants who later recounted their experiences during the rebellion often stated that the rebellion failed because Sidu and Kanhu had sinned and broken the orders of Thakur. Sometime between 1892 and 1927, another Santal, by the name of Durga, recounted how he and his *pargana* (headman governing a number of villages) had been forced to join the rebellion. At the time of the rebellion, Durga had been a young man and was the father of one child. With regard to Sidu and Kanhu, he stated that they had fornicated with women they had found beautiful and who they had ordered their messengers to bring to them. He concluded his narration with the statement that "Sidu and Kanhu thus became defiled and unclean. They committed unrighteous acts. Because they were lusting after other people's women, they defiled their religious and moral virtue".[42]

Since other sources similarly recount that the leaders of the rebellion raped women, it is unfortunately likely that Durga's report is correct, even if this kind of behaviour is "a standard theme in the Hindu image of immoral kings".[43] In the present context, regarding the history of the rebellion, the sins of Sidu and Kanhu were stressed again during the later Kherwar movement among the Santals. That movement began in 1871 (perhaps as early as in 1869).[44] In accordance with a narrative of Sagram Murmu recorded later in 1906 or shortly thereafter, one of the early leaders in this political movement, Bhagrit Baba, is said to have stated that the Government of India ("the Sahebs") brought rice from Burma during the famine in 1874 because the Sahebs:

> know very well that one day the 'dark-skinned' sons of this land will get the country, they know it definitely. In Sido's and Kanhu's time, Cando[45] wanted to give us the country. But they could not carry out their office; they could not control their greed and began to snatch away the daughters and daughters-in-law of others. They did unjust acts in the eyes of Cando; this is why he in his turn did not give the country to them; and as he did not approve of misdeeds, they could not win their fight.[46]

So the Santals ended up looking back on the rebellion as having been lost due to the sins of the leaders – not the crimes or sins of the Santal soldiers, as Kanhu interpreted it, but the sins committed by Sidu and Kanhu themselves. In retrospect, one can see that some Santals continued working against the colonial regime, as is evident from the quote of the Kherwar guru. Other Santals accepted the defeat and came to see the colonial regime as just,[47] at least up until the late-19th or early-20th century.

The last text that will illustrate the secondary discourse is Digambar Chakrabortti's *History of the Santal Hool of 1855*. It belongs to the secondary discourse in so far as the author was a child during the rebellion, and some of the

[42] Durga from Mundha Am, "The Story of the Santal Rebellion", in Andersen et al., eds., *From Fire Rain to Rebellion,* section 27, 180-181.

[43] Andersen et al., eds., *From Fire Rain to Rebellion,* 215.

[44] Joseph Troisi, *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Santals* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), 255-26; P. B. Andersen, "Revival from a Native Point of View: Proselytization of the Indian Home Mission and the Kherwar Movement among the Santals", in Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg, eds., *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 119-132.

[45] Cando 'the Moon' – or rather Sin Cando 'the Sun' – is here another name for Thakur.

[46] Sagram Murmu, "The Kherwar Movement", in Andersen et al., eds., *From Fire Rain to Rebellion,* section 11, 220-223.

[47] For instance, Andersen, "Revival from a Native Point of View", 129.

events are described with him as an eyewitness, yet he may nevertheless have been influenced by the tertiary discourse. As a result, it is necessary to introduce the tertiary discourse first.

With regard to colonial discourses, it is evident that the various voices and writers related themselves to the colonial power of the EIC or the British Crown through the actual government in Calcutta. But this is evidently not the only way in which the voices relate to each other. Up until and throughout the rebellion, there were different voices in the Santal community concerning how to respond morally and strategically to challenges from the outside.

Tertiary discourse

The account of the Santal Rebellion in W. W. Hunter's chapter on "The Aboriginal Hill-Men of Beerbhoom" in his *Annals of Rural Bengal*, published in 1868, is the first full-fledged interpretation of the rebellion in a larger handbook-like publication, and it has come to be a key reference as well as a point of dispute.[48] As R. Guha rightly states, this is:

> a remarkable text. Written within a decade of the Mutiny and twelve years of the *hool*, it has none of that revanchist and racist overtone common to a good deal of Anglo-Indian literature of the period. Indeed the author treats the enemies of the Raj not only with consideration but with respect although they had wiped it off from three eastern districts in a matter of weeks and held out for five months against the combined power of the colonial army and its newly acquired auxiliaries – railways and the 'electric telegraph'.[49]

[48] William Wilson Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1868), 236-257.

[49] Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", 65.

Guha, of course, also demonstrates how Hunter describes the colonial power of the EIC as a benevolent government and how Hunter blames "the outbreak of the *hool* squarely on that 'cheap and practical administration' which paid no heed to the Santals' complaints and concentrated on tax collection alone". He points out that Hunter went "on to catalogue the somewhat illusory benefits of 'the more exact system that was introduced after the revolt' to keep the power of the usurers over debtors within the limits of the law".[50] In this regard, Guha is correct: Hunter was a utilitarian and saw the government as obliged to work for the benefit of the people. Guha, however, forgets that Hunter was appointed by the British Crown and not by the EIC, a difference that becomes evident when one looks at Hunter's generalisations regarding the former government in comparison to the government of the British Crown. Hunter states that:

[50] Ibid., 68.

> The servants of an association like the East India Company, which had to make its dividends out of the revenues, were constantly liable to the temptation of looking at government in the light of a mercantile undertaking, and of estimating its success by its profit.[51]

[51] Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, 232.

Hunter says that this was a "temptation the Court of Directors [of the EIC] resisted with a consistency most creditable to our nation, but ambitious subordinates in India sometimes took a narrower view," but he continues that: "the benign maxim that Indian governors are the trustees of the Indian people, not merely a few hundred English shareholders obtained a full and definite recognition only when India passed under the British Crown".[52] Hunter thus admits that one of the reasons for the rebellion was the exploitation of the Santals through land rent and taxes, something that happened under the former government but that would not happen under the government of the British Crown.

[52] Ibid.

In this regard, it is interesting that Hunter is the first scholar who states that the rebellion was intended as a kind of a democratic demonstration, which should carry a petition to the government. "A general order went through the encampment to move down upon the plains towards Calcutta, and on the 30th June 1855 the vast expedition set out. The bodyguard of the leaders alone amounted to 30.000 men. As long as the food which they had brought from their villages lasted, the march was orderly",[53] but once the food ran out, the protest turned into plundering. Hunter dates the event that ended in the killing of the *daroga* to 7 July 1855, and he states that the "foolhardy inspector ... ordered his guards to pinion them [Sidu and Kanhu]" and that "Sidu slew the corrupt inspector with his own hands".[54]

[53] Ibid., 238-239.

[54] Ibid, 239-240. With regard to the *perwannahs*, Hunter stresses that he had not discovered any of them but that he trusted contemporary writers as to their existence (238, note 69).

All later research on the rebellion has had to consider its start, and many scholars (including the present author) have accepted Hunter's view that it was intended as a peaceful demonstration,[55] even if there is no documentation for this in the early accounts, neither in the *perwannahs*, in the court case against Kanhu, nor in the contemporary press.

[55] For instance, K. K. Datta, *The Santal Insurrection;* Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions* (Asia Publishing House: London, 1965), 51; P. B. Andersen, "Revival from a Native Point of View", 128; though not R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*; nor N. Kaviraj, *Santal Village Community and The Santal Rebellion of 1855* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 2001).

It is now possible to return to the Digambar Chakrabortti's *History of the Santal Hool of 1855* (reprint 1989). Formally, the text belongs to the secondary discourse as D. Chakrabortti was about six years old at the time of the rebellion. He belonged to the Pakur Raj family of Kanauji Brahmins, and he states that he remembers parts of how he fled with his family. But when it comes to the Santals' gruesome killing of his relative, the Dewan, he must draw upon the account of the Dewan's sister, who witnessed the event as she was "lying concealed in a ditch".[56] The editor of the text argues that Chakrabortti wrote it sometime in 1895 or 1896.[57] This may have occurred at an even later point in time, but the dating to the middle of the 1890s gives evidence that Hunter's publication had already existed for about a quarter of a century. So it is interesting that the *daroga*, according to Chakrabortti, managed to arrest some of the Santals and began "to beat them with a dog whip he had in his hand"[58] and that the killing of the *daroga* was carried out by unknown Santals and not by Kanhu (as Kanhu had himself confessed in court). In this text, the decision to "proceed southward [towards Calcutta], as was directed by Cando Bonga and ask the great Firengee [European] Sahib at Calcutta why did he allow the obnoxious money-lenders to rob harass the poor people"[59] was taken after the

[56] Digambar Chakrabortti, *History of the Santal Hool of 1855*, edited by Arun Chowdhury (Aligarh: Rajnagar Lamps, 1989), 39.

[57] Arun Chowdhury, "History of Santal Rebellion: A Pioneer", in Arun Chowdhury ed., [Digambar Chakrabortti's] *History of the Santal Hool of 1855* (Aligarh: Rajnagar Lamps, 1989) 7.

[58] Digambar Chakrabortti, *History of the Santal Hool,* 26.

[59] Ibid., 27.

beheading of the *daroga*. This clashes with Hunter's description, which allows the killing be a consequence of the problems involved in maintaining an orderly demonstration on the way to Calcutta.

One can say that Chakrabortti offers a very positive account of the rebellion and systematically seeks to acquit Sidu and Kanhu of all accusations in a way that seems to be a further development of Hunter's account. With regard to the discourses, it is difficult to place this account in any linear relation to the colonial situation. Chakrabortti belongs to the wealthy *zamindars* and is related to one of the "obnoxious" moneylenders who – to some degree – were a product of the colonial system. He also belonged to a family that had lost at least one leading member in a gruesome killing during the rebellion. Nevertheless, Chakrabortti forwards his own very positive attitude towards the Santals and the actions of its leaders.

Summary and conclusion

Looking back at the argument, it becomes evident that Guha took his discursive approach too far when he identified the Santal Rebellion with peasant insurgencies. It is evident that the rebellion was a tribal rebellion. His further systematisation of the 'Prose of Counter-Insurgency' has proved open to demands for the inclusion various voices, colonial as well as Santal, and their interpretations of the rebellion.

Regarding the later interpretation of the events, it is evident that the Santals reinterpreted the rebellion as having been lost due to moral sin. One of its main leaders, Kanhu, interpreted it as due to possible crimes or rather sins committed by his army. Later, Santals who had been part of the rebellion stressed that Sidu and Kanhu had themselves sinned, and at an even later point in time, around 1870, this became part of the legitimation of a new religious movement: the Kherwars worked to cleanse the Santals of their sins so that the Santals could retrieve their power.

These aspects of the narrative received new impetus with the publication of W. W. Hunter's chapter on the rebellion in 1868. Hunter reinterprets the rebellion as an attempt to organise a peaceful demonstration to the government in Calcutta. This interpretation influenced the narrative presentations in the wealthy Brahmin Chakrabortti's account of the rebellion.

This is nothing more than what a historical investigation of the rebellion might have expected to encounter, yet it raises some problems for R. Guha's interpretation of 'the prose of counter-insurgency' inasmuch as space is opened for a number of other levels of relations to the colonial power than are assumed in Guha's otherwise-elegant analysis of three continuative levels of discourse, which depend on distance from the participants. The problems with Guha's analysis are especially clear with regard to meaning of the change of the government from the EIC to the British Crown as well as the positive evaluation of the leaders of the rebellion in the narration of the Brahmin who had been forced to flee the

rebellion. One might say that Guha's strict analytical approach, with his three levels, ends up concealing the development in the discourse from his own analysis.

We can allow ourselves to be inspired by Guha's reading of the sources, but must also recognise that it is flawed to classify them in relation to the colonial power. The sources should instead be regarded in relation to the numerous interest groups they represent and by which they have been utilised over the years. This approach offers no simple understanding of the colonial system, but it promises to open space for new and more nuanced understandings than are possible within the three discursive levels.