The Kherwar movement among the Santhals was a watershed in the socio-political history of the Santhal Parganas. Between 1871 and 1879, many frustrated Santhals who had lost their lands associated themselves with a new kind of religious order coming from their headman named Bhagirath. The followers of Bhagirath called themselves Kherwars. Kherwar is an ancient name of the Santhal tribe that carried overtones of the tribal golden age. The term was used after 1857 to describe any person who practiced the new Santhal religion. The Kherwars also called themselves “Sapha Hor” or pure Santhals.¹

The period following the Santhal Rebellion was not entirely peaceful. The Santhal Parganas district slowly began to revert into the regulation system and the privileges of the Santhals began to be taken away from them once more. In 1861, there were some agitations against the exploitations of the Santhals by a European rent farmer in one area of Santhal Parganas. In 1865, a Santhal headman claimed supernatural powers of healing and attracted a large following until he was arrested. These were, however, short-lived episodes and neither of them left any legacy of permanent organization. The unrest of 1861 ended when most of the rent increases were eliminated by the government. The organizers of the unrest were inspired by the then recent indigo rebellion in the plains.²

We can distinguish three phases of the Kherwar movement.³ The transition to each new phase is marked by fresh initiatives by the government. In this chapter, I have described the Kherwar movement along with the general political, economic and social history of Santhal
Parganas district as they are closely inter-related. The period mainly covered is between 1858 and 1895. Major Santhal activities during this period are divided into three phases.

Despite the erosion of the non-regulation system, the Santhals made no major protests against the administrative or agrarian conditions until 1871. Uncertainty prevails as far as the initiation of the Kherwar movement and its actual date of starting is concerned. However, it achieved prominence in 1871, when Bhagirath Manjhi of Godda subdivision, a charismatic leader announced that he would restore the golden age to the Santhals if they returned to the worship of one God and cleansed themselves of their sins. He also added the title of Babaji to his name. As the king of the new Santhal Raj he endeavoured to liberate the Santhal country from the oppressors; the British officials (Sahibs), Zamindars and Mahajans. While exhorting the people to worship the Hindu deity ‘Ram’, who he identified with the Santhal ‘Chando’, he assured them that their lands would be recovered. Their present oppression, he explained was divine punishment for abandoning the worship of one God and turning to the veneration of minor and evil spirits. His teaching was in consonance with Santhal tradition, according to which, their ancestors had worshiped only Thakur and had no Bongas (spirits).⁴

In 1871, Santhals held large meetings and visited their local officers and complained strongly against their exploiters in many parts of the Santhal Parganas district. They, at times threatened the officials of the dire consequences. However, no violence occurred but there was an atmosphere of panic and many officers fled.⁵ The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal admitted that the Santhals had good grounds for complaint and promised an immediate enquiry into their conditions. Many Santhals,
however, were impatient for action even after being told that the enquiry was under way and that their grievances would be redressed. The official sources claim that eventually calm was restored and the government took immediate action. The government of India decided that the policy of letting the Santhal Parganas become a regulation district was mistaken and not required by law under an Act of the British Parliament. Summary regulations could henceforth be issued for the administration of the Santhal Parganas. This procedure was adopted in order to give local officers, the greatest possible legal basis for exercising discretion. There followed the re-enactment of almost all the non-regulation rules governing the civil courts, and a series of agrarian reforms. Under the Santhal Parganas Settlement Regulation of 1872, a full survey and settlement of all land claims was performed in almost all of non-Damin portion of the district between 1872 and 1878. In Damin-i-Koh rents and land rights had been settled by the government in 1856-58 and 1868-69, and were again settled by the government in 1878-79.

In the Non-Damin settlement of 1872-78, the settlement officers were instructed to fix the land rents for the village as a whole, but the distribution of rents within the village was to be decided by the villagers themselves. However, since villagers often could not see eye to eye on this issue, settlement officers, themselves were constrained to make decisions about rent distributions. Another problem was that the volume of litigation about settlement officer’s rulings was much greater than expected. As a result, it was harder for non-settlement officers to maintain close contacts with the Santhals. Notwithstanding this in the late eighteen seventies, virtually everyone was scarified with the land settlement, both inside and outside the Damin-i-Koh.
Despite the above calming effect of the administrative and agrarian reforms by the government sources, a major Santhal religious and political movement took place in 1874-75. Since the Santhals were unable to recover their lands the number of Bhagirath Babaji's followers began dwindling. Bhagirath now changed the style of his preachings, particularly after the famine of 1874. He told the people, that the Rebellion had failed because they had committed sin of having sexual relations with non-Santhal women. Only, if they purified themselves, would God or Ram Chando, restore their lands to them. He instructed the people not to let fowls or pigs pollute the Burma rice (imported by the government because of famine) and to bathe daily before cooking their food. These new forms of behaviours which Bhagirath sought to impose on Santhals reflected Hindu notions of ritual purity and pollution. Many Santhals obeyed him “in almost every village” and Bhagirath set up a shrine in Godda sub-division, where many flocked to pay him homage. At a village, some fifteen miles away from the shrine, Bhagirath was anointed Raja (king) and received money in payment of ‘rent’.9 Also in 1874, the Santhal Parganas were affected by a severe famine that struck the plains of Bihar and Bengal. The government provided relief to the famine struck people but some Santhals objected to the way the relief was administered. Bhagirath’s followers resisted the work of the land settlement and induced Santhals to refuse to pay their rents. In some large estates outside the Damin-i-Koh, hardly any rent was paid for several years.10 Bhagirath and several other leaders of the movement were arrested and soldiers were posted in the Santhal Parganas district for four years. After Bhagirath, the movement was kept alive by several Babajis who claimed to have received a mandate from Ram Chando to work for the economic
uplift of the Santhals. In general, they were more pre-occupied with religious ideas rather than with political action. They adhered to Bhagirath's teachings and introduced new rituals. Bhagirath died in 1880 and in the same year many Santhals fell under the influence of another Babaji named Dubia Gosain, a Hindu mendicant guru. He came from the vicinity of Deoghar. He introduced the worship of the babajis much as the Hindus revere Sanyasis. He smeared his body with ashes and kept long hairs and also started taking ganja (marijuana). His followers also abstained from keeping fowls and pigs. His followers, however, did keep pigeons, goats and sheep. In November 1880, many santhals under his influence in Jamtara subdivision refused to allow themselves to be counted for the forthcoming census in 1881. An attempt was made to burn down the house of the senior officer of Jamtara sub-division while he was on the premises. Officials and Missionaries got panicky and held Santhals responsible for the crime. Following Dubia's directions the Santhals objected to the numbering of their houses and recording of their names. Seeing this, the British government took immediate action. Dubia Gosain was arrested and the entire area was placed under the control of the police and the army.

After the outbreak at Jamtara, the Santhal Parganas remained calm for about a month. However, towards the end of January 1881, Santhals again began resisting the census efforts in all districts except Jamtara subdivision and only a few Santhal headmen supported the government.¹¹ The most dramatic events occurred in the South-Central part of the Santhal Parganas, in two small towns, not far from the district capital of Dumka. The first town was Nunihat, which lies outside the Damin-i-Koh. The experienced Sub-divisional Officer, W.M. Smith was in charge of the census in Nunihat. He recorded the events and quotes at length:
On January 26, 1881, At Nuni, parties of Santhals and Khetauris who were a traditional-landlords caste, came to me, stated their objections to the census and received explanations. All were civil as a rule, and I thought my explanations were well received. The general excuse was that their neighbours had not submitted to be numbered. All at last went away promising, some to set to work, and some to come again tomorrow.

(27 January) A great crowd of Santhals and others came today; it was hat (weekly market) ... On (my) going amongst them, they answered curtly that they did not want the census and would not have it... I then called to me some representative Manjhis (Santhal village headmen) and talked to them, but to no good, they were rough in speech, cast reflections on government officers and made promises and did not keep them.... As these men, seven in number, defied me, I was obliged to detain them saying they must either understand me or... be instructed by the Deputy Commissioner.... I got the seven men food and talked to them up to a late hour at night. Amongst other things, I introduced Bengali School book which gave the population of various countries.... This made some impression I think.

(28 January) Some Parganaits (Santhal Village-Circle Headmen) came up this morning and I associated them with the seven detainees; two of these parganaits are well dispensed and at last the seven men said that they.....would agree to the census... Just at this time fifty
men of the thirty third Native infantry came.... So having ostensibly gained my point; the submission of the seven men, I started them off to enumerate, giving them at their request, parwanas (orders) to assure that there was nothing hurtful in the census... Today there are large crowds gathered about 150 yards off. Most of the people are morose and not fit to be talked to. Babu Udit Narayan Singh (a landlord) came to see me, and I sent him to talk to the Santhals and others assembled, there must have been considerably over two thousand people... Towards evening the crowd broke up after getting Parwanas from the Zamindar that the census would not hurt them... Since I have been here I have not attempted to force enumeration in any village. It would have been worse than useless to do so in the face of the large masses of people streaming in from all parts.12

The other serious act of Santhal resistance occurred at the small town of Katikund which unlike Nunihat lies just inside the Damin-i-Koh and was a major center for southern Damin. Cosserat, another veteran European officer was in charge of census here, unlike Smith, Cosserat failed to control the crowd of resisters who extorted a written pledge from him that the remaining census proceedings would be cancelled. Cosserat was the only officer in the Santhal Parganas who refused to have reserve policemen accompany him, and he had only four village constables with him at the time. He was censured and transferred for yielding to mass threats.13

In Godda subdivision in the northwest of the district, after two officers had arrested four protestors, the scene is described as follows:
The protestors escaped and called on the crowd for rescue. Captain Carnac and Mr. Kaye (the two officers present) drew their pistols; the police fell in and Captain Carnac rearrested the rioter with a pistol to his head. The crowd, Mr. W.M. Smith Says, “then gave in.”

The leaders of the Santhal resistance to the census were Santhal headmen and disciples of Bhagirath and Dubia Gosain as witnessed in Jamtara subdivision earlier. All kinds of rumours circulated such as the report that Santhal men were to be sent to the tea gardens of North Eastern India and Santhal women to Afghanistan, perhaps for service in the impending war with Russia. A missionary in the Damin-i-Koh reported that the Santhals talked of having their own country. A millennium was expected to come about in April 1881, when the landlords and local officers would be “eliminated”.

The government of Bengal was alarmed at the turn of events and decided to make use of force. This was done on a more extensive scale than in 1874-75, senior officials, policemen and troops were brought into Santhal Parganas to help the local authorities in the places cited above and also elsewhere. Once the officials and armed forces had entered the affected areas and arrested 65 leaders of the resistance, peace was restored and the census completed.

In 1880-81, there was a revival of the Kherwar religious activities started by Bhagirath, which had diminished in intensity in the late eighteen-seventies (Bhagirath died in 1880). In addition, at the same time as the resistance to the census, some Santhals withheld rents in the Damin, and complained to the officials about various agrarian issues. At the government show of force, however, these agrarian protests petered out. After the agitation of 1880-81, senior officials thought that Kherwars
constituted “an organization necessarily opposed to the government, which is capable of being used again,” and that the Santhals were by constitution politically discontented, and had not appreciated the motive of the government for keeping the police out of the country”.\textsuperscript{17}

Guided by these perceptions, the authorities introduced various administrative changes. The most important was that outside the Damin, village headmen were relieved of many of the police powers they held. Henceforth, headmen were to be assisted by regular policemen who were not local people.\textsuperscript{18}

Between 1888 and 1894, a new land settlement was made, which covered thirty-eight (38) percent of land outside the Damin-i-Koh. Land rights and rents were hardly changed, but unlike in 1872-78, settlement officers rather than villages decided how rents were to be distributed within villages. This necessitated detailed land measurements, and made the work of land settlement more elaborate than in 1872-78. Much litigation arose concerning the decisions of the settlement staff, but cultivators usually accepted the decisions.\textsuperscript{19}

An agrarian issue that proved troublesome for the authorities between 1880 and 1895 was the alienation of Santhal land. The Santhals continued to demand credit, and usually obtained it from moneylenders. The latter circumvented the reforms of the 1870s, and often gained control of lands pledged by Santhals as security for their debts. Within a decade of the settlement of 1872-78, probably thousands of Santhals outside the Damin-i-Koh found themselves enjoying less security of tenure, and paying more rents than the settlement provided for. Sales of land in execution of debt decrees were permitted but between 1884 and 1886 the government annulled such sales, when used to restore alienated lands. In addition, the settlement of 1888-94 provided that lands were not
transferable and despite these and other measures, Santhal tenants’, lands continued to be taken over by dikus in disguised ways during the late eighteen-eighties and eighteen-nineties.\textsuperscript{20}

When the state introduced its new policy on land alienation in 1884, many Santhals brought and often won suits against those who had dispossessed them of their lands. Other Santhals simply seized alienated lands, and held meetings. The leaders of the land-seizure agitation were arrested, and when the government started hearing the suits the protests died down.\textsuperscript{21}

The only other movement activity on the part of the Santhals between 1882 and 1895 was the unobtrusive performance of the prescribed rituals by small bands of Bhagirath's and Dubia Gosain's followers.

In the early eighteen-nineties, economic and political changes took place that further diluted the government’s policy of preserving Santhal institutions and fostering Santhal’s economic independence. In 1893, a regulation was promulgated which increased the similarity between the legal procedures in the Santhal Parganas and those used in the plains of Bengal. In addition, the market for Santhal labour became more sensitive to external changes.\textsuperscript{22}

The Kherwar movement, however, was more than anything else, a movement of religious revitalization, but it also contained important elements of agrarian and political protest.\textsuperscript{23} Kherwar's religious and political activities are hard to separate empirically.

Bhagirath's followers were given a mantra (incantation formula) by a guru (preceptor) that was apparently used by the followers of the Hindu God Vishnu. According to the prominent missionary Skrefsrud, the main deities included Singh Bahini, the goddess of the landlords, and the Kherwars thought that by offering her more fervent devotion in a just
cause than the lukewarm attentions of untrustworthy and usurping Bengalis they could win her over to the Kherwar’s cause. The Kherwars abandoned all traditional Santhal deities except for their supreme Sun-Creator God, when some Kherwar leaders from Jamtara subdivision in the South-west of the Santhal Parganas visited Dubia Gosain in 1880-81, they told him that they wanted to become Hindus. Bhagirath's followers worshipped their gods twice a day as they were given a mantra by a Hindu ascetic.24

In 1874-75 and in 1880-81, Santhals killed their pigs and fowls in almost every Santhal village as a way of purifying themselves. They abstained from alcohol, but often smoked Ganja (marijuana). Bhagirath's disciples apparently had a Hindu mark smeared on their foreheads when they visited their masters. Some Kherwars were reported in 1881 to have donned the high-caste sacred thread. They preferred Hindu dhotis to traditional Santhal clothes. In 1880-81, Kherwar men wore tufts of hair like Hindu devotees.

The Santhals had probably adopted some Hindu practices and beliefs for centuries, but in a superficial and unselfconscious way. The Kherwars, however, took over Hindu religious ideas and rituals much more widely and thoroughly.25

In 1865, 1874-75 and 1880-81, scraps of paper were passed around. They often bore unintelligible marks, which the initiated said they could decipher. In 1874 and 1880-81, Parwanas (orders) were circulated concerning religious and agrarian issues.26 At mass meetings, the new rituals were frequently performed, for instance when Bhagirath performed sacrifices in 1874-75, Santhals sometimes travelled long distances to attend these ceremonies. In 1880, they came from up to a hundred miles away to receive Dubia Gosain's blessings in Hazaribag.
district; however, these pilgrimages did not disrupt agricultural operations.27

The followers of Bhagirath and Dubia Gosain collected money in various ways to strengthen their movements (religious) in 1865, 1874-75 and 1880-81. In 1874-75, Gyan (Parganait), one of the leading followers of Bhagirath claimed that it cost him sixty rupees to obtain an order from the government absolving the Santhals of the obligation to pay rent and he then sold copies of the so called order.28

There was on occasions’ talk of a Santhal Raj (rule) and defiance of British rule. Bhagirath's followers declared Bhagirath their king and crowned him. He was anointed raja (ruler) of the Santhals. When Bhagirath ordered the Santhals to kill various animals, he claimed that this was an order of the government. Some Santhals, at this time spoke of killing people in the Damin-i-Koh. Bhagirath's followers used words that connoted rebellion in Santhali.29

After Bhagirath's death in 1880, some Santhals threatened violence against government officers and disobeyed them to their faces. In Jamtara subdivision, the crowd burst out in such a violent and insolent manner, that they would not allow their houses to be numbered or their names to be written. On reminding them that the same thing had been done nine years ago, a section said they were ready to give the total.... Objection was further made that they would not be registered like the land, and on their being assured that there was no intention, a partial lull occurred. On recurring to the writing of names and use of forms they broke out again as before... One Santhal... thrust himself with his arms folded against Mr. Oldham (Deputy Commissioner of Santhal Parganas) touching him several times, and in a contemptuous and insulting tone asked what right that officer had to pass any order or the Government in Calcutta either.
He also repeatedly turned and addressed the crowd in Santhali. Mr. Oldham thought that the man was drunk, said so, and turned away. The man said......... “You are drunk”..... The Deputy Commissioner asked where their Parganait (village- circle headman) was. They replied that they had no Parganait - they were their own parganaits and pramaniks (traditional Santhal distributors of village land).30

It seems that some of the Santhal headmen who had been employed by the government refused to work on the census. Dubia Gosain told people that bullets would not kill them, and the word was passed around that in April 1881, the local government officers and the landlord would be exterminated and the millennium would begin.31 Skrefsrud, an Anglican missionary reported that the Kherwars claimed, “The Sahebs (Europeans) and the Christians are few, we are numerous”.

The extent of Santhal resistance to the British should not be exaggerated. When the government demolished Bhagirath's shrine in north western Santhal Parganas, all the Santhals accepted this, saying “it is the government’s command.” In 1881, some headmen petitioned the government for not to be counted for the census, which implies an acceptance of government authority. However, one European Officer, Cosserat, was forced by an unruly and numerically overwhelming crowd to suspend census operations as mentioned earlier. But even he was addressed by some Santhals as “Huzur” (Your Honour).32 Kherwar devotees also joined their fellow Santhals in building roads for the Commissioner, Bhagalpur division on his visit.33

There were two main forms of agrarian protest. They frequently aired agrarian grievances at times of religious and political ferment, especially in 1871-72 and 1884-86. During the religious and political upheavals of 1874-75, Kherwar leaders advised the Santhals not to pay their rents or
cooperate with the land settlement. Many Santhals obeyed and as late as
1878, Kherwars were reported to be still refusing to pay their rents. Some Santhal headmen resisted the government’s settlement of their villages’ rent between 1872 and 1878. Santhals rarely paid rents to the government treasury when they did not pay their rents to their landlords. They often refused to pay rent. In 1871-72, they refused to pay their rents both inside and outside the Damin-i-Koh region. Encouraged by some of the leading followers of Dubia Gosain (but not by Dubia Gosain himself), many Santhals did not pay their rents during the opposition to the census in 1880 and 1881. The leaders of this round of rent refusals did not demand that rents should be paid to them instead of the government or to the landlords.

Another form of direct action was the repudiation of debts and the occupation of lands which had been taken over by non-Santhals. Debts were repudiated in 1871-72, and lands were occupied on several occasions, especially in 1884-86. On the latter occasion, Santhals violently seized lands, looted markets and brought suits against landlords; all supposedly with government’s permission. But after the initial excitement, Santhals waited quite peacefully for the result of the suits.

In the Damin-i-Koh, before the rent settlement of 1868-69, complaints were voiced orally by groups of Santhals. In 1871-72, when large bands of Santhals met their local officers, some of them disobeyed the officers’ orders not to meet in such large numbers, and not to meet before a certain date. In 1874, many Santhals complained about the differential treatment by the government. They stated that during the famine, the landlords and the money lenders but not the Santhals had received aid from the government.
During the religious and political protests of 1880-81, agrarian grievances were aired for the benefit of officials who travelled around the Santhal Parganas district. According to a government report, in June, 1880:

Some five men all under the influence of ganja (Marijuana) appeared before the sub divisional officer of Dumka with some segments of paper scrawled over with unintelligible characters, which they said had fallen from heaven on one of their numbers who had been directed by the deity to take them to the magistrate. It appeared that these men .......... were aggrieved at the disappearance of the village grazing lands under the operation of settlement and took this method of bringing it to notice. The disappearance of village grazing grounds, or rather their diminution, was purely due to the premium put on the cultivation of waste lands by the settlement pattas (title deeds). Both the Divisional Magistrates of Dumka and Deoghar enquired into the matter and in it could trace no other significance and discharged the men with a warning against the effects of ganja.³⁷

Some dissatisfaction was also expressed at the alienation of Santhal lands. The Santhals felt that local officers had broken their trust vis-a-vis officials. But the rent settlement of the Damin-i-Koh, which had just been completed, was never in dispute.

Sometimes the Santhals submitted written petitions or brought suits against landlords and moneylenders who were allegedly in league with landlords. Sometimes the petitions and suits bore no relation to religious or political activities. Other petitions were filed during periods of
religious and political ferment. During the protests led by Bhagirath, an official reported:

A ryot (cultivator) sued before the Assistant Settlement Officer of Godda for rent the other day, apparently with genuine simplicity declined to pay, on the grounds that he held the commissioner’s written order directing him not to do so. When requested to produce the order, he brought out certified copy of a petition presented to my office, bearing simply the order: “referred to the subdivisional officer for disposal”. No doubt, this man had been deceived by designing persons.38

Kherwar leaders sometimes wrote what they claimed were their own orders on agrarian matters. In 1880-81, a Kherwar village headman wrote several long petitions. In 1874 was issued the following:

Honourable, the Assistant Commissioner to Mustajir (Rent collector) Mohan Manjhi (Village headmen and another not legible) I, Gyan Parganait (Village Circle Headman), state under orders of the Bara Sahib (Great European Officer) that you will not pay any government revenue nor debts to mahajans (moneylenders) till you have paid the value of government rice. When the Bara Sahib will be here, he will make a new settlement. You will pay the government revenue and the mahajan’s debt afterwards. If anybody will come forward and raise quarrel with you, you will make him over to the Sub-Assistant Commissioner. For your guarantee Gyan Parganait of Beliadanga holds execution of decree parwana (order), 2nd December 1874.39

Another document, written in the same year runs:
An order of the Commissioner Sahib (Commissioner of Bhagalpur Division) has passed that in the country the ryots (cultivators) have been much distressed, and while the Zamindars (landlords) are demanding their rents the ryots cannot pay. Accordingly, the hakims (Senior Local Officers) have set forth that for three year there has been a famine, wherefore by importing rice from their own country they saved the lives of the ryots and given it without interest and have passed on an order that three years (of rent payments) are let off.

Now order has passed on the Zamindars to the effect “like as the hakims have saved the people, you will also show pity,” and it has been written so and the order has gone out. Nevertheless, the Zamindars have levied the whole of their rents from their ryots and said nothing about it. Now the ryots are not able and said nothing about it. Now the ryots are not able to pay anything because without any crops having been produced, they have taken and sold all they had, and making them run in debt to mahajans, they have taken that too. For this reason you ought to consider whether to pay your mahajans or to pay your rent to the Zamindars. Now the order of the hakims is that in Chait and Baisakh (March-April and April-May), when the mustard and linseed and oil come in, it will be paid.

You will take this as a reminder: N.B. (by the Commissioner of Bhagalpur Division)....The original bears some hieroglyphic in that part where a parwana is
usually signed having the appearance of an English initial signature.\textsuperscript{40}

How violent were the various Kherwar activities, religious, political and agrarian? Kherwar talked of committing violent acts on many occasions. However, actual violent acts were rare. In 1880 and 1881, members of the crowd that met British Officers in opposition to the census operations carried sticks. Santhals, hardly ever owned firearms.\textsuperscript{41} The Santhals however, knew about guns and swords in the rebellion of 1855.

The government reacted forcefully any time the Kherwars posed a threat to law and order. During the agitation of 1874-75, 120 policemen and 1000 infantrymen were sent into the district or to nearby areas and the soldiers stayed in the district capital Dumka until 1879.\textsuperscript{42}

In the disturbances of 1880-81, six senior civilians and police officers, 625 policemen and 4750 soldiers were brought into the Santhal Parganas from outside. They assisted those regular civilian officers who were experiencing particular difficulties. After the trouble subsided, the soldiers including the cavalry, whom the Santhals dreaded, marched through the disaffected areas to intimidate the Santhals. In subsequent years, two hundred and fifty of the extra police remained in the district, 1874-75 and 1880-81 were the only occasions on which extra forces were sent to the Santhal Parganas.

The leaders of the Kherwar Movement were jailed in great numbers. In 1881, 24 village headmen who had been connected with the Kherwars were dismissed. The authorities prevented the Santhals from holding meetings which might, intentionally or unintentionally, have helped the Kherwar cause.

The government made it clear that it would not allow the Santhals to use threats or create panic to attain their ends. British authorities also made
half-hearted efforts to solve the underlying problem that led to Santhal unrest. In 1874, to counter Bhagirath's influence, the authorities announced that it was not the government that had ordered the killing of pigs and fowls and that the Santhals could hold religious meetings provided they were not too big. In 1881, the British refused to give up their objective of enumerating the whole population for the census. But they did abandon those practices which the Santhals strongly objected to; like marking of the houses, taking of names and the final enumeration that was to be held at night.

Let us now summarize the history of Kherwar movement in the Santhal Parganas between 1858 and 1895. In the first phase, which lasted between 1858 and 1871, the laws and procedures used in the district became more and more like those of the plains, even though the Santhal Parganas was supposed to have been under a special non-regulation form of administration since 1855. Thanks to the erosion of the non-regulation system, dikus ousted many Santhal village headmen and frequently raised their Santhal tenants’ rent. In 1871, Santhals held large meetings to protest against this state of affairs, and to demand redress in the presence of local officials, and although no violence occurred, non-advasis panicked.

The State’s response to the agitation of 1871 brings us to the second phase of Santhal Parganas’ history. The authorities reaffirmed the policy of withdrawing the district from the operation of the ordinary laws, and of giving local officers broad latitude. Between 1872 and 1879, rents and land titles were settled throughout the district by specially-appointed Settlement officers. Many Santhal tenants and village headmen were reinstated, and tenants were accorded security of tenure.
Agrarian protests died down after 1871. But in 1874-75, there occurred a major episode of religious revitalization, led by Bhagirath, a Santhal headman. Many Santhals came to worship him and he was anointed as chief of the tribe. It is probable that this movement gained impetus from the confusion occasioned by the land settlement, and from the severe famine of 1874. After Bhagirath and some of his lieutenants were arrested, only a few thousand Santhals continued to practice Bhagirath's teachings. The devotees called themselves Kherwars (an ancient name for the Santhals).

The third phase lasted from 1880 to 1895. It was ushered in by a new mass movement of religious revitalization in 1880, led by the Hindu ascetic Dubia Gosain. A few months afterwards many Santhals refused to be counted for the census, and violent clashes between Santhals and European officials were narrowly averted. Leaders of the census resistance were the “veteran” Kherwars and followers of Dubia. The agitation collapsed when an unprecedentedly large number of policemen and soldiers accompanied by senior officers, were rushed to the interior of Santhal Parganas.

After 1881 only a few small groups of Santhals continued to follow Bhagirath's and Dubia Gosain's teachings. In 1884, the Santhals sensed a more favourable government policy towards lands they had lost to dikus, and agitated to regain the lands. In the ensuing lawsuits, some Santhals regained their lands, but covert mortgaging of Santhal lands to dikus continued.

After the Santhal unrest of 1880--81, the government felt betrayed by the Santhals. It introduced a new police system, which interposed new officials between local officials and village headmen, and in other ways made contacts between Santhals and officials less personal and
egalitarian. Santhal villages’ economic isolation was probably somewhat eroded after the mid-1880s.

The Movement is discussed from the viewpoint of its sociological characteristics also. It was a movement of religious revitalization but it also contained important elements of agrarian and political protest. The Kherwar movement’s leaders appeared to be less interested in publicly stating their creed. The ideology, structure and leadership of the Kherwar movement should be approached in a more analytical way. The main questions to be addressed here are: what were the Kherwar movements’ ideologies, i.e. analyses, predictions and prescriptions? What types of adivasis led the movements, what types constituted the rank and file and how were leaders and followers coordinated? How did the external factors, such as missionaries and civil servants, respond to the movements? The following themes can be discerned in the Kherwars’ thinking on religious revitalization:

Certain individuals’ namely the Kherwar leaders have been divinely chosen to show the Santhals the right religion. Consequently, the Santhals must worship the deities prescribed by those leaders and perform the rituals laid down by them. Those who disobey their leaders will incur divine punishment. Those who do perform the new rituals will become prosperous. When the new practices are followed, a new golden age will dawn and government will leave Santhal Parganas perhaps because the Kherwars have driven these people out. The last belief was not so commonly expressed as other beliefs. Various additional ideas were implied by these five beliefs. One idea was that elements extraneous to Santhal society; in particular, the British government might seek to frustrate the Kherwars’ goal of revitalizing the religious and social life of the Santhals. The Santhals were to watch out
for these external elements and to oppose them whenever they became active. During the census of 1881, doubtless many Santhals firmly believed in hostile outside elements, and in the dire fates Kherwar leaders predicted for those who co-operated with the census. Kherwar devotees did not, however, include the dikus among thier enemies. All these points except the fifth one are to be found in the instructions of Dubia Gosain, the very popular hindu guru in the unrest of 1880-81:

Receive the blessing of Dubianath babaji. Do not milk your cow or plough your field on Sunday, neither keep or rear pigs or fowls. Walk on the right path, Whoever comes to pay his respects to me, all his desires shall be accomplished, but if my commands are not obeyed as stated above, punishment will follow within two or four months. My letters have already been sent to all parts of the country. Make every person acquainted that his welfare depends upon my blessing, and that he will obtain thereby the benefit as of making the gift of cows; in other words, Bhagwan (God) will give whatever may be good for him. Whoever may think these words false will certainly get into trouble. Whoever receives this letter will make fresh copy and circulate it; failing this he will be held as guilty of the sin of killing a cow.

The fifth point is well expressed in the following government report:

Kali Kamal Roy, head constable, states on inquiry today, it is found that Gyan Parganait (village-circle headman) declared that in the next phalgun (month of
February -March) he will be king (raja) and he will
drive the present king.....and the English king
(Sahib Log) out of the country..... If some portions of
the English nation then still remain they will be his
servants (chakars).  
A further implication of the Kherwars’ fundamental beliefs was the
notion that the Santhals were suffering because they had developed the
wrong types of religious practices. According to a missionary, Bhagirath
and his followers claimed the traditional Santhal spirits (Bongas) were
not powerful enough to prevent the famine of 1874.
A millennial strain in Kherwar ideology is evident. However, it was
apparently not strong, and in any event no concrete preparations were
made for a millennium, even in the crises of 1874 and 1881.
The Kherwars did express their views on the questions of land rights,
little difference can be seen between Kherwars’ agrarian demands during
periods of primarily agrarian unrest, and demands accompanying
political or religious activities. We can distinguish extreme and more
moderate agrarian demands: the latter were evident when Kherwars
addressed government officials. The extreme view was that since the
land had been cleared by the Santhals, they should have to pay the most
minimal rents. Even after the land settlements of the 1870s, the Santhals
seemed to regard landlords and moneylenders with the greatest
suspicion. Such an attitude was probably as common among devotees of
the new religion as among other Santhals, as is evident in following
description of the Kherwars, written by a civil servant in 1880:

Quite apart from the fact that some of (the Kherwars)
being sadhus or ascetics and other Ram Hindus, and all
of them Sapha or pure, the bearer of the name Kherwar
is one who claims to cultivate his land free from all interference whatever, as did his ancestors in the good old times when they were Kherwars and not Santhals.\textsuperscript{47}

The Santhal movement attempted to explain or influence the actions of the traditional landlords, the Kherwars only directed their attention at the dikus.\textsuperscript{48} When they adopted a more moderate and practical stance, the Kherwars argued that excessive rents were being charged by the landlords or their agents. However, the Kherwars did not indicate as what constituted a maximum level of rents. The Kherwars also demanded fixed rent leases of at least seven years for lands which they had cleared with their own hands and the right to pay rents directly to the district capital in Dumka (this right was claimed by Santhals living both inside and outside the Damin-i-Koh: Dumka is located outside the Damin). The Kherwars never made an issue of labour dues.\textsuperscript{49}

There are some contemporary accounts of Santhal’s general views of their situation in the late nineteenth century. These general attitudes no doubt contributed to the popularity of the Kherwar ideology among the Santhals. For example many Santhals vividly remembered their old traditions and the rebellion of 1855. An old Santhal religious teacher put it this way, as a missionary record’s:

\begin{quote}
Now a days the dikus also rob us of our villages; they both encroach on our boundaries and steal our rice land. People say: the dikus enter like a needle, and they swell to be as large as a ploughshare, they are also making us rob each other and quarrel…. If diku cats were not living among Santhals it would be good for us…. Because of the harassing of the dikus and the distress through lack of food after we crossed the Ajoy
\end{quote}
River (which flows from Santhal Parganas into Birbhum district: the migration referred to is probably that into Santhal Parganas at the beginning of the nineteenth century) we were, as time passed, spread about towards the north and the east… We cleared the hill country and the forest country at our expense for the new landlords, after they had become moneylenders and they gradually increased the land rent for us. The moneylenders gave us very small amounts, and they take away very much. The crops of the year they take away from us, all of it, and we get through life again incurring debts with them… If they are not satisfied with the crops of the year, they drive our cattle away; and if they are not content even by this they make us, wife and children, serve with them as slaves for a couple of half-seer (about 2 lb of rice)...

At that time there were no magistrates, to whom we could complain? Afterwards diku police came in; but these dismiss our cases, taking the white pice (money) of their own race. We have very great distress. With the whole country we have become bewildered ... From after the insurrection (of 1855), the Europeans have appeared in the Santhal country. First Telbour Sahib (possibly one of the first Deputy Commissioners of Santhal Paraganas) was our magistrate. At that time he judged our cases without charging money; but nowadays much money has to paid in court cases:... if the orderlies are not given a little, they push you
straight away when you come, and if you do not go and have trouble three-four times, the case is not settled. This we feel is a distress, otherwise the Europeans judge well.\textsuperscript{50}

Many Santhals probably felt generally restless. In the words of Carstairs, a Deputy Commissioner:

I remember one Sunday morning in camp we were strolling about and met an old man, who said he had been a Kherwar, we sat down on a grassy bank together and began chatting: “so you wanted to take the raj (rule) from us,” I said. “Oh no,” said the old man,” “we had no idea of doing that.” “Who told you to leave off eating fowls and drinking liquor?” I asked.

“No man,” he replied.

“What made you do it, then?” I asked.

“Something within told me, and I had to obey,” he said.\textsuperscript{51}

The social-class impact of the economic and socio-political conditions in the Santhal Parganas had its imprint on the movement. The patterns of land control in the late nineteenth century definitely effected Santhal’s perception of interests, their relationships with these adversaries and allies. It would be interesting to gauge the qualitative as well as the quantitative aspects of the organization that mainly includes the dikus, traditional landlords, village servants and non-tribal cultivators in the Santhal Parganas. Adivasi solidarity and the relations between the tribes also arouse much interest regarding their class interests and how they were guided by internal as well as extraneous considerations.

The dikus as such exploited and harassed adivasis in several ways in their multiple roles of landlords, moneylenders and petty officials. They
were drawn from a mobile entrepreneurial class that lived in northern and eastern India in late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were attracted to the Santhal Parganas by the adivasis’ gullibility and by the high profits to be made from exploiting tribal people. Their immigration into Santhal Parganas began in late eighteenth century and continued in nineteenth century especially between 1858 and 1895. This influx into the Santhal Parganas was particularly heavy as reported, in 1881. They were settling in the Damin-i-Koh despite the governments’ best efforts to keep them out. They came from the regions north and east of Ranchi and the Santhal Parganas districts, mainly from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal and from Bangladesh. Thus, they spoke a variety of languages and professed different religions. However, majorities were Hindus, but some policemen and landlords’ agents were reported to be Muslims and Sikhs. The dikus were neither very educated nor greatly interested in caste ranking and were heavily outnumbered by the adivasis. They very well remembered how fierce the tribals could be when they rebelled and that is why they cooperated with each other. They intervened in disputes among adivasis sometimes, particularly when the tribal leaders were weak. However, they rarely made permanent alliances with one group of adivasis against another. However, there is no definite information on whether in a typical adivasi group of villages, all the recently-settled landlords, moneylenders and policemen were of the same caste and region of origin. Many adivasis, including the headmen in villages were in debt to diku moneylenders, which frequently hampered the adivasi’s ability to resist them. It was very common in the Santhal Parganas. The following case, reported by the Deputy Commissioner of the Santhal Parganas in 1884, was probably typical:
A Santhal woman came to me complaining that she had just been turned out of house and lands by a Bengali mahajan (moneylender)...her husband had died last November. Her village was purely Santhali village. The Bengali... had come alone to the Santhal village, exhibited a bill-of-sale purported to have been executed to him four years before by the deceased husband, and had then and there executed it himself by driving the widow out of her house. Not a soul in the village knew anything of the bill-of-sale, and the Santhal headman, vested with police powers showed helplessness as he was in debt to the Bengali himself. The bill-of-sale, to all appearance, was perfectly normal..... The above is a mere type of hundreds of cases that occur. Each one investigated discloses overreach and fraud.

The Kherwar movement did not add much to the Santhals hostility towards the dikus, as the agrarian issues and the militancy were in the oblivion and not in the forefront of the movement as it addressed more towards the religious revitalization being the sole solution of all their ills. Traditional landlords are easy to distinguish from dikus, who arrived in the Santhal Parganas after British and who had no legitimate position in adivasi society. Strictly speaking landlords were tenure-holders, who were first given rent-collecting rights before British rule, and who in tribal eyes justifiably held those rights. As a class traditional landlords were internally divided and economically declining. Many landlords were losing legitimacy as they imposed higher rents and other economic
burdens on their tenants, and as they sided with the government and dikus against the adivasis.

However, many traditional landlords did contribute significantly to their tenant’s material and symbolic welfare. One of the most striking traditional landlords in the Santhal Parganas district was the Maharaja of Maheshpur in the east-central part of the district. His family had lived there for many generations and he rescued many Santhal tenants from the famine of 1874, from land alienation in 1884 and on other occasions.\textsuperscript{57} In the Santhal Parganas, several superior landlords with large holdings owned a lot of land outside the district. Quite a few landlords, however, had small holdings, particularly in the southwest part of the district, where a group of petty landlords traditionally performed police duties.

Even though many traditional landlords wanted to be generous to help their tribal tenants, they were less and less able to help their tenants for several reasons. Many traditional landlords tried to maintain extravagant life-styles. They sold part of their lands and in the process overrode the rights of adivasi tenants. Another way to finance their expenses was to hire managers or rent farmers to increase their rental incomes, and many managers and rent farmers were dikus who made large profits from their activities. In addition, many traditional landlords went into debt to remain solvent and their creditors were also frequently dikus.\textsuperscript{58}

Some traditional landlords themselves behaved more or less like dikus towards their tenants. Once, when the young Maharaja came of age, the local authorities had to make strenuous efforts to prevent him from bringing in oppressive subordinate revenue-collectors. Traditional landlords were often embroiled in litigation and in quarrels with relatives or with other landlords, which diverted their attention from their tribal tenants. There are reports that in the Santhal Parganas, traditional
landlords often ceased to perform their traditional roles of arbiters in village disputes. Most of them did nothing to prevent the Santhals on their estates from being transformed from tenants into share-croppers on account of land alienation to dikus, or to prevent the latter from usurping the rent-collecting and other functions of traditional village officials.\textsuperscript{59}

Adivasis often displayed some hostility towards traditional landlords also. In the Santhal Parganas, during the disturbances of 1871-72 and 1880-1881, the Santhals’ animosity was chiefly directed against landlords rather than moneylenders, and the objects of Santhal hostility probably included some traditional landlords too. On the other hand, in 1881, the authority of one landlord was used by some Santhals to justify their refusal to cooperate with the census.\textsuperscript{60} The British attached the estate of Maharaja of Maheshpur, when he was heavily in debt, and refused him relief.

In the Santhal Parganas, village servants apparently did not have enough work in their traditional occupations, for them all to be able to make ends meet. There were number of Hindu and Muslim castes, who before the British rule, lived in adivasi villages or were craftsmen. Village servants were not subordinate in status to the Santhals, since no ritual impurity was attached to them and no rigid rules governed exchanges between village servants and adivasis. We find member of village-servant castes working as village policemen, landlords’ agents and recruiters of labour for tea plantations and railways. Many others were cultivators.

Some village servants participated in the Kherwar movement as well as in opposing the census of 1881 and the various agrarian struggles. Some of them, no doubt, suffered from land alienation and rack-renting at the hands of the dikus. The evidence from folklore suggests that Santhals were very familiar with village servants, and were neither friendly nor
hostile towards them. They also accepted cooked food from them. Thus the relations between village servants and adivasis were close in the Santhal Parganas implying the greater political power of the Santhals. The village servants had to turn to non-traditional sources of livelihood to greater extent in the Santhal Parganas. It was one of the reasons that the Santhals were more strongly attracted to a religious movement because they had closer ties with village servants.

The non-tribal cultivators formed another category consisting of the numerous Hindus or Muslims who were not dikus, traditional landlords or village servants. The economy of the Santhal Parganas was almost entirely agricultural and most of these people were cultivators. There were virtually no landlords other than dikus or traditional landlords. Not much is known about non-tribal cultivators. They and village servants often replaced adivasi cultivators ousted by diku landlords. Non-tribal cultivators also probably served dikus in their capacities of village watchmen and tea-garden labour-recruiters. Village servants and non-tribal cultivators in combination were clearly numerous. It is evident that potentially, village servants and cultivators could be mobilized on a large scale by dikus in their struggle against adivasis.

There are some indications that bonds between adivasis did to some degree become weaker between 1858 and 1895. Adivasi marriages frequently broke up. A divorce could in the late nineteenth century be obtained on grounds of disharmony between the spouses, whereas earlier the only admissible grounds were witchcraft and adultery. Punishment for serious crimes against traditional morality became harder to enforce and less severe. The Santhals paid less attention to the training imparted by their traditional gurus, spent less time on their annual hunts because of deforestation and performed fewer religious celebrations there. The
amount of cooperative labour by Santhal families declined as well.\textsuperscript{61} Alcoholism became more common. They began to drink country spirits which probably made Santhal drunkenness more serious and frequent. The liquor shops in the Santhal Parganas were sometimes centers of Kherwar activities or of opposition to missions. Sometimes dikus had the police bring charges of witchcraft against adivasis, they did not like.\textsuperscript{62} However, there is no evidence of Santhals leaving Santhal Parganas for tea plantations to escape from a sexual union or to form a new one.

The British legal system helped to weaken traditional tribal sanctions in Santhal Parganas. The British indirectly encouraged alcoholism for revenue on the liquor in form of the excise tax. Although, the authorities sometimes took steps to combat alcoholism, they proved ineffectual.\textsuperscript{63} The missions had an ambiguous influence on traditional Santhal institutions. The Indian Home Mission in Santhal Parganas sought to preserve those adivasi customs which they approved, but conducted their own Santhal ceremonies, in a paternalistic manner. Among the Santhals, abstention from liquor by Christian headmen deprived them of one of the perquisites of office. However, many adivasis did not take the new moral teaching seriously and were still attached to traditional tribal ways. Knowledge of Bengali and of local Hindi dialects increased due to day-to-day contacts between the adivasis and the Hindus that expanded in nineteenth century. Adivasis other than Kherwar devotees worshipped Hindu deities more than before. However, they did not adopt Hindu practices such as child marriage. Dikus never pressed them to adopt Hindu customs or beliefs.

In the late nineteenth century Santhals probably engaged in individualistic activities more than group activities. Kherwars’ did adopt Hindu patterns of belief and socially interacted with Hindus. Though,
many adivasis converted to Christianity for utilitarian purposes. Some members belonged to consciously Hinduizing sects as they were exposed to Hindu culture more than before. Non-Kherwar Santhals probably respected individual Kherwars’ aspirations and activities. There was little interaction and indeed considerable hostility between Kherwars and non-Kherwars as groups. Kherwar devotees were not richer or better-educated than their fellow Santhals. Sect members had intimate relationships with their religious teachers who were mostly non-Santhals.  

Thus, the Santhals shared a fierce hostility towards the dikus and a willingness to be mobilized for the restoration of the pre-British society. These attitudes determined the general goal of the Kherwar movement. But the movements’ specific activities and ideologies were affected to some extent by the class structures of Santhal Parganas district. More importantly, the divisions between Kherwars, Christian and other Santhals help explain why lots of Kherwar devotees doggedly adhered to their new beliefs and practices as a way of bolstering tribal solidarity, though some cleavages were developing within tribes, especially those between Kherwar devotees and other Santhals, and between some headmen and ordinary villagers in the Santhal Parganas.  

After the Santhal rebellion of 1855, the Santhals got a reprieve and the authorities assured them to contain repressive elements in the area. But soon the Santhals realised that the moneylender, zamindar and the government authorities’ nexus had not given in and was bent upon exploiting the gullible mass of Santhals. The Santhal leaders once again decided to force the authorities and vested interests to mend their ways. Their protests and persuasions gave birth to the Kherwar movement which promised the Santhals, the restoration of the ‘golden past’.
Bhagirath Manjhi, a parganait was the unquestioned leader of this movement. The Kherwar movement had religious and social undertone but it was also aimed at the destruction of alien rule. Bhagirath Manjhi belonged to Godda subdivision. He has had primary education in a local missionary school and was visibly impressed with Christianity in the beginning. He was on the verge of conversion, when he came in contact of some low Hindu caste ascetics and he added the title of Babaji to his name. He accepted Matadin, a Hindu saint as his guru. Under the influence of his guru, he matured and accepted some of the essential features of Hinduism. He stuck to the original Santhal religion and declared himself the messenger of the Thakur. He announced that he would restore the golden Age to the Santhals if they returned to worship one God and cleansed themselves of their sins. He declared himself the king of the Santhal Raj. He said that he would endeavour to liberate the Santhals from the oppressors, the Sahibs, Zamindars and mahajans. In no time, he had a large number of followers and he exhorted them to worship the Hindu deity, Ram, whom he identified with the Santhal Chando. He assured his adherents that their land would be restored to them. He impressed upon them that their malaise was due to their adherence to evil and minor spirits. If they followed their tradition strictly he said, and worshipped only Thakur and had no bongas or spirits, their lot would become better. Bhagirath instructed them not to let fouls or pigs pollute their house. He laid stress on purity and austerity and told them to take bath daily before cooking their foods. These were definitely new norms which Bhagirath wished to inculcate among the Santhals. He wished to impose Hindu notions of ritual purity and pollution. All aforesaid measures taken by
Bhagirath were to make his followers feel that their guru had a charismatic spell and he would ameliorate their wretched condition. He politicized his movement and exhorted his followers not to pay revenue on the land they cultivated. The government authorities took it seriously and arrested him. Soon he was out of jail and provided fresh zeal to the movement. Under his able leadership, the Kherwar movement forged ahead with greater intensity and the government officials had to face uphill task in containing it. By 1874-75, Bhagirath became so popular that many Santhals started worshipping him as their newfound God. They resisted the work of land settlement. In some large estates outside the Damin-i-Koh, hardly any rent was paid for several years.

Bhagirath Manjhi died in 1880. In the same year many Santhal fell under the influence of Dubia Gosain, a Hindu mendicant guru. He came from Deoghar subdivision. He smeared his body with ashes and kept long hair. He started taking ganja. Probably he had come in contact with the Kapalik sanyasis. He also wielded charismatic personality. He told the British officials to grant administrative autonomy in the hands of the tribals. He objected to the government census operations in 1881. Following his directions, the Santhals objected to the numbering of their houses and recording of their names. The British government took immediate action and arrested Dubia Gosain and placed the entire area under the control of the police and army. Nevertheless, the Santhals continued the resistance and non-cooperation with the government authorities. Dubia Gosain had clear vision of government’s collaboration with the moneylenders and Zamindars and naturally his call to his followers was against all the three. Naturally, all the three ganged up against him and his followers were arrested and put into jails. Not content with this, the government of Bengal took special measures to
counter the Santhal outbursts. It decided to make a show of force. Senior officials, policemen and troops were brought into Santhal Parganas to help the local authorities. Eventually peace was restored and the census operations conducted by the government officials were completed. Dubia Gosain and his movement went into oblivion but the impact of his movement remained there in the Santhal Parganas district. The government had to make a new land settlement between 1888 and 1894 and the Santhals accepted the settlement without much fuss. The only other movement activity on the part of the Santhals between 1882 and 1895 was the unobtrusive performance of the prescribed rituals by small bands of Bhagirath’s and Dubia Gosain’s followers.

The Kherwar leaders held mass meetings to mobilize support. Unintelligible scraps of paper and so called orders were circulated from time to time. Leaders of the movement also exploited Santhal institutions to organize their followers. In 1871, the Santhals went out on one of their traditional summer hunting expeditions and in this they apparently discussed their agrarian grievances. This is how Kherwar leaders may have communicated with their followers and followers with each other. Christian Santhals who opposed Kherwar activities were sometimes intimidated. Some traditional Santhal officials used their authority to coerce their fellow Santhals into joining the movement. In 1880 and 1881, the Santhals deposed some of their headmen who had cooperated with the British. Tribal folk songs and folk tales probably contributed to internal communications. The Santhal rebellion of 1855 (Hool) is frequently celebrated in the Santhal folklore. However, Kherwar ideas and activities find no place in most of the songs and stories. Rumours also sometimes provided for the communication. The role of rumours cannot be underestimated. Rumours seem to have affected the Santhals a
great deal. In 1871-72, it was rumoured among Santhals that people were being sent to the tea plantations or being converted to Christianity. In 1874, it was claimed that Bhagirath had met Queen Victoria. Rumours probably circulated most widely in 1880-81. It was said at that time that Santhal women would be raped by the policemen and soldiers on the night of the census enumerations, that the men would be deported or sent to the impending war in Afghanistan; that a new tax was to be levied and that the Europeans were to be beheaded. Large numbers of Santhals took part in the mass upsurges of Kherwar activity, but only for a few weeks or months. But small groups of Santhals adhered to the new religion for many years, and constituted a consciously new group in Santhal society. Between 1876 and 1880, a “few thousand” Kherwars were following Bhagirath’s religious precepts. The devotees’ spiritual guides were either Hindus or Santhals. The Santhal guides were sometimes leaders of villages or clans. According to Skrefsrød, the leaders of the sects were literate and sometimes it were they who circulated the scraps of paper mentioned earlier. Sect members were as poor as non-Kherwar Santhals. There were many differences of religious practice between Kherwars and other Santhals. The two groups were hostile to each other, however, members of Kherwar sects were tolerant towards Hindus. Thus, the Kherwars did not claim a Hindu identity, they did seek a new identity within the Santhal society, and it was indeed an important identity for them.

After 1881, there were two main groups in Santhal society practicing religious reform. The first was Bhagirath’s and the second group was the babaji’s (devotees) as the disciples of Dubia became known. Babaji’s were less cohesive than Bhagirath’s followers. However, the babajis who followed Dubia Gosain were not necessarily same as the babajis of
the late 1870s. In 1881, the Deputy Commissioner of Santhal Parganas said that the Santhals joined Bhagirath’s sect for religious purposes, while they joined Dubia’s in order to seek political change. There may have been some element of truth in this observation if we link it to the declining number of followers after 1881. Dubia’s followers (members) fell more sharply than Bhagirath’s after 1881, when in Santhals’ eyes, the political situation deteriorated. Relations between these two sects were also not close.\(^72\)

When Bhagirath was arrested, he was accompanied by a crowd of several thousand Santhals indicative of his mass support. In 1881, 40,960 Santhals were classified as professing Kherwars and as those supporters of Bhagirath who held the “most pronounced views.” But there were few thousand Santhals who adopted the new religious practices and opposed the census, yet repudiated the name of Kherwar. According to the census figures, nearly 50,000 Santhals in Santhal Parganas strongly adhered to some version of Kherwar religion in 1881.\(^73\) In 1881, twenty four village headmen who were connected with the Kherwars were dismissed. Thus, we can gauge that in the Kherwar movement, the leaders were often traditional Santhal officials. Members of the new sects often led subsequent political and agrarian struggles. Leaders of the movement were usually people who enjoyed power and prestige in their societies, independent of their activities in the movement. The leaders of most social movements are influential in their societies, however, such influence brought with it contacts with the wider worlds of towns, missions and district government. It was because of the leaders’ ties outside village society that the beliefs and activities of the Kherwar movement were quite distinct from those of the earlier Santhal rebellions. The leaders made vigorous efforts to enlist the support of
non-adivasis who were considered influential by them, some of whom lived outside the Santhal Parganas district. The Kherwars sought religious guidance from Hindu gurus like Dubia Gosain.\textsuperscript{74} The Kherwars saw the dikus as their main adversaries. The dikus usually reacted to outbursts of protests by taking to flight. They were neutral or ambivalent towards Kherwars’ religious and political activities. The traditional landlords were not the targets of the Kherwars hostility. The Kherwars sometimes consciously opposed the British authority, especially during the census of 1881 in Santhal Parganas, unlike other tribes. However, when the Kherwars formed religious sects they felt relatively friendly towards the dikus and the British, but quite hostile to non-Kherwar Santhals.
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