CHAPTER 5
THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SANTHAL MOVEMENTS

Most of the earlier writings on tribal revolts are prejudiced due to the concepts developed by the colonial rulers. Colonial conquests were definitely different from pre-modern conquests in the sense that pre-modern conquests were made to control less powerful human societies but the colonial conquests were in the nature of “a modern enterprise that sought mastery primarily over things.”

From this cognitive vantage the colonial administrators confronted the tribal natives. The tribals had too little things to possess and that nothing could be measured in terms of being in their own possession. Therefore, it seemed to the British that the tribal natives had been frozen in the march of civilization and the tribal areas signified a social space least touched by purposive human activity. No doubt, the Europeans perceived the tribal areas as a romantic virgin field.

It was considered similar to the state of humans and things in Europe thousand years ago. It was coined as the ‘comparative method’ by Anthropologists. In 19th century, this school believed that one could learn of Europe’s distant past from Asia’s present. Sir Henry Maine is the best representative of this school who wrote “the great difference between the East and the West is that past of the West lives in the present of the East, what we call barbarism is the infant state of our civilization.” This resulted in representing a coloured perception of the tribal situation by the colonial ethnographers and anthropologists. They developed the idea of tribals’ as ‘Noble Savages’. The tribal communities were treated as isolates and their primitive condition was described as a state of ‘Arcadian simplicity’. Further, it was conceived that their primitive
purity was diluted by the process of sanskritization and mediation of non-tribals.\textsuperscript{4}

It has now been proved beyond doubt that before the coming of the British, tribal areas had developed the mechanism of state and they were gradually entering the mainstream of historical process. Therefore, the description of pre-colonial situation as static by colonial ethnographers seems to be erroneous. Jharkhand and Gondwana emerged as Historical Regions in medieval period, the Bhumij state in Manbhum, Khetauri kingdom in Santhal Paragans, Cooch state in Cooch Bihar, Nagbanshi state in Chhotanagpur are few of various examples.\textsuperscript{5} It is thus clear that in the semi exposed tribal regions, the portrayal of a tribal; “as a noble savage” innocent of the historical processes was both “naive and untenable.”\textsuperscript{6} However, this simplistic model served to justify the presence of the “Raj” and the role of missionaries as the protectors of tribals against the non-tribals.

This colonial discourse depicting the tribals as ‘Noble Savages,’ has acquired significance in the writings of Modern Indian historians particularly the subaltern historians. Colonial discourse was a two way affair in which the colonialists participated as the victors and natives as victims. Being victims here implies something deeper and far more annihilating than mere physical subjugation. Colonial discourse is so intimately connected to us that its categories and modes of comprehension are still in our subconscious minds. It was perhaps this reason that Gandhi’s critique of colonial rule began as a search and affirmation of intellectual and historical space least touched by the colonial phenomena.

Prof. Ranjit Guha in his well-known work “Elementary aspects of Peasant’ insurgency in colonial India”, \textsuperscript{7} has mentioned five elementary
aspects of peasant insurgency. We will analyse these elements in the context of the Santhal Hool first in order to bring out the nature of Santhal Hool and its significance that occurred in 19th century and thereafter the analysis of the Kherwar movement will be done.

The element of “Negation” borrowed from Gramsci signifies the peasant’s attempt “to destroy” or appropriate for themselves, the signs of the authority of those who dominated them”, this has been called “Inversion”. However, so far as the Santhal Hool is concerned we know that Sidho used palanquins and elephants, and wore the attire of upper class. The element of inversion was present there and they also adopted Hindu religious practices and Kanhu celebrated ‘Durga Puja’ with all pomp and grandeur. However, the next statement of Ranjit Guha regarding the nature of peasant violence is incorrect. Prof. Guha states that the insurgents carefully distinguished between the foes and friends and their violence was seldom indiscriminate. This statement, however, does not stand the scrutiny of the events in Pakur town where the Santhals killed an invalid and old man and also a lame man without any reason during the “Hool”. There are numerous other examples showing the fact that the Santhal violence was blind and discriminate.

Ambiguity and modalities are closely related concepts. It was related to the difference in perception of the dominant classes and the rural population regarding crimes and insurgency. According to Guha; insurgency abolishes crime as “a form of social protest”. Thus, according to Guha, the modalities of peasant violence during an insurgency fundamentally differed from crimes. It was public, collective, destructive, and had nothing to be secretive about it. The insurgents hardly concealed their intentions; they often declared their plans and programmes to their enemies in advance. When juxtaposed, this seems
correct to some extent in case of the Santhal Hool. During the climax of
the Hool they forewarned their enemies by sending the leaves of Sal tree.
However, the crimes committed before the beginning of the Hool namely
the different dacoities in 1854 cannot be explained through this
paradigm as these were by nature secretive and committed during the
nights. They may be a form of social protest, but not an insurgent
activity.

“Solidarity” signifies unity. Often, ethnic solidarity was sought by the
leaders of the insurgents. An ethnic group could also define its identity
negatively by excluding the outsiders. Santhals did try to exclude all
non-Santhals except the service castes, who were in Jajmani relationship
with the Santhals like the Black smiths, Potters, Oilmen, etc., and the
remaining were considered as ‘Diku’ and the insurgent Santhals proved
too cruel to them.

“Transmission” was the means through which the messages of revolt
were circulated, either orally or by other non-verbal means. Some of the
usual signs were arrow, Sal branches and chapatis. Rumours also played
a significant role in the abetment of insurgency.

During the Santhal Hool, the rumours played a very important role. Just
prior to the outbreak of the Santhal rebellion in 1855, a rumour swept
through the Santhal villages warning the people that the Dikus are
coming. Similarly many other rumours spread during the Hool. Hence
the role of rumour in the Santhal Hool is accepted.

According to Guha “Territoriality” represents the localism of peasant
insurgencies – “It is made up of a sense of belonging to a common
lineage and common habitat, an intersection of two primordial referents
which.............. we shall call Territoriality” He further tells us that
there was an awareness of identity based on an “ethnic space”. This is a
strong feeling that the homeland of the tribe has been unjustly appropriated by the outsiders and it should be fully restored to it. This sense was also present in the Santhal Hool when they talked of their government. (Abuaraj). However, it must be pointed out here that ‘Damin-i-Koh’ or jungle Terrai was not the homeland of the Santhals. They came in this region as late as 1790s and their migration continued till the outbreak of the Hool.

Prof. Guha might not have been aware of this historical fact that ‘Damin-i-Koh’ was created for the protection of the Paharias and not the Santhals. The Santhals were treated as the newcomers and they were not covered by the special protective regulation for the native tribes (Regulation I of 1796 and Regulation I of 1827).

It was because of this fact that Santhals were treated as migrant new settlers. The British encouraged Santhals as they had expertise in cutting the forests and as such they expanded at the cost of the Paharias. Therefore, the argument of protecting the homeland does not hold good as far as the Santhal Hool is concerned.

It is thus apparent that the concept of elementary aspects of peasant insurgency as developed by Prof. Ranjit Guha cannot fully explain the nature of Santhal Hool as it was a complex phenomenon.

Dr. Kumar Suresh Singh has divided the tribal movements into three categories; the first phase, 1795 to 1860 has been termed as primary resistance movement, however he has “deliberately excluded” the Santhal Hool and has emphasized a re-assessment. According to Dr. Singh “it represented a transitional phase and partook of the characteristic of both resistance and agrarian-cum-revivalistic movements of the second phase 1860-1920."
This brings us at the concept of different types of social movements. Without going into the details of defining a social movement we are accepting a working definition given by L. K. Mahapatra; “A social movement covers a fairly large number of people or an otherwise indefinite segment of the population, deliberately bound together for collective action in order to alter, reconstitute, re-interpret, restore, protect, supplement or create some portions of their culture and social order, or to better their life chances by redistributing the power of control in a society. On the basis of different orientation to the existing social set-up, the movements may be reactionary, conservative, reversionary or revolutionary.”

When a social movement seeks to restore the golden past of a society, Cameron terms it as reactionary while Linton calls it revivalistic. The same term has been used by Stephen Fuchs.18 The Santhal Hool displayed these characteristics. Remembrance of their golden past, their imagined golden past was one of the causative factors. In this sense it was a revivalist movement. It also displayed nativism. Nativism means a conscious attempt on the part of a backward people to restore selected aspects of its pristine culture and to reject alien elements adopted from other cultures. Such movements arise chiefly out of a basic change in the way of life and thereby bringing unwanted obligation.19 After the setting up of ‘Damin-i-Koh’ such things did happen to the Santhals; a basic change came in the life pattern of the Santhals. From a wandering tribe, they transformed into settled cultivators. This change happened in the preceding fifty years of the Hool. The social tensions produced by this process of sudden change were one of the main causes leading to the outbreak of the Hool. The Santhals were overwhelmed in less than 50 years by a process that had developed in Europe for over a
period of centuries. It was not the Santhals who moved by stages into the complexities of the market economy rather the market economy and the colonial administrative structure engulfed the Santhals. In the span of a single generation, the Santhals were unable to adjust their role and moral goals to the demands of market economy. In face of the colonial rule, the danger of losing their cultural identity and values may have been felt along with economic exploitation. Therefore, the crisis of losing cultural identity was the primum mobile in the minds of the Santhals. Therefore, it is not surprising that the revolt quickly assumed the character of a millenarian or messianic movement with the promise that “true justice will be administered”. Thus, the Santhals provided themselves with a justification for their violence in their confrontation with the outsiders and the authorities.

Professor Rottger Hogan has surmised the concept of pollution and subsequent purification to explain the nature of the Hool. She has particularly referred to the incidents of rapes of Santhal women by the British Railway officials violating the purity of entire community and therefore the Santhal Hool as a rite of purification normally known as ‘Bitlaha’ among the Santhals. We also find many of the characteristics of Messianic movements in Santhal Hool. The Hool reflected emotional unrest with certain hysterical symptoms of cruelty and inhuman behavior; cutting of the body of Mahajans and others into several small pieces, etc.

Sidho and Kanhu appeared as a charismatic leader demanding and commanding unquestioned obedience form their followers. The movement also displayed religious overtones. Therefore, we may conclude the discussion with our humble submission that the Santhal
Hool was a complex phenomenon and its re-assessment is quite in the fitness of the things.

The period following the Santhal Rebellion was not entirely peaceful. The Santhal Parganas district slowly began to slide back into the regulation system and the privileges of the Santhals began once more to be taken away from them. At the outset, the Act XXXVII of 1855, which set up the district of the Santhal Parganas was largely amended by Act X to Z in May 1857, resulting in the considerably reduced size of the district. This was done however, on the representations of the European Indigo Planters, Zamindars and Raiyats who pointed out that the designation of their area into a non-regulation district of Santhal Parganas was improper, since the santhals were not the majority group inhabiting the area. Various decisions were taken by the government during the middle and late 1860's, which did affect the working of administrative and agrarian procedures in the Santhal Parganas increasingly similar to those employed in the “Regulation” districts in the plains. The reasons for the government's neglect of the Santhal Parganas can also be traced to the role of the Santhals in the Mutiny of 1857, the growing bureaucratization of the administration throughout India and the volume of litigation and paper-work in the Santhal Parganas. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal accepted the Advocate General’s opinion that there was no reason to exempt the district from the operation of any general law passed after 1855. As a result, the Santhals were made to pay ever increasing rents, many of their village headmen were dismissed and a lot of rent-free land was seized by the rapacious landlords. Santhal village headmen were no longer recognized and consequently had no rights to their lands and many of them including those who refused to collect increased levels of rent were
evicted by landlords. Some of the Courts also ordered such evictions and rent enhancements. Many of the new landlords were dikus, land speculators and moneylenders who belonged to North Bihar and Bengal. They had swarmed the district due to the opening of new roads and were more than willing to lend money to the spendthrift Santhals in exchange of their lands. Though the Kamiotee system of bondage was abolished, the government neither curtailed the high rates of interest nor made arrangements for cheap agricultural credit to the Santhals, who had no option but to resort to the moneylenders’ again.26

The failure of the rebellion was still fresh in the minds of the Santhals and they realized that the path to better economic conditions through militant methods was closed and they could not openly revolt against the British or those whom they supported tacitly. This realization was the beginning of a new consciousness which manifested itself in another socio-political religious movement called the “Kherwar Movement”. The movement was motivated by the desire to return to an idolized past of the tribal independence and glory that was celebrated in the Santhal myths. Skrefsrud asserted that the Santhals yearned for the restoration of their golden era, when they lived in “Champa” in absolute independence and had no rent or tribute to pay but only to bring a small offering to pay to their leaders.27

To delve into the origin and nature of the Khewar movement, one has to pay particular attention to the economic, political and socio-religious conditions in the Santhal Parganas district during the late nineteenth century. The patterns of agrarian change and an account of agrarian relations are important in explaining the movement for several reasons. Firstly, the tribal economy in the nineteenth century was based on settled rice cultivation with minor exceptions. Therefore, the nature of the land
tenures had a great impact on the nature of the political resources available to them. Secondly, a major issue in the Kherwar movement was diku's destruction of the adivasis' generally free and equal rights of access to land. Thirdly, the various ways in which British administrators approached the problem of alienation of tribal land significantly affected the objectives and the activities of the movements. Fourthly, agrarian relations did much to shape the class structures of Santhal Parganas district and thus influenced the kinds of allies and adversaries encountered by the Kherwar movement.

In the late nineteenth century, information on Santhal Parganas is more or less contemporary due to the various settlements implemented between 1856 and 1895. All Santhals in the Santhal Parganas district paid quite heavy rents to some kind of landlord. Landlords in Santhal Parganas did not have any privileged lands on which they could levy labour dues. Many Hindus were tenants especially outside the Damin-i-Koh which was a government estate and is often impossible to determine from records whether tenants are Santhals or Hindus, but in the rest of the Santhal Parganas, there were only private landlords.

Between 1865 and 1871, landlords and their agents in the non-Damin part of the Santhal Parganas also known as the Zamindari (revenue farmer) tract used various devices to evict Santhal Tenants. Evictions were facilitated by the tendency to apply the ordinary laws of Bengal to the Santhal Parganas during this period. Thus leases were sometimes cancelled by landlords before they expired and rents were raised with each new lease and the Santhals had to accept the new leases or leave their holdings. When rents were not paid, crops and personal property were often seized. Landlords often replaced Santhal village headman by more pliant non-adivasis, who then intimidated whole villages into
paying increased rents. Diku moneylenders imposed harsh debt burdens on their Santhal debtors and often used the courts to gain legal title to their tenants’ possessions, especially after the intermediaries were reinstated in the courts and other administrative changes were introduced. The rates of interest were no longer limited after 1859. The reforms of 1872 removed or mitigated many of these abuses. The land settlement of 1872-78, reinstated many tenants as well as recorded the names of displaced tenants and their rights to their holdings. Many disputes arose about the distribution of rents to the various tenants in a village, and presumably also about the sizes of tenant’s holdings. The Settlement Officers resolved many of the disputes themselves. In the second land settlement of 1888-94, the holdings of each tenant were accurately measured by the settlement staffs.

Tenants who were recognized under the Settlement Regulation of 1872 were considered to have occupancy rights as defined by the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1859. Landlord’s distrait of crops for arrears of rent was restricted under this Act. Lawsuits regarding rent arrears were rare after 1872, until in 1882, such suits were reported to be increasing in number due to probably the growth of land alienation in the early eighteen-eighties.

Throughout the period 1858-95, the Santhals wanted credit, which the moneylenders were only too glad to give. After 1872, tenants had security of tenure, so they now accepted tenants’ land as collateral. These money lenders were in practice able to charge more than the maximum rates of interest laid down in the Settlement Regulation, and to trick their debtors into incurring larger debts than originally agreed on. So in a few years, many Santhals had accumulated an almost unbearable burden. Debtors often signed bonds for both the principal and the accrued
interest, but did not know that this was considered the new principal. The courts held that since rented holdings were secure, they could be sold if tenants defaulted on their debts. However, when constrained to sell their lands to pay their debts, the Santhals usually preferred to sell them to their creditors privately, as they thought they would obtain a lower price for their land from a court-ordered sale. As such, sales of land increased markedly during the eighteen-seventies and eighteen-eighties which is evident from the fact that registered land sales grew nearly ten-fold between 1873/74 and 1878/79. Between 1873 and 1887, about half the cultivable land in the non-Damin portion of the Santhal Parganas was sold frequently by Santhals.32

A graphic example of land sales is the following which occurred in 1886:

Dasu Manjhi was the pradhan (village headman) and settlement leaseholder…. His grandfather had created the village for Zamindar (Landlord) whose custom it was to grant six years leases with an increased jama (village rent) of about Rs. (rupees) 20 each time. Five years before the settlement, Dasu had succeeded his father, paying a Salami (fee) of Rs. 900 to his Zamindar, his rent being Rs. (rupees) 170. One year of his lease remained unexpired when the settlement raised his rent to Rs. 535. The village was a fine one… Dasu was a well-to-do yeoman. Either at this time, or subsequently, the Zamindar handed the village over to an izaradar (rent farmer), and some eight years after settlement, Dasu was sued for the current rent, the amount of the claim being Rs. 129. Dasu begged for time but the court sternly refused to grant his prayer.
His nij jote (private lands) were sold up for Rs. 100, which was less than the amount of the claim, and was purchased by a bhagat (North Indian), who then became the real head of what had hitherto been a pure Santhali community village. There still being a small balance due on the decree, Dasu struggled on for another year on the strength of his commission as the village pradhan and then in despair surreptitiously sold his office ... to a Moira or Halwai (member of the Sweet meat making caste) thus introducing a second foreigner. Dasu… is now living as a hired labourer in the house of one of his own ryots.\textsuperscript{33}

For most Santhals the process of land alienation apparently ended when they became sharecroppers paying rents at the rate of half the produce. This system known as bhaoli, was highly profitable to the new landowners, and more lucrative than renting out land for cash rents. Between 1884 and 1886, government policies concerning land alienation appeared likely to change, which gave rise to widespread Santhal agitation. In 1886, the authorities banned the sale of land unless it had been declared saleable in the settlement records. When the courts started reviewing land sales, many who had recently obtained land returned them for fear of court scrutiny. After 1886, land alienation took new forms. Thereafter, the trend towards land alienation was halted to some extent, but land transfers continued, in disguised forms.\textsuperscript{34}

Some tenants, including the Santhals, took on subtenants or became subtenants themselves, subtenants generally paid rents in kind at the rate of half of the produce as in the bhaoli system. So rental rates were higher on sublet lands than on others, and holdings were probably smaller and
subtenants seemed to enjoy considerable security of tenure. Nonetheless, abuses occurred on sublet land. One moneylender induced some subtenants to sell to him, and proceeded to impose rentals of half of the crop as the tenant’s share, and most of the remainder as his share.\textsuperscript{35} Agrarian conditions in the Damin-i-koh, the government estate was closer to the traditional Santhal pattern than the rest of the Santhal Parganas. Fixed rents and security of tenure were guaranteed to the Santhals in the Damin-i-Koh throughout 1858-95. Starting in 1856-58, three settlements were conducted in the Damin in a rough- and-ready manner, rents were distributed in a village by an assembly, and no difficulties arose as they did outside the Damin. Thus the Settlement Regulation of 1872 had no great significance for the Damin. Nevertheless, in the last forty years of the nineteenth century, dikus flooded into the Damin-i-Koh and succeeded in alienating some Santhal lands through a process similar to that occurring outside the Damin despite governmental efforts. By 1878, some Santhals were working as hired labourers for dikus on what had previously been their own land. However, in the late eighteen-seventies most of the land in the Damin apparently remained in Santhal hands.\textsuperscript{36} To a great extent the issues concerning access to land did arise in the Kherwar movement as reflected in various unrests in the late nineteenth century. Outside the Damin-i-Koh, severe land alienation prompted the unrest of 1871-72. The Santhals hoped to have all their land restored by the settlement of 1872-78 and continued to seek the restoration of alienated lands after 1872 and further in 1884-86 seized on a perceived change in government policy to recover land sold under pressure.\textsuperscript{37} However, the problem of access to land was probably seen by the Santhals as less acute in the Damin-i-Koh than in the rest of the Santhal
Parganas. For, although agrarian issues were brought up in the Damin briefly in the 1880-81 unrest, yet it was not affected by the larger agitations that broke out in 1871-72 and 1884-85 to restore alienated lands. The settlement of the Damin in 1868 initially aroused considerable excitement among the Santhals, but they were reassured when senior local officers explained matters.

The process that led to evictions of tenants during this period (1856-71) also led to increased disparities between rent levels in different areas as the rents outside the Damin-i-Koh rose markedly. When rent levels were set, no reference was ever made to the levels obtaining in the Damin or to rents for non-equivalent types of land. Santhals often moved to the Damin-i-Koh from other areas partly because rents were lower in the Damin and tribals were being replaced in those areas by non-tribal tenants willing to pay the enhanced rents.

The nature of the Kherwar movement can also be gauged through the settlement of 1872-78 which reduced the rates of rent at times and also through the inequalities in rents between the different areas, which remained, as reported by Carstairs himself, who had served for many years as Deputy Commissioner of the Santhal Parganas. Some thirty years after the settlement he described how the settlement had been performed.

The main object of the settlement was to settle. Accuracy was not as important as finality. It had to be carried out cheaply, for in the first place, the government was bearing the expense, and secondly, the rates of rent were too low to justify the cost of a detailed survey.

A survey involved a swarm of surveyors and blackmail. The Santhals, moreover, were opposed to a survey. No such thing had yet been ventured on, even in the Damin. For all these reasons, it was thought
better to make an honest guess, at the risk of being wrong, and stick to it, than to involve everyone in great expense, cause great delay, and incur much odium in the attempt of ascertain the exact truth by a survey.….

The record of rights was conclusive proof of any fact stated in it. There was for each village a separate record, of which a copy was given to the landlord, and another to the head of the village. For every village a rent-roll was ordered to be prepared, distributing among the tenants the lump-rent fixed by the settlement officer. For this purpose, the law required that the village panchayat (assembly) should be appointed. In a great many villages of Godda (subdivision) the plan broke down owing to the refusal of the villagers to serve in the panchayats. Mr. Fredrick Grant, the sub divisional officer, was accordingly deputed to frame rent-rolls for those villages.

Many years later when the settlement expert of the government was in Dumka, in connection with a revision of this first settlement, he would not believe for a long time that there were no survey records of the settlement and in despair he asked if there was not still in the district someone connected with the settlement who could give information on the point. No one, he was told but Mr. Grant. So Mr. Grant was consulted.

Mr. Grant: “Not exactly, but I framed rent-rolls”.
Expert: “And there were papers?”
Mr. Grant: “Yes”.
Expert: “At last I have something tangible! Where are the papers?”
Mr. Grant: “There are none now”.
Expert: “Why, what did you do with them?”
Mr. Grant: “I burned them all”.

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Expert “Burned them! Monstrous! What on earth made you do such a thing so outrageous?”

Mr. Grant: “My orders were to do nothing to discredit the settlement, and my figures came out so different from the settlement figures that I burned them to save the credit of the settlement.”

Clearly, in the interests of finality, this was the right thing to do.\(^40\)

The rent settlement of 1872-78 increased landlords’ total rentals by ten percent without raising the burden on tenants. Since the private taxes paid to the landlords probably fell as a result of the settlement. However, between 1878 and 1888, many tenants became sharecroppers or subtenants paying higher rents because of indebtedness and land alienation.\(^41\) However, in the portion of the Santhal Parganas that was covered by the second settlement of 1888-94, rents per acre were probably reduced by that settlement.

Lands were frequently cleared or improved by Santhals, and they were given occupancy rights to those lands at reduced rent levels after 1872.\(^42\) Although rents were also reduced by the settlement of 1872-78 outside the Damin, the reduction was less than thirty percent. So the settlements of the eighteen-seventies widened the disparity in rent levels between the Damin-i-Koh and the rest of the district. However, in the following two decades the disparity did not increase.\(^43\) Though the rents in the Damin were payable in cash in 1878-79, under previous settlements they were payable in kind.

It is likely that the government’s various agrarian actions after 1872 led tenants to feel independent of their landlords. Santhal villagers seem to have become more individualistic in their economic relations with each other. This tendency was aided by the British policies of granting tenants
the occupancy rights, and of diminishing the role of village-headmen in determining villagers’ rents. Robberies of land and lawsuits over land became more widespread. Even though Santhals continued to work together on various tasks, they demanded higher payments for their efforts.44

Santhals frequently complained about the levels of rents during outbreaks of Santhal unrest and in times of calm, in and out of Damin. Many Santhals were unwilling to accept the general principle of paying rents for access to their lands. Organized refusals to pay rent were more sporadic.

Access to forest caused some dissatisfaction among Santhals in late nineteenth century. The issue came up in 1881 during the disturbances at Nunihat just outside the Damin-i-Koh as forest products were very important in the Santhal economy. Between 1858 and 1895, outside the Damin, Landlords raised the cost of tenants’ access to forest. In the Damin, where most of the forest in Santhal Parganas are located, the authorities tried to prevent deforestation and control Santhal’s use of forest but these efforts met with little success and in 1880 Santhals were found to be cutting down more than the permitted amount of timber.45

The state thus sought to preserve and protect Santhal society in a multitude of ways in the Santhal Parganas. In several respects the state’s position hampered officials’ efforts to protect Santhals’ land rights’ as some of the laws and regulations were inconsistent with each other. They increasingly favoured dikus before 1871, though the balance was somewhat redressed in favour of the Santhals in 1872, the application of the Bengal Rent Act of 1859 to Santhal occupancy rights contributed to the alienation of Santhal lands in the late 1870s and early 1880s. The government, however, felt that the reforms of the eighteen-seventies met
all the Santhals’ agrarian demands and that if new agrarian grievances arose, the Santhals should bring them to the authorities and accept whatever decision was made. The government’s response did not always contribute to the strengthening of traditional Santhal land tenures as reflected in the land settlements outside the Damin-i-Koh that tended to take away the authority of the village assemblies to determine individuals’ rent levels and transferred it to officials.46

Emigration was recommended as a major solution to the Santhals’ land problems which was inconsistent with protecting Santhals in their own homes. Education also received less emphasis here as a way to improve their living conditions.47 Officials often deliberately limited their concessions to the Santhals in order to prevent non-adivasis and Santhals living outside the Santhal Parganas from making their own demands. They also encouraged the commercial use of forests and agricultural improvements like irrigation but did not encourage cash crops as they did in Ranchi. It was commonly felt that money lenders should be allowed to operate in Santhal Parganas since the Santhals found them indispensable. Policies like this undermined the Santhal’s economic self-sufficiency and raised rent levels.48 The government made few efforts in Santhal Parganas to protect traditional laws. Laws, rather than persuasion were employed to make the dikus mend their ways and Santhals were never told that dikus had prescriptive land rights.49

The significance of the movement is also linked to the Adivasis’ living standards. How well did the Santhals lived off their cultivated lands and the forests, after deducting the landlords’ and the government’s impositions? The factors such as the quality of land in the Santhal Parganas, area of typical adivasis’ land-holdings and other traditional economic resources as well as traditional alternatives like clearing of
new lands should be taken into consideration to answer the question. Debt was another important aspect of adivasis’ living standard. There is no precise information on the amount of indebtedness among the Santhals. Bonded labour service by defaulting creditors was no longer hereditary after 1858. However, it is likely that despite the government’s strenuous efforts, the burden of debt hardly diminished between 1872 and 1895. As a Santhal put it to the missionary Skrefsrud in about 1870: Nowadays people of both sexes... do not press oil, neither do they prepare salt; they do not weave much cloth either; they buy everything; thereby we Santhals are becoming poor, and we are becoming deeply involved in debt to the moneylenders ... By constantly paying to the moneylenders, we become numb; still the debt never comes to an end ... But there is fault also on our side. Foolishly, the Santhals run into the hands of the usurers; whether they will be able to pay back or not, this they do not think of, and when they have what is needed to pay with, they will not pay at once; consequently interest upon interest is heaped up; there upon the moneylender comes and carries all and everything away. And in the present age, many Santhals also deceitfully cheat the usurers and moneylenders of what is their right.

It appears that after 1872, the main effect of serious indebtedness was to turn many Santhals into share-cropping tenants of their creditors which was probably less onerous than debt servitude. The issue of indebtedness was raised in the unrest of 1871-72, and in 1872-73 some Santhals actually repudiated their debts. However, after 1872, there are no recorded instances of Santhals concertedly refusing to pay their debts or demanding the enforcement of credit regulations. Santhals probably tended to have better high yielding low lands and valley-floor lands in the Damin-i-Koh that were said to be very fertile.
The average cultivated holding of a tenant was estimated to be five acres in the non-Damin tract covered by the settlement of 1888-94 which probably approximated quite closely to the average Santhal holding. However, in Damin the average holding was nine and half acres, according to the settlement of 1895-97. Rents in the Damin were typically half those outside the Damin. Rents constituted only about one-sixteenth of the value of agricultural produce in the Damin. However, famines occurred between 1858 and 1895 in the Santhal Parganas; the famine of 1874 being especially severe.

Forest resources were seriously depleted in the late nineteenth century. Clearing of new lands was a welcome relief to the hard-pressed adivasis. In Santhal Parganas as a whole, the cultivated area rose by 84 percent between 1880 and 1910, where as in Damin area it rose only by about 36 percent. There are no figures on changes in the forested area of the Santhal Parganas. But we may assume that the rate of deforestation varied inversely with the rate of extension of cultivation. It seems that some Santhals took refuge from their agrarian troubles by cutting down the forests. A few Santhals moved to the Damin from outside before 1872, partly to escape from the high rates of rent prevailing in the rest of the Santhal Parganas, this being the only case of Santhals moving onto virgin lands to escape the oppressions of landlords or moneylenders. The Santhals probably cleared forests for new settlements apparently because of population pressure rather than harassment by landlords. The Santhals in the Damin-i-Koh fared much better than those in other parts of Santhal Parganas. The Damin was a large compact area with the government as landlord and the Santhals made hardly any efforts to extend the Damin-i-Koh system to the rest of the district. In the Santhal Parganas, the government’s measures to deal with the land question were more
effective as they saw government agrarian reforms as a direct response to adivasi pressure as the authorities here, were less constrained by loyalties to non-tribal groups.

The trends discussed also help explain the nature of the Kherwar movement. In the Santhal Parganas traditional Santhal land rights were more effectively and evenly preserved, so these rights were somewhat less of an issue in the Kherwar movement and the Santhals’ poverty made it harder for them to sustain a risky agrarian movement that is why perhaps religious revitalization movement combined with the agrarian issues in the background.

The Kherwar movement continued in different forms and there are great differences in its estimation as a political or a religious movement. There is little doubt that many administrators and missionaries estimated the early phase of the Kherwar movement in 1870s and early 1880s as a dangerous political movement. This is expressed in administrative reports, and letters from the missionaries to the authorities and the newspapers.

In 1874, the Kherwars were strongly opposing the Christian missions and the Church Mission Society (CMS) missionary Rev. A. Stark stressed that the Government should found Christian schools to fight the opposition and in the autumn 1880, Rev. Skrebrud observed that the Kherwars propagated “a rabid, socialistic, political agitation, the religion being only a means towards an end”.55 When one considers the situation of the census operations at that time, it is understandable that he considered the movement as political. Other observers had, however, already pointed to the fact that parts of the movement had turned its focus towards more mild aspects of religious life.
The Kherwar movement among the Santhals was a great social and political upsurge in Santhal Parganas. The Santhal rebellion had promised a brighter future for the Santhals. The British authorities then had assured them a fair deal but the authorities did not fulfill their assurances and the Santhals had no way but to resort to another movement which was led by Bhagirath Manjhi. The movement had religious, political and agrarian character. Kherwars talked of committing violent acts on many occasions. However, actual violent acts were rare. Many of the Kherwars who met British officials in opposition to the census operations carried sticks but they hardly ever owned firearms.

The Kherwar movement under Bhagirath was a religious revitalization movement. Bhagirath and his followers were deeply impressed with Hinduism and felt no difference between Ram and Chando. There are number of instances of syncretism between Santhal religion and culture and Hinduism as well as Christianity, but the meaning of the variations in religion were dependent on a time specific political programme for the empowerment of the Santhals. Theologically, Bhagirath explained that the Hool (Santhal rebellion of 1855) had failed due to the fact that Santhals had had intercourse with non-Santhal women. Bhagirath and his new sect have been orderly and quiet; they had formed themselves into a separate community who won’t eat, drink or intermarry with the other Santhals and in their religious and domestic practices were more and more approximating to the Hindus and may almost be regarded as belonging to that religion. Kherwars’ preaching of repentance is seen as just another formulation of the Christian message of repentance. Bhagirath and his followers claimed that they had communications with the spirits of Sidho and Kanhu, the leaders of the Hool. Bhagirath
prophesied that on a given day he would offer himself in a sacrifice and disappear in the Kundali Tank. The people flocked around carrying presents of money and cloth. On the given day, he went to the tank and having taken a sheep in his arms entered the water and after swimming for a long time, the sheep drowned and he benumbed with the coldness of the water came out of water and has not been heard of thereafter. He is hiding his diminished head and enjoying the profits of his lies. This did give Kherwarism a very severe shock in that neighbourhood. This was a typical governmental version of the Kherwar movement.

The Kherwar movement was also an agrarian movement. The introduction of the permanent settlement in Santhal Parganas, shattered the traditional socio-economic and religio-political structure of the Santhals and they yearned to redress the mischief done to them by the indigenous as well as alien rapacious elements. The Kherwar movement was a typical product of scarcity and famine like situation in Santhal Parganas. In order to exploit the situation more subtly, Bhagirath provided the movement with socio-religious base and laid stress on purity. His movement had a keen resemblance with the sanskritization movements which clearly sent the message to the Santhals that if they wished to get rid of the exploiters, they would have to adhere to the concept of purity as enunciated by Hinduism. Thus, we see the strong socio-religious overtones in the Kherwar movement.

The Kherwar movement was decidedly against the mass conversion of Santhals to Christianity. The Christian Santhals did not take active part in the agrarian, religious and political movements. This was much due to the hostility between the Kherwars and the Christian Santhals. Members of various low castes joined the Kherwar movement and added a strong subaltern bias to the movement. The movement did not attract
the upper sections of the society. Traditional landlords were at best neutral to the movement. The dikus also responded to the movement in much the same way as the traditional landlords. That is why we find not much of anti-diku strain in the movement. However, before 1872, the dikus reacted to any Santhal agrarian unrest by deposing the militant headman and villagers, complaints of law suits and singled out Kherwar leaders for special treatment. Dikus rarely acceded to Santhal agrarian demands but became alarmed whenever any unrest broke out. Shopkeepers and moneylenders ran away from the Santhal Parganas district in the agitations of 1871-72.

The Kherwar movement had anti-British and government stance as well. The anti-colonial discourse in it is very much explicit. The movement posed a serious challenge to the British rule by challenging the census operations work being conducted by the government. Kherwar leaders and their followers frequently asserted that they would not obey British authorities. The meaning of this threat took concrete shape only in the resistance to the census of 1881. This was very well reflected in their attitude to defy the British authority. The followers of Bhagirath and Dubia did not deposit the land revenue with the state exchequer or with the revenue officials rather they deposited the sum with Bhagirath and declared him their king. However, anti-British and government stance was differential in character when it came to Damin and non-Damin portions of the Santhal Parganas.

The Kherwar movement was not violent. The leaders abjured violence as the means to their end. The broad goal was to restore those aspects of the pre-British isolated and egalitarian tribal society and solidarity which seemed most threatened by external forces. In the Kherwar movement, it was the adoption of new religious beliefs and rituals in an attempt to
purify Santhal society that was accompanied on occasions by direct
calls to the British authority.
The Kherwar movement had what Ralph Linton termed both revivalistic
and perpetrating features. The Kherwar movement was a revitalization
movement in Wallace's scheme since it was a conscious reconstruction
of the entire Santhal culture. However, the movement also continued
with many imported Christian and probably most importantly Hindu
elements. Wallace argues that movements that purportedly only revive
an old culture, in fact contain many imported elements and the Kherwar
movement bears him out since it contained many imported (Christian &
Hindu but not Muslims) elements.
The Kherwar movement happened to lie at the initial stage of the
articulation between the Capitalistic mode and pre or non-Capitalistic
modes of production. At this time, the two modes were in conflict, and
perhaps the Capitalist mode used the peasant mode to overcome the
resistance to Capitalism offered by the resilient tribal mode. The
Kherwar movement was indeed a mass movement as reflected by its
participation and the temporal and spatial duration and diffusion. It also
had millennial strains with reformist tendencies.
REFERENCES:


2. Ibid, p. 67.


5. The first reference to Jharkhand could be traced to a copper plate inscription of the 13th century, see N. N. Basu’s article in Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal vol.–XVI, Part-I to IV 1869. pp. 256-57.


16. Sutherland’s Report, 1819. Sutherland was the Magistrate at Bhagalpur who was appointed to enquire into the mal-administration in Jungle-Terrai. He submitted his report to W. B. Bay, Secretary to the Government in the Judicial Department Fort William on 8th of June 1819; a copy is available in West Bengal Archives Calcutta. A xerox copy is with Dr. Surendra Jha that has been used, Para-134.


22. Rottger Hogan op. cit. pp.82-3.


34. Carstairs, R., op.cit. p. 262.


42. Craven, J., op.cit. p. 529.
44. Bodding, P. O., op.cit. pp. 95, 107-9, 131.
52. Bodding, P. O., op.cit. p. 115.
56. Ibid, p.111.
57. Bengal judicial proceedings/1648, August 1881. Deputy Commissioner Santhal Parganas District notes.