

# Nineteenth Century Santals Migration to Assam – Colonial State, Marginalisation and Christian Missionaries

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## Introduction

The Assamese Society has emerged as a multi ethnic, multi racial, multi lingual, multi religious society. At different times many different ethnic groups came to Assam and so, sociologically speaking, Assam has been extraordinarily plural in its composition and highly uneven in structure. Among these groups, the Santals in Assam stand foremost. The Santals of Assam could be divided into two groups – the tea labour including ex-tea labour and ordinary peasants. The Santals of Lower Assam are basically ordinary peasants. These Santals were ex-displaced of colonial regime from erstwhile Chotanagpur region. European colonization and introduction of new land tenure system profoundly affected the socio-economic life of these tribal people. They were forced to leave their traditional homeland namely Chotanagpur by the colonial socio-economic policy. The grim situation was exploited by the *arkuttis* and these helpless peasants were encouraged to join tea plantation, the new venture of British capital. Some of them chose Assam as their destination. Unlike the *arkuttis* or labour supplying agents, here the Christian missionaries played important role in their migration to Lower Assam as ordinary peasants. The paper is an endeavour to reconstruct the colonial context of Santals migration to Assam towards the last two decades of nineteenth century and the role of missionaries in the process. Besides an attempt will also be made to focus on the process of marginalization of the Santals during colonial and post colonial period.

## Historical Background of Santals in Chotanagpur

Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* has located 'the Santals in a strip of Bengal extending for about 350 miles from Ganga to Baitarani bisected by the meridian of Bhagalpur or 87<sup>o</sup> east longitude and comprising the following districts of Bhagalpur: the santal Pargana, Birbhum, Bankura, Hazaribagh, Manbhum, Singhbhum, Mayurbhanj and

Bafosore.<sup>1</sup> The Santal traditions represents themselves as a race wandering from one country to another until they reached Chotanagpur, their traditional homeland. Thus the ancestors of the Santals were living on the Chotanagpur plateau about six hundred years ago and they had at that time been living there for many generations.<sup>2</sup> B.S.Guha observed that from the Santals physical character they can be classified as belonging to Proto-Austoroloid group. Ward observed 'their habits and customs are singular, they are of no caste, extremely hardy and industrious and are upon the whole considered an extraordinary race of being.'<sup>3</sup> The Santals are known for their art of land reclamation. Gradually the Santals had made their way further north into the forest below the hills of the Godda Sub-division and into the Damin-i-Koh. By 1827 the Santals had got as far as the extreme north of the Godda Sub-division. Mr. Ward when demarcating the Damin-i-Koh found three Santal villages in Patsurda and 27 villages in Barkop. The Government demarcated area surrounding Rajmahal Hills and comprising, 1, 366 square miles, Damini-i-Koh which literally means 'the skirts of the hills.' The idea behind this move was to declare this hill tract, occupied by the Tribals, the property of government. Lord William Bentick's government encouraged the Santals to settle in the newly formed district. During the next fifteen years they moved to this region in such great numbers that the population of the area increased manifold. They emigrated from their own country to those districts which are known to be most forested and where they were welcomed by the Zamindars to settle. By 1851 Damin had 83,265 Santals and it increased to 4, 55,513 in 1872, 6, 17,150 in 1891 and 6, 63,471 in 1901. The Damin soon became the centre of Santal lives. In 1838 the annual ground rent of the Damin was amounted to 2000 rupees and number villages rose to 1, 473 with the annual rent more then 43, 918 rupees.<sup>4</sup>

### **Colonial State and Marginalisation of Santals**

The rosy prospects of Damin-i-Koh were not destined to last long. The area soon fell into the clutches of the *diku* or *mahajan*, money lenders from the plains. The coming of the colonial rule and its concomitant land revenue policy had adverse impact on the socio economic life of these tribal people. It would be worth mentioning that before the commencement of the foreign rule internal colonialism had developed in the region. The tribal land alienation of the region was earlier by non tribal Jagirdars who acted as intermediaries between the cultivators

and the Raja. In 1765 the Mughal emperor, Shah Alam granted Chotanagpur to British East India Company as part of the Diwani of Bengal. "Chotanagpur which up to the seventeenth century was predominantly an egalitarian society now got sharply divided along class lines into producers of surplus and appropriators of surplus."<sup>5</sup> The British regime had widened the class cleavage. The Permanent settlement of Bengal (1793) had gradually penetrated into the Tribal region and brought new waves of non tribals into the area as police, revenue and forest officials. In pre-colonial period, though the area was under the Mughal rule but no attempt was made by the Mughals to exercise direct control over the area. The intermediaries became owners, many tribals were ejected from their tenancies. There emerged two systems of bondage – the *Damin-kamiotee* and *harwahee*. In the former system a man borrowed money binding himself to work without pay for the money lenders whenever required till the loan was repaid. Under the *harwahee*, the borrower had in addition to personal service, to plough the mahajans fields whenever required till his loan was repaid. Thus it was almost impossible for the borrower to repay loan, as he did not have enough time to plough his own field. A Santal 'saw his crops, his cattle even himself and family appropriate for debt which ten times paid remained an in cubes upon him still'.<sup>6</sup> A group of rich money lenders had sprang up that contributed towards the land alienation and pauperization of the Santals. 'Zamindars or more properly speaking the zamindars retainers, as *gomasta*, *Surarakar*, peon and their *mustajirs* or agents, the police the revenue and court *amalas* have exercised a combined system of extortions, oppressive exactions, forcible dispossession of property, abuse and personal violence and variety of petty tyranny upon the timid yielding Santals. Usurious interest of loans of money ranging from 50 to 500 percent, fake measures at the haut and market' were very common as *Calcutta Review* reflects.<sup>7</sup>

Besides, the colonial rule brought forest resources under its clutches through new forest policies. The resource management policy of the British was guided by three principles (which marked in many ways a paradigm shift) – primacy of commercial over subsistence uses, the delegitimisation of the community rights and the abandoning of restraints on resources exploitation.<sup>8</sup> The first Forest Act (1864) allowed large areas of forest to be demarcated as reserve forest in which the govt. became the sole authority. The state assumed a new role, it intervened in the day to day life of the tribals to an unprecedented level, depriving them of their traditional right over forest. The Santals collected larger part of

their day to day requirement from forest. All these added to their miseries and impoverishment.

It would be worthwhile to mention here that the deprivation of Santals of their traditional right over land, exploitation by the *Diku* eventually led to the great Santal Insurrection of 1855. The insurrection was not a mere spasmodic outburst of the crude instincts of the semi-savage Santals but the outcome of 'long course of oppression silently and patiently submitted by these unsophisticated people unaccustomed to fight for their rights in the legitimate ways of their neighbours.'<sup>9</sup> The Santal insurrection led to large scale mass mobilization under the leadership of Kanhu and Sidhu and they resorted to violence. The colonial state followed ruthless measures including using elephants against them to suppress the uprising. Eventually they brought the situation under control and followed a policy to displace Santals from their homeland namely the Damin. The crushing defeat must have left them dejected and demoralized. Thus in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Santals in Chotanagpur and Santal Pargana dispossessed of their traditional land and forest stood alienated. It is not surprising that alienated from their traditional land by non tribals under the patronage of colonial state many of them would have looked for a new home outside the Damin for themselves. Apart from colonial policy of marginalization of the Santals the unprecedented drought and famines of 1851, 1865, 1877, 1892 and 1908 forced large number of Santals to leave Damin-i-Koh towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Santals Migration and the European Missionaries**

"The colonial system which helped deprive them of their land and traditional employment was also the one that provided them with alternative employment. On examining the functioning of colonial system one finds that there is nothing paradoxical about the two opposite roles of 'depriver' and 'provider' played by the colonial system of India. Indeed it is the essence of the colonial system"<sup>10</sup> Besides being recruited to the plantations by the *arkuttis* large number of Santals were encouraged to settle as ordinary peasants, where land was abundant. The colonial state was interested in additional land revenue. Apart from the *arkuttis*, the European Missionaries played an important role in the Santal migration to other parts from erstwhile Chotanagpur region. In the post Santal insurrection period, Chotanagpur and the adjoining hill districts of Bengal

became studded with Missions. "The political aspects of this work is that rude tribes have been taught the value of British contact and civilization and together with the policy of favourable and special treatment of aborigines and converted Christian aborigines this made aboriginal discontent a very remote possibility".<sup>11</sup> The Christian missionaries in colonial India associated themselves with various reform movements against social taboos, introduction of western education, establishment of schools and colleges. Rev. Jermiah Philips first established a Primary School in 1845. The schools started by Re. E. Droese in 1850 at Bhagalpur became prominent institutions in the region. "Mr. G. Yule, the British commissioner at Bhagalpur, noticed that the Santals who had attended the missions school did not take part in the rebellion".<sup>12</sup> Therefore during the post rebellion period the colonial government encouraged missionaries to establish more schools in newly formed Santal Pargana district. The Christian missionaries immensely contributed towards the language of the Santals. They were the first to study and promote Santal language. P.O. Bodding's *Material for a Santali Grammer* (1923-29) is still considered as the best source for the study of their language. The missionaries besides playing pioneering role in spreading education among he Santals also established number of hospitals and dispensaries. It would be worth mentioning that the impact of Hinduism was felt several centuries before, while Christianity is a relatively new force in the region. The missionaries gave much importance to the world of peasants and tribals.

In the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century the American Free Will Baptist Mission first started regular work among the Santals. The Church Missionary Society of England was the next to take up work among the Santals. Rev.E.Droese, a German Missionary started worked among the Mal Paharies at Bhagalpur in the beginning of 1850. As we have mentioned earlier that the missionary activities among the Santals started after the Santal insurrection. Rev.E.L.Puxley and Rev. W.T. Storrs of the Church Missionary Society started their activity in the northern part of the Santal pargana district. On 26 September 1867 Mr. Borreson, a Dane and Lara Olsen Skrefsrud, a Norwegian began their activity at Benagaria in Dumka sub-division of Santal Pargana under the Indian Home Mission to Santals.<sup>13</sup> The missionaries in Chotanagpur, Santal pargana, Orissa and various other missions in India considered migration as one of the means to release the tension of poverty stricken rural India, arising out of the oppression of the landlords and money lenders in the given colonial frame work.<sup>14</sup> The Royal Commission on Labour in India 1930 revealed the facts

that the missionaries told their people to go to other places for employment rather than to starve in their own place. Rev. Isaac Row, secretary Anglo Evangelization society wrote in the Englishman "there are tens of thousands, half starved in the over crowded districts of Bengal and elsewhere, who should be encouraged and helped to emigrate to Assam, where they might find lucrative and easy employment"<sup>15</sup> There is evidence to prove that the missionaries in order to encourage migration propagated that those who emigrate to Assam would have the opportunities to settle in government waste land, besides they would not have to suffer payment of *betbegari* (forced labour) or suffer harassment of law suits; nor would they have to face oppression of the zaminders. The missionaries not only encouraged migration but also often allured them to the new settlement, "Rev. Mr. Heberled a Baptist missionary personally brought up a party of Christian people from Orissa to Sylhet in 1887"<sup>16</sup>

### **The Santal colony in Assam and Indian Home Mission to Santal**

The beginning of tea plantations in Assam under colonial situation and its concomitant demand of cheap labour brought number of the santals as tea labour. Apart from tea gardens the abundant wasteland of Assam also encouraged the rootless Santals to settle as ordinary peasant. It would be worthwhile to mention here that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century Assam became a thinly populated state with a declining population. Burmese invasion, civil war, Black fever etc. drastically added to the decline of the Assamese population. A large part of the land remained unutilized. The Colonial administrators of Assam encouraged new settlement from other provinces of India to enhance land revenue which was meager. "Likewise Santals were encouraged under the orders of Steuart Bayley to colonize district of Goalpara defraying their expenses on travel from home besides advance free of interest until they could reap a crop of their own (1886)".<sup>17</sup>

The Missionary records reflect that by 1870s many Santals of Dumka, the then district headquarter of Santal Pargana requested L.O Skrefsrud (kerap) of Indian Home Mission to Santal (IHMS) seek a place to which they could migrate enmasse. It would be worthwhile to mention that the IHMS originated from Baptist Missionary Society. In 1910 this name was changed into the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches. As time passed the work done by the Lutheran among the Santal Pargana

spread to the Santals in the state of Assam, Orissa and West Bengal, therefore a new name the Northern evangelical Lutheran Church was given. Skrefsrud on behalf of the IHMS gave serious thought to the request of the Santals of Dumka. Earlier he entered into a direct negotiation with Australian government but eventually withdrew his adventure and through Dr. Graham, Skrefsrud was put in direct contact with high officials of Assam. As a result a tract of 30sq. miles to the north of Dhubri around the Sonkosh River, the then sub divisional headquarters of Goalpara was given to them. On the part of the Santals, Skrefsrud made an agreement with the Assam Government for the settlement. On February 8, 1881 Borresion arrived with the first settlers, forty-two Santal families in all. They had traveled the long route via Calcutta by train and by Brahmaputra, walking the last 30 miles from Dhubri and arrived at Dingdinga and they named the place as Thakurpur. For some years this village remained the headquarters of the Santals colony in Assam. Only a week later 13 more families arrived. Gradually this new settlement expanded in population and area. The people divided themselves into five villages and soon started reclaiming the jungle and building their houses. A govt. official wrote in a letter (reprinted by Dr. Graham) "The settlement is situated at the base of Bhutan Hills. In the background rise the Himalayan Mountains in a lofty grandeur, while streams of water supplied by the melting snow of their vast ranges, intersects its plains. The soil of the new colony was exceedingly rich and fertile. There is nothing which, if sown, will not grow." Though the report reflected a rosy picture of the area however numerous difficulties and hardship were there in their way. The area known as Dooars located in the foot hills of Bhutan was known for unhealthy conditions. There were jungles with wild animals such as elephants, rhinos, wild boars, tigers and leopards. It was a very unhealthy track within the black water fever belt and in the malarial fever zone. Cholera, dysentery and above all malaria accounted for the heavy loss of lives during the first few years. In the first year the death rate was 14% of the total number of settlers; but with the cleaning of jungle the health scenario improved substantially. By 1888 seven years after the establishment of the colony there were some 600 inhabitants and an area of 1886 bighas of land could be cultivated. By 1910 the Santal population increased to 4486 with a cultivated area of 12280 bighas. Though the settlement was meant to be Christian gradually non-Christian Santals and other communities settled in the area. In 1908, P.O. Bodding gave a short resume over the

development of the colony as he wrote: 'a casual visitor to the colony may not see what level the Santals up there have really reached. Any one who knows the Santals in their old home cannot avoid being forcibly struck by the difference... the Santals up there have no fear of the lying and cheating money lenders. He became an honest, straight forward and independent character who stands up for right and we can here in the colony see what Santals are capable of developing into when they get an opportunity of living without fear of money lenders... we have here a place and almost solitary instance of an aboriginal people getting an opportunity of showing what they may develop into (Letter to Skrefsrud dated Oct. 22, 1906) Siram Soren shouldered the responsibility of their spiritual leader. Gradually the Santal settlement extended to other parts namely Grahampur, Srirampur, Haraputa, Kachugaon, Saraibil, Sapkata, Jaraguri, Gurefela, Padmabil, Hakma, Pakriguri etc under Kokrajhar Sub-Division of erstwhile a tea garden namely Mornoi Tea Estate just outside the colony to the south east. The said tea garden posed a threat to the ongoing process of peasants' settlement, as the Santals went to work as coolies in that garden instead of tilling their own land.... Skrefsrud made strong objections to such a decision of the government and insisted that the garden should be closed down. Hence the government conceded and limited the area of the garden. Skrefsrud forbade the colonists to work in the garden. As a result by 1890 the tea garden went to the hands of Missions. It would be worthwhile to mention here that initially 43 revenue villages were created to accommodate the Santal that were brought in.

### **Status of Santals in Assamese Society**

For hundred years the Santals have been living in the area with the Bodos and other communities in harmony. Though they have been treating Assam as their own home by accepting its customs and language, but the process of marginalization had been continuing since colonial period. Amalendu Guha observed that the planters made the worst use of semi-feudal methods of reducing the free labour to a kind of serfdom. Like the tea labour the Santal peasants have been marginalized by colonial policies. It would be worthwhile to mention here that they were recognized as scheduled tribe in colonial period, but during the post-colonial period they have been descheduled in Assam. This descheduling has obstructed their socio economic and cultural progress. A.K. Chanda committee (govt. of India, 1966) has observed "the committee has accepted the overwhelming

note that the scheduled tribes who have migrated from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa and settled in Assam should be recognized as scheduled tribes. These tribes were descheduled, not because of any principle but purely on political ground..... the govt. (Assam) wants to perpetuate the ignorance backwardness, poverty people only because that will disturb the political pattern in the state". Thus the Santals have been living as one of the most oppressed, exploited marginalized group in Assam even during the post colonial period. The community has been sharing the area with the Bodos and other communities and has been gradually assimilating in the Assamese society. But in the course of Bodo identity movement the vulnerable situation of the community in Assamese society has become visible. In 1996, the Santals of the area experienced a brutal massacre costing more than one thousand Santal lives. Apart this the terror stricken Santals were forced to leave their homes to seek shelter in relief camps. Along with Santals, people from other communities like Bodo, Rabha, Nepalis have been taking shelter in relief camps. More than 2.5 lakh people have been living out of their home in 78 relief camps in Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Kokrajhar district of lower Assam (1996) and larger parts of the inmates were Santals.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Notes and References*

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2. O. Maley L.S.S., *Bengal District Gazetur*, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1910, P-95
3. *Ibid*, P-98
4. K.K. Dutta, *The Santal Insurrection 1855-57*, Calcutta, 1940, P-
5. "The Sonthal Perugunnahs", in *Calcutta Review*, No-35, July-December, 1860 P-510.
6. *Ibid*, P-515.
7. Vandana Shiva – *Ecology and Politics of Survival*, P-16
8. K.K. Dutta, *The Santal Insurrection of 1855-57*, *op. cit.*, P-4.
9. S.D Badgaiyan, *19<sup>th</sup> century in Chotanagpur and Santal pargna – Political Economy of Migration*, in M.S.A. Rao (ed) *Studies in Migration* 1986, Delhi, P-296
10. K.K. Dutta, *op. cit.*, P-73
11. J. Troise, "Social Movement Among the Santal" in M.S.A. Rao (ed) *Social Movement in India*, 2002, P-185

12. In 1910, this name was changed into the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches. As time passed, the work done by the Lutherans among the Santals in Santal Pargna spread to the Santals in the state of Assam, Orissa, and West Bengal. This was the reason why a new name, the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church was given. (see J. Troise, Christianity Among the Santal; The Christian Mission in Subhadra Channa, (ed) *Christianity and Tribal Religion*, 2002 Cosmos publication, Delhi – P-196.
13. Ram Krishna Chatterjee – *Christian Missionaries and Labour Migration in Tea Garden Labour of North-East India* (ed) S. Karotemprel, S.D.B.B. Dutta Roy, Vendrame Institute Shillong, 1990 P-159.
14. *Ibid*, 159
15. *Ibid*, 159
16. H.K. Barpujary, (ed) – *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Volume – V, 1993, P-48/49
17. Olav, Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit – A Short History of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches*, 1867-1967
18. This information has been collected from reports in the newspaper like “*the Assam Tribune*” and a number of vernacular dailies of the period.