



## Surendra Sai : The Great Freedom Fighter

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Surendra Sai, the great freedom fighter in the first Indian struggle for independence in the 19th century, is the least known and yet one of the bravest and most valiant martyrs for the cause of independence of the country. It is a pity that his name has been omitted in many annals of this first war of independence of India.

Surendra Sai started his revolt against the British rule long before 1857 and continued his guerrilla war against the British authority from 1857 till 1864 long after the struggle led by the Rani of Jhansi, Tantia Tope, Kunwar Singh and others had subsided. Surendra Sai was a prisoner in British jail from 1840 to 1857 and then again from 1864 to 1884 being lodged in the final couple of decades of his life in Asirgarh jail, far away from the place of his birth. He was blind at the time of his death. Not merely he alone, but practically his whole family were valiant freedom fighters. His uncle Balram died in Hazaribagh jail after 16 years of jail life. His brother Chhabila was killed in an encounter with the British army. Another brother Ujjal was sent to the Raja Patnagarh to seek the latter's help in the fight against the British, but the Raja betrayed Ujjal and surrendered him to the British and Ujjal was executed. His other brothers Udaut, Dhruba and Medini and his son Mitrabhanu were also among the freedom fighters.

Surendra Sai was born on January 23rd, 1809 in his ancestral home at Khinda in the district of Sambalpur. His father Dharam Singh was the sixth in the line of succession to Raja Madhukar Sai of Sambalpur.

When in 1827, Maharaja Maharaj Sai of Sambalpur died issueless, the British who had earlier in the third Maharatta war got the suzerainty over Sambalpur tried to put Rani Mohan Kumari, the widow of Maharaj Sai on the throne of Sambalpur. This gave rise to great resentment among the people of Sambalpur, because the Rani was mere puppet. The land rent was increased. Drought brought misery to the people. In 1833 the British removed Rani Mohan Kumari from the throne and put one Narayan Singh, a very old Zamindar on the throne.

Narayan Singh was also a puppet and Mr. O' Melly has written about him as follows : "He is described as having been perfectly astounded when it was proposed to make him Raja, so much so that he prayed the Agent not to exalt him to so dangerous a position."

It was very natural for the people to resent such action of the British and Surendra Sai naturally took the lead in the protest against such arbitrary action of the British and against the misrule of Rani Mohan Kumari and Raja Narayan Singh. Surendra Sai was only eighteen years old at the time of death of Maharaj Sai. He had been trained in horsemanship and guerrilla warfare by his uncle Balaram. Many Zamindars, Gountias rallied round the leadership of Surendra Sai. Prominent among them were Balabhadra Dau of Lakhanpur, Kunjal Singh of Ghens; Karunakar Naik of Jajpur (Kolabira) and others.

Though most people supported Surendra Sai for his fight against the British, there were some



who were spying on behalf of the British and one such was Durjoy Singh, the Zamindar of Rampur, which is close to Khinda. There were some quarrel between Durjoy and Surendra. Surendra with his brothers and uncle raided Rampur in 1840 and in the clash Durjoy Singh and his sons were killed. Surendra Sai then openly marched to Sambalpur where Major Osley faced the attack of Surendra Sai who with crude weapons of his force could not face the artillery barrage of the British troops. Surendra, his uncle Balam, his brothers Udent, Ujjal and Chhabila were taken prisoners. They were charged with the murder of Durjoy Singh of Rampur and others and were sentenced to imprisonment for life and sent to Hazaribagh Jail.

Surendra languished in jail from 1840 till 1857. His uncle Balam died in the prison. In the meantime Raja Narayan Singh died issueless. The East India Company applying the doctrine of lapse annexed Sambalpur in 1849. During a short period, the land rent had been increased five times and free Jagirs had been abolished.

In 1857, on July 30, the Sepoys of Ramgarh battalion broke open the Hazaribagh jail and set free Surendra Sai and others. Surendra Sai reached Sambalpur by the end of August and received a grand ovation as the region was seething with discontent. He had now a fighting force of about 1,500 people. The Senior Assistant Commissioner Captain R. T. Leigh was panicky, because he had few men with him. He took recourse to a stratagem of sending a message of peace through one, Chhakadi Mahapatra. Surendra Sai was bold enough to agree to meet Captain Leigh without any of his followers. But the treacherous Leigh imprisoned him. Surendra escaped from the prison in no time and began to harass the British authority since then.

He followed the strategy of cutting off all lines of communications for the British force as it was difficult to face them openly without the necessary weapons. The roads leading to Ranchi and Hazaribagh were obstructed by his followers

in the Maula Bhanja hills and Jharghati hills. Karunakar the good Zamindar was his chief lieutenant in this matter. The British administration of Sambalpur at that time was under Ranchi. Surendra tried to cut off communication from the Cuttack side and the Zamindar of Gadlo Singh and Madhu Gountia of Jujomura and his men helped Surendra Sai in this. To the West, was Singoda Ghati (pass), on the line of communication between Sambalpur and Nagpur and Kunjal Singh and Hati Singh took charge of this pass. Surendra Sai's main fort was at Debrigarh in Barapahar (literally twelve hills). The other strongholds were at Paharsirgida, Singoda, Gadpati and Jharghati.

Surendra Sai carried on guerrilla war from 1857 till 1862. Captain Woodbridge was killed in 1858, February while attempting to attack the main fort at Debrigarh and his dead body was recovered with great difficulty by Ensign Warlow. Dr. Muir was killed while coming from Cuttack side at Jujomura. Earlier in November 1857, Surendra made a night raid on the British force in Sambalpur killing two and wounding eight others. There was a pitched battle between the British force and Surendra's men in Kudopali in December 1857 in which Surendra's brother Chhabila was killed and Captain Wood was seriously injured. There was also a confrontation in the Gadpati hills, where the British troops were routed.

As the war of independence in other parts of the country subsided, the British had time to send reinforcement to Sambalpur but they could not capture Surendra Sai nor could they check the raids of his followers. Surendra would cover long distances on horse back and always kept close contact with his associate fighters.

The British tried to harass Surendra and his supporters in many ways. The authorities confiscated the property of people who helped Surendra. They even burnt villages which were suspected of helping Surendra Sai. Women and children were not spared. But Surendra continued



his operations from the fastness of Debrigarh and other hills.

In 1861, Major Impey came to Sambalpur as Deputy Commissioner. He followed the policy of conciliation. He succeeded in persuading Udant and Dhruva, the two brothers of Surendra Sai to surrender on January 18, 1852. Major Impey sent these brothers of Surendra Sai as messengers to Surendra to surrender. Surendra saw the futility of continuing the struggle and surrendered in May 1862. He could no longer meet the demands of his supporters for necessities.

Surendra surrendered but this did not last long. His supporters Kamal Singh Dan and others were still unreconciled and wanted Surendra to take the lead in the struggle again. Major Impey died and was succeeded by Major Cumber Lege as the Deputy Commissioner, who reported to the higher authorities that Surendra had a secret hand in fanning the fire of rebellion. The changed policy of the new Deputy Commissioner had reaction and there was again an uprising. Surendra Sai could no longer be found in his home village Khinda. Again all attempts to capture him failed.

The authorities were harassed and took recourse to a new track. One Dayanidhi Meher was a British spy and an excise vendor. He picked up friendship with Surendra Sai and his followers. On the 2nd January 1854, Pousa Purnima a festive occasion of Sambalpur region, Dayanidhi offered Surendra and his follow sweets mixed with heavy intoxicants, alleging that the sweets were the offerings to the deity. Surendra and his followers took the sweets and became intoxicated. Dayanidhi reported to the district authorities about the hide-out of Surendra Sai. The Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police Mr. Beryal and others raided the place at dead of night and arrested Surendra Sai, Udant Sai, Dhruva Sai and Medini Sai, Surrendra's brothers and Mitrabhnun the son of Surendra.

It was not considered safe to keep Surendra Sai in Sambalpur. A batch of 17 prisoners were forwarded to Raipur under heavy

escort on the 25th January 1864. They were tried for waging war against the queen and other charges. Surendra Sai, Udant Sai and Khageswar Dau were convicted and sentenced to transportation for life. Dhruva Sai, Medini Sai, Loknath Gadia, Shradhakar Mallik, Mrutyunjay Panigrahi and Jagabandhu Hota also were awarded the same sentence. Mitrabhanu Sai, Mohan Dau, Dharanidhar Mishra and Padmanabh Guru were sentenced to seven years imprisonment each.

There was an appeal from these sentences to the judicial Commissioner, who set aside the order and sentence. But Surendra Sai and his followers were re-arrested under Regulation III of 1818.

Surendra was sent to Asirgarh fort jail along with Lokanath Gartia and others. There he languished for a long period of twenty years. He lost his eye-sight. He breathed his last on February 28, 1884.

What about the ladies at home? Surendra and his brothers were so engrossed with the struggle for freedom that they had no time to arrange the marriage of their only sister Anjana, who died an old maid. Practically throughout her life, Sunakumari, the wife of Surendra Sai, spent her life as a grass-widow. In the history of India, it is difficult to find the name of another martyr, who lingered in jails for a period of thirty-seven years and who spent so many years in jungle warfare.

History refuses to recognise the valour, the patriotism and the noble qualities of a hero, who has fought and lost. The victor occupied a notable place in the pages of history, however cruel, mean and selfish he may be and he is free to malign the victim. This is the lesson we learn from the life of Surendra Sai.

But Surendra paid his debt to the motherland to the last breath of his life, to the last drop of his blood and to the last ounce of his energy.

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