



Tribal Resistance Movement Against British Imperialism : Role of Saheed Madho Singh

Dr. Himansu Sekhar Padhi

Indian freedom struggle is a story of endless bravery, heroism, patriotism and self sacrifice of the people. From king and kingly people to the subjects, rich to poor, literate to illiterate, all had come forward leaving their families to sacrifice themselves in the sacrificial pit of the revolution against the oppressive rule of the British government. Needless to say that in the freedom struggle the roles of the tribal were very significant and thus deserves special mention in this regard.

‘Saheed Madho Singh is one among those tribals who dared to challenge the British imperialism. He came forward to support Veer Surendra Sai, when the latter fought against the East India Company claiming legitimately for the throne of Sambalpur kingdom.

Ghens is a village under Padampur sub-division of Bargarh district of Odisha. It was a prominent centre of the resistance movement against the Britishers in 19th century. A small *zamindari* (feudatory state) of the Chouhans of Sambalpur, Ghens played a vital role under its tribal chief Madho Singh in the First War of Indian Independence of 1857¹.

Saheed Madhab Singh Beriha, a less known martyr belonged to Binjhal tribe. Son of

Arjuna Singh Beriha, he had often been referred in the British record as Madho Singh. The local contemporary records also narrate him as Madho Singh. Therefore he is known in the same name in Indian history. He was the *zamindar* of Ghens in the 1st half of 19th century. Unfortunately his date of birth has not been brought to limelight. It is assumed that because his family members were far away from formal education, they might not have recorded it. When the king and feudatory chiefs of other states used to live in palace, used to maintain luxurious life, his forefathers used to lead a simple life like that of the common people. They used to live in a mud house having thatched roof. They used to take simple food and used to dress themselves like common people. Their sole aim was the welfare of the subjects².

Since Madho Singh was born in a *zamindar* family, his father must have made necessary arrangements to make him proficient in the art of warfare. He inherited the value of honesty and integrity from his predecessors. His indomitable courage, love of freedom, altruistic nature made him a great revolutionary. Having seen his courage and calibre, his father Arjun Singh Beriha handed over the *zamindari* of Ghens in his favour, which consisted of 20 small villages like Ghens, Petupali, Ghumuripali, Jhankarpali,

Tileimal, Barpadar, Turimunda, Badmal, Katapali, Kuchipali, Sidhira, Kalagapali, Nuapali, Bideshpali, Brahmanipatha, Balipatha, Beherapali, Tumarpali, Bandpali and Charhapali. These are known as *khalsa*. Madho Singh had five sons. They were Hati Singh, Kunjel Singh, Bairi Singh, Airi Singh (Uday Singh) and Narayan Singh. His second son Kunjel Singh had got five villages as dowry. Those were Girinjal, Budhamal, Kendumudi, Rengali and Biripali³.

Madho Singh was a man of independent status. He was not in favour of being controlled by Britishers. His feeling towards the British echoed in all the villages of his *zamindari*. He was well aware of the might of the British power. Their prowess, valour and diplomacy did not have any impact upon Madho Singh's attitude towards the Britishers. The factors which prompted him to adopt hostile attitude towards the East India Company is widely known. Firstly, the attitude of British towards Veer Surendra Sai wounded his sentiment. Surendra was not given the throne of Sambalpur because he was a man of independent status. Secondly, the Britishers wanted to place a henchman on the throne who would dance according to their tune. Thirdly, the Britishers had come to India for business purpose. Due to the lack of unity among the Indians and that of their innocence the Britishers became our master. Fourthly, most of the British officers were oppressive and brutal. Fifthly, they tried to collect huge amount of tax from the people. The British attitude towards Narayan Singh, the *zamindar* of Sonakhan also hammered the sentiment of Madho Singh. Narayan happened to be his son—in-law. A great famine broke out in Sonakhan where thousands of people died out of starvation. Narayan Singh requested Seth Makhanlal, the *zamindar* of Kharod to provide foodgrains to

the famished subjects. Makhanlal however became reluctant to keep his words. This infuriated Narayan Singh. He marched to Kharod and looted food grains, which was distributed among the famine-stricken subjects. For this act Narayan Singh was convicted and sent to jail. This act of British added fuel to the resisting attitude of Madho Singh⁴.

Maharaja Sai, the last Chouhan king of Sambalpur died in 1827 leaving his widow Mohan Kumari and two daughters. He didn't have any male issue⁵. After his death the throne remained vacant. The Chauhan family of Rajpur-Khinda claimed themselves next to the main line of Sambalpur and hoped to succeed to the throne. No sooner than he died, Surendra Sai, who at that time represented the Rajpur-Khinda family asserted his claim for the *gadi*⁶. On the other hand the British government wanted to have a henchman to serve their interest. They neglected the claim of Surendra, because he was a man of independent disposition. The Britishers installed Mohan Kumari, the widow queen of Maharaja Sai on the *gadi* of Sambalpur. They were sure that the *rani* could not be in a position to control the male officials of the state and could not make public appearance for discharging the function of an administrator of a territory. Consequently the Britishers would be the sovereign of Sambalpur. The installation of a lady against all established local customs and laws of land was unavoidable⁷. No sooner than Mohan Kumari got the throne, the Britishers found widespread dissatisfaction and protest against the *rani*⁸. The discontentment among *rani's* subject was universal and the people took up arms against *rani's* officials, who were oppressive and corrupt. Thereafter they disposed her and chose an imbecile old man named Narayan Singh, who was the illegitimate



scion of the Chouhan *zamindar* family of Barpali⁹. Narayan Singh was quite aged when he was made the *raja* of Sambalpur. He, with a religious bent of mind was not able to discharge his duties as the king¹⁰. The elevation of Raja Narayan Singh to the *gadi* of Sambalpur and his weak and corrupt administration added fuel to the agitation this time by Surendra Sai, along with his six brothers namely- Udanta, Dhruva, Ujjala, Chhabila, Jajjala and Medini under the able guidance of Balaram Singh, their uncle. In the revolt Surendra was supported by thousands and thousands of tribal along with their *zamindars*. The tribal *zamindars* of Ghens, Kolabira, Pahadsirgida, Machida, Kodabhaga, Laida, Loisinga, Lakhanpur, Bheden, Patkulunda, etc gave up their comforts and to jungle life. Some of them lost their estate, some were arrested and hanged and so many were imprisoned. The tribal people of Sambalpur and Baragarh tracts were noted for their sacrifice and heroism. Surendra could challenge the mighty British power basing solely on their prowess and support¹¹.

In 1849 Lord Delhousie introduced the Doctrine of Lapse, which stated – the king, who dies without a son, his state will be confiscated and will pass in to the direct control of British government¹². On 10th September 1849 Raja Narayan Singh died without a son. Accordingly the state had lapsed to the British government and there was perfect consolidation of administration and enforcement of law and order whether people liked it or not. The years of consolidation of British administration had created a suitable field for a wide and sustained rebellion in which most of the dissatisfied people participated under the leadership of Surendra Sai¹³. After taking the rein of administration of Sambalpur, the British government showed no sympathy to the tribal

people along with their *zamindars* and *gountias* and brought them under their rigorous control. The revenue paid by them was highly raised, the free hold grants were resumed and the rent free villages were assessed at half rates. It is revealed from a record that the amount paid by the states as annual tribute previous to 1849 was 8,000 rupees whereas it raised to 74,000 rupees in 1854¹⁴. The tribal people had then no leader to voice their grievances or to launch any movement against British exploitation as Surendra Sai was in jail.

It is needless to say that this hard and fast order affected Ghens *zamindari*. When the Britishers compelled Madho Singh to pay the revenue at enhanced sum, he protested. He stopped collecting the revenue from his subjects. The Britishers warned him to pay 356 rupees. Madho Singh did not care to the British order. The Britishers summoned him to Sambalpur. He neither responded nor intended to pay the revenue. The Britishers warned him to confiscate his estate. It however did not have any impact upon him. The disobedience of Madho Singh to British order led to a cold war which resulted into a frequent fight between them.

On the other hand on 31st July 1857 the revolutionaries broke up the jail of Hazaribagh. Surendra Sai then in conviction in Hazaribagh jail for killing the family members of Rampur *zamindar* and burning his house was released by the mutinous soldiers (sepoys). He, with his brother Udanta Sai decided to go back to their native district to reorganize tribal people for whom they fought seventeen years ago. The two brothers proceeded through the dense and unfrequented forest of Chhotnagpur, Singbhum, Gangpur, and reached at Sambalpur. The



Commissioner of Chhotnagpur intimated about the flee of Surendra Sai to R.T. Leigh, the then Principal Assistant Commissioner of Sambalpur. He got alarmed and became impatient at the news of the approach of Surendra. He dispatched *parwanas* to all *gadajat rajas* and *zamindars* directing them to be alert and to apprehend the rebels and send some of their armed retainers for the assistance of troops stationed at Sambalpur¹⁵. He also approached G.F. Cockburn, the Commissioner of Cuttack for assistance. Accordingly the two companies of 40th Madras Native Infantry left Cuttack for Sambalpur on 26th August 1857 under Hawkins accompanied by Lt. Hart and Napier¹⁶.

After the arrival of Surendra Sai in Sambalpur he was accorded rousing reception. He was joined by all nearby *zamindars*. Karna Gartia, the Gond Zamindar of Kolabira was the most powerful of these chiefs. His support to Surendra inspired others to join with him¹⁷. Thus the revolution again broke out in and around Sambalpur. The common people along with the tribal became delighted and encouraged. Arkhita of Karandola, Markhanda Beriha of Bamra, Pitambara Singh of Patkulunda, Dair Sardar of Khursal, Manohar Singh of Bhuseikela, Chandan Gadtia of Luisinga, Janardan Singh of Pahadsirgida, Anata Singh of Mundomahul, Anjari Singh of Kodbhaga, Dhana Singh of Machida, Kamal Singh, Nilambara Singh and Khageswar Singh of Lakhanpur, Balabhadra of Chandrapur (Padampur), Rama Chandra Gountia of Patrapali. Lokanath, the *gountia* of Bargaon, Gobinda Singh of Sonakhan, Jaya Singh of Laida, Ganesh Upadhyaya of Singhbaga started vigorous protest in support of Surendra Sai. They were indirectly supported and inspired by Umarao Sai, the Zamindar of Bindra-Nuagarh and Krushna

Chandra Singh Deo, the king of Khariar¹⁸. Madho Singh also sent his sons - Hati Singh, Kunjel Singh and Bairi Singh along with a group of soldiers in support of Surendra.

The bell of revolution at last rang in 1857 in Sambalpur when on 17th October the loyals of Surendra Sai assembled at Barampura temple. There they vowed to drive away the Britishers from our country. They also promised to enthrone Surendra Sai on the *gadi*. Surendra Sai having collected a large force marched straight to Juhna Killa (old fort), which was however in ruin. He made representation to Captain Leigh that the sentences on him and his brother should be remitted at once and that he should be recognized as the Raja of Sambalpur¹⁹.

The rebellion of 1857 in Sambalpur was mainly a tribal rebellion. Almost all the tribal *zamindars* and *gountias* joined it exposing the cause of Surendra Sai and they played a significant role in it. They gave up comforts and resorted to fugitive life. Their *zamindaris* were confiscated. Some of them were killed in the battle, some were arrested and hanged and many were imprisoned. Surendra Sai could challenge the mighty British relying solely on the strength and support of these tribal leaders²⁰.

The rebels preferred *guerrilla* warfare instead of face to face fighting, because they were mainly dependent on traditional weapons like shield, sword, axe, bow and arrow etc. while the British forces were well equipped with modern arms and ammunitions²¹. The revolutionaries planned to attack the British forces in various hill passes. Madho Singh along with his four sons - Hati Singh, Kunjel Singh, Bairi Singh and Airi Singh remained in charge of Singoda Pass that lies on the road linking Sambalpur to Nagpur at a



distance of 93 k.m. from Sambalpur. At that time it was clothed with thick woods and abounded by many wild animals. Captain E.G.Wood, who left Nagpur on 8.12.1857 reached here on 26.12.1857, after a tedious journey of 440 k.m. in 19 days. On the very day a severe fight was held between the army of Wood and that of Madho Singh. Large numbers of British forces were killed by Madho's army. Being severely wounded and defeated Captain Wood escaped and saved his life. He reached at Sambalpur after 3 days on 29.12.1857. This sorrowful defeat created havoc in British army at Sambalpur²².

After his tragic defeat Captain Wood became more violent. He however changed his war policy. Instead of proceeding to Singoda Pass he preferred to attack the nearby camps of the revolutionaries. He along with Captain R.T. Leigh being accompanied by 275 trained soldiers, out of whom 75 consisted of cavalry and 200 of infantry left Sambalpur in search of Udanta Sai and arrested him. In the early morning of 30 December 1857 they reached at Kudapali, a place near Bheden. When the British forces reached at the foothill of Kudapali the rebels, who were on the hill top attacked them. The British forces also attempted to attack. They fought with modern weapons, but failed as the rebels were at better position than the British forces hiding themselves behind the trees and bushes. They became unable to make any loss of them as their bullets could not pierce the enemies²³. Captain E.D.Wood and Captain R.T. Leigh could not dare to climb the hill. The rebels were taken by surprise. Instead of attacking them Captain Wood pretended to retreat thereby inducing the enemy to come out of the hill. Accordingly the rebels came out and they were charged by the cavalry waiting for them. They were put to flight. In that encounter 53

rebels were killed, 11 rebels were taken as prisoners and many rebels were wounded²⁴. Captain Wood was wounded in the shoulder by an arrow²⁵. Surendra Sai, who was reported to be in the encampment escaped²⁶. The great loss that the rebels suffered was the death of Chhabila Sai,²⁷ fifth brother of Surendra Sai. This was the first big victory of the British against the rebels²⁸.

The Kudopali battle enhanced the British confidence²⁹. Surendra Sai became disappointed to learn the tragic death of the rebels. Madho Singh felt much sorrow and repented with the incident. He felt himself responsible for this encounter. Had he become able to kill Captain Wood at Singoda Pass this massacre might have not occurred?

In spite of the heavy loss that the rebels suffered at Kudopali and from the most extensive operation of the British, Madho Singh along with his associates did not lose their hope. After it he encamped at Singoda Pass and became more vigilant. In the first week of January 1858 Captain Shakespeare attacked the Singoda Pass with his cavalry regiment. When the British army entered there the rebels led by Madho Singh attacked with traditional weapons. They rolled down big pebbles from the hill top. Shakespeare could not proceed onwards due to the resistance of the rebels and was compelled to retreat. Large numbers of British forces were slain. Shakespeare could save himself by fleeing from the battle field. Thus he failed in his first attempt³⁰.

Shakespeare felt humiliated because of his defeat. It proved his weakness and failure. So he again attacked the Singoda Pass. At that time Hati Singh, the eldest son of Ghens *zamindar* Madho Singh was in charge of the garrison there. In the pitched battle, eleven insurgents were killed



and Hati Singh was injured. He was rescued by one of his associates named Kharsal Bhoi³¹. On the other hand the rebels also countered severely. They rolled down big pebbles upon the British soldiers. They could save themselves from the British forces by hiding themselves behind the rocks on the hill top. So in spite of the above mentioned reverses it could not be possible for Shakespeare hold the Pass. Rebels like Kunjel Singh, Kamal Singh, Gobinda Singh and Salegram Bariha with much difficulty became successful to retain it³².

When Hati Singh got injury a rumour spread among the people about his death. Then Madho Singh became disappointed. The Britishers thought that Madho Singh would remain aloof to learn the death of his son. When they came to know the rescue of Singoda Pass by the brothers of Hati Singh, they lost their patience. On the other hand Madho Singh with much courage and enthusiasm continued his activities.

To arrest Madho Singh Captain Woodbridge and Captain Wood were sent to Pahadsirgida. They *gheraoed* the Pahadsirgida Pass. Those two British officers marched with a battalion of the 40th Regiment MNI on 12 February. At that time the insurgents had built their strongholds at Pahadsirgida, Ammojuri and Paklikhole. Annojuli and Paklikhole were two gorges situated at a distance of about 10 miles from Pahadsirgida. The insurgents had occupied a strong position in a narrow defile between these two places. They had also created stone barricades of about 7 feet high and 13 feet long. In an encounter at Paklikhole the British forces were defeated and retreated as far as Attabira. Captain Woodbridge instead of outflanking and taking the reverse march went straight up to it along a narrow road and thus fell in to an

ambuscade. There he was captured and killed on 12 February 1858 along with two *sepoys*³³. Four *sepoys* were wounded while trying to bring off the body of Captain Woodbridge.³⁴ It was a significant victory for the insurgents who probably avenged the death of Chhabila Sai at Kudapali some months back.³⁵ On 14 February Captain Ensin Warlow attacked the basement at Pahadsirgida with more troops on the three sides. The rebels fled away. He was able to discover the dead body of Captain Woodbridge which was found naked and chopped up.³⁶ A. Sahu³⁷ says – Warlo saw a horrible scene there. The heads of the British soldiers being cut off and separated from the body were kept hanging in the tree branches. The head less bodies of the Britishers along with Captain Woodbridge were tied on the trunks of the trees in standing postures. Warlo could recognize the body of Woodbridge and brought it to Sambalpur carrying on a horse back. It was no doubt a ghastly murder. But the incident revealed the popular resentment and disgust against the British authorities, opines P.K.Mishra.³⁸ With the brutal death of Woodbridge the anger of the Britishers became no bound. They centralized their prowess upon Madho Singh. Major Foster became the Commissioner of Sambalpur with all civil and military power in March 1858.³⁹ His tenure ushered the growth of suppression, harassment and terror. He took military action against *gountias*, who had maintained liaison with the rebels and helped them.⁴⁰ He with huge forces attacked Ghens to capture Madho Singh. When he reached there, he found nobody. Deep silence reigned in the village. The total village was empty. All had fled to Talkhal, Janhalsi, Dhanuhad, Luhurmund, Ganjaighuta, Patgudi etc. and kept themselves hidden there. Even the inhabitants of Chuhanpali, Petupali, Kuchipali, Badmal etc fled

to the jungle. The village was burnt in to ashes.⁴¹ In the meantime Madho Singh had already grown old and had become strengthless. His health declined due to constant and restless struggle against the British. Due to severe cold he was on the way to Matiabhata village when he was captured by the British forces.⁴² He was hanged to death without trial at Sambalpur in the last part of December 1858.⁴³ After his death the rebels became disappointed. Surendra Sai became deeply shocked to learn it. However after him his son Hati Singh, Kunjel Singh, Airi Singh and Bairi Singh continued to assist Surendra Sai.

About the contribution of Saheed Madho Singh, N.K.Kulkarni, Former Deputy Director, National Archives writes – there is no example in Indian history of a father along with his three sons becoming martyrs. It is regretted that this family who sacrificed themselves for our motherland passed into oblivion⁴⁴. According to H.K. Mahatab,⁴⁵ former Chief Minister of Odisha and celebrated historian- the revolution of Madho Singh is more significant than that of Surendra Sai. It is regretted that he has not been given adequate place in the history of Odisha.

The rebellion of Saheed Madho Singh is a landmark not only in the history of Odisha but also in India. Due to his courage, valour and patriotism and his challenge to British imperialism, he is accorded a high and honourable place in the history of freedom movement. The people of India cherish his memory with love and pride.

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Dr. Himansu Sekhar Padhi, Head of the Department of History, Birmaharajpur College, Birmaharajpur, Dist- Subarnapur, e-mail: himansupadhi59@gmail.com.