

Veer Surendra Sai

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*“ Ask not what your country can do for you;
Ask what you can do for your country”*

- John F. Kennedy

Introduction

Amidst the tens of thousands of the names considered against the British imperialism that crowded the columns of history, the name of Surendra Sai shines almost alone as a star. Veer Surendra Sai, the first freedom fighter of Sambalpur, had fought for his right against British imperialism during the middle part of the 19th century when British empire was at the height of its glory.

Surendra Sai was the child of the historic revolution of 1857, as Napoleon was the child of the French Revolution of 1789. The heroic achievement of Surendra Sai and his uncommon sacrifice for the cause of his people have few parallels in history. He had neither modern weapons nor organized soldiers to fight against the mighty administration but only his strong determination, when elites of India did not even dream of going against the foreign rule.

His Childhood

Surendra Sai was born on 23rd January 1809 on full moon day of Pausa in the Chauhan



family of Raipur, Khinda.¹ His father Dharam Singh was a descendant of Aniruddha Sai, son of Madhekar Sai, the Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. According to Siva Prasad Das, Surendra Sai was born in his maternal uncle's place at Bargaon located in the police station Dhama in Sambalpur district.² This is the opinion of a large section of people which Sri Das accepted but the mother of Surendra Sai whose name was Revati devi

belongs to Bargaon near Sareikela in Singhbhum district of Jharkhand.³ The people of Khinda village quite reasonably claim that Surendra Sai was born in that village. The birth ceremony of Surendra Sai is known to have been celebrated in festive mood for three days by the tribal people of Khinda and its neighbourhood. Surendra Sai had six brothers and a sister namely Udant, Dhruva, Uajjala, Chhabila, Jajjala, Medini and sister Anjana.⁴

The education of Surendra Sai and his brothers was not neglected and all the brothers could read and write well both in Odia and Hindi. The brothers were trained more particularly in physical culture and technique of guerrilla warfare from his uncle Balaram Sai.⁵

Rebel in early phase (1827-1840)

In the year 1803, Odisha came under British rule. In many parts of Odisha people opposed them vehemently. They strongly refused to accept their authority. It took a violent turn in Sambalpur when Surendra Sai took part and headed the movement. In 1827, Maharaja Sai the ruler of Sambalpur passed away leaving behind two daughters.⁶ He had no male heir to inherit the Sambalpur Rajgadee. Mohan Kumari the widow of Maharaja Sai ascended on the throne. In fact, Britishers were behind her. Though Mohan Kumari was the first lady to succeed the throne in the known history of Sambalpur, people believed that it was an abuse of practice and violation of tradition. Prettifying the throne with a widow was not acceptable to the people of Sambalpur. Apparently and allegedly the Britishers also ignored the successive family chain. "Doctrine of lapse" also did not arise at that moment.⁷

Surendra Sai who represented the next line of succession claimed his legal right to the throne but his right claim was thrown down. The princess Mohan Kumari of neighboring Bamanda State, was seated on the throne and made nominal head of the State of Sambalpur.

The real power passed into the hand of British authorities. Surendra by then a young and energetic man of nineteen got enthusiastic support from the enlightened people of Sambalpur and revolted against them. Because of the widespread discontentment, Mohan Kumari was opposed and Narayan Singh an illegitimate scion of the Chauhan Zamidar of Barpali, was ascended to the throne. The plot of the British Administrators of total ignorance to the claims of Raipur, Khinda family infuriated Surendra and his family members and they took it as a challenge and broke into rebellion.⁸

One way or another, Surendra Sai's claim gained momentum in his favour. In fact this popular thrust and drive was the origin of the movement against British Raj led by Surendra Sai. It was fundamentally a tribal movement, for the reason that the different groups and resistant fighters mostly belonged to the Gond and Binjhal tribes. Gauntias and Zamidars mostly belonging to Gond and Binjhal tribes of Sambalpur states extended their support. More over by and large tribal people were behind this movement. It was suppressed by the Britishers with firm hands.⁹

The Sai brothers trashed throughout the nook and corner of Sambalpur kingdom enlisting the support of the Zamidars and Gauntias. On one occasion when Surendra was at Debrigarh with Balaram Dev, the Gond Zamidar of Lakhanpur, was attacked by the sepoy of Raja Narayan Singh. Although Surendra miraculously escaped Balabhadra was killed on the spot. The

death of Balabhadra Deo charged the Gonds and they supported Surendra wholeheartedly against Narayan Singh.

The only Zamindar of Sambalpur who was then actively supporting the Raja was Durjaya Singh of Rampur near Jharsuguda. This estates had been created by Raja Chhatra Sai at the cost of the Gonds and its Zamindar who belonged to a Rajput clan was not liked by the tribal people Surendra attacked Rampur, demolished the fort and killed the old father and son Zamindar, Durjaya Singh fled for life to Himagiri".¹⁰

By this Surendra avenged the death of Balabhadra Deo and satisfied the ego of his tribal followers. The British Government after that acted promptly and arrested Surendra Sai along with his uncle Balaram and brother Udanta. They were sent to the Hazaribagh jail as prisoners for life. At the time none of the tribal Zamindars had the capacity of giving leadership to their people. The first tribal rising of Sambalpur was thus hipped in the bud. Balaram Sai a friend, philosopher and guide of the rebels died in the prison shortly after his confinement.

2nd phase (1857-1864)

With the imprisonment of Surendra Sai the British administration was left without any opposition for which there appeared stringent laws and regulation to calm down the disgruntled people of Sambalpur. The revenue was at once raised by one- fourth indiscriminately without reference to the capabilities of the villages. By 1854, a second statement was made as equally indiscriminate principles which raised the amount from Rs.8800/- to 74,000. Above these unwarranted increase in revenue share and stringent exactions were made on the public by the royal households in the form of nazarana and

unpaid labour. But in spite of this burdensome and pitiable economic life of the people with prevailing state of confusion bounding anarchy there was least attempt by the elite of Sambalpur to redress the general grievances of the populace.¹¹ It appears probably that they were watching for someone to lead them to get out of the deteriorating situation. It was during such a critical juncture Surendra Sai reappeared on the soil of Sambalpur being released by his associates.

Though the circumstances which led Surendra Sai first, to appeal the British authority for remission of the rest of the life sentence on him and his brother and then suddenly to reopen the hostility with vigour and well organised manner were confusing. One can postulate, that he was offered help and assistance even by the disgruntled high ups of the society of Sambalpur. He was made to realise that his cause was the common cause by the people of Sambalpur against the British authority.¹²

Soon after their release from the Jail, Surendra Sai and Udanta Sai entered the district with a number of followers. By the middle of September they entered into the town of Sambalpur with a force of 1400 or 1600 men and established themselves within the precincts of the old fort. Surendra Sai soon established contact with Captain R.T. Leigh Senior Assistant Commissioner of Sambalpur and assured him that he had no intention of aspiring to the Raj and that his only object was to induce the Government to cancel the remaining portion of his and his brothers imprisonment.¹³

Captain Leigh promised to represent the matter to the Government, and in the meantime Surendra Sai agreed to disperse his followers and

remain in Sambalpur while Udanta Sai was permitted to reside in the village of Khinda. The Commissioner of Chhotnagpur recommended to the Government of Bengal for commuting the sentence of Surendra Sai and his brother on the condition that they should reside either at Cuttack or at Ranchi. G.F. Cockburn insisted on taking strong measures like deportation. Surendra Sai was treated like political prisoner and his residence was closely guarded, naturally he wanted to escape and on October 31, 1857 he fled to Khinda where his brother had collected more than a thousand rebels.¹⁴

In the meanwhile two companies of the 40th Madras native infantry had been despatched under Captain Klocker from Cuttack. Besides lieutenant Hadow of the Madras Artillery who arrived at Cuttack with some light mountain guns was also asked to reach Sambalpur to take part in an expedition which Captain Klocker made against Khinda and Kolabira. He reached on November 5, 1857. He destroyed the house of the Gountia. But he failed to capture Surendra Sai and his brother at Khinda though he found their houses loopholed and prepared for defense in only one place he could find a large gathering of armed men concealed by the jungle.

Matters had now taken a serious turn, many of the Principal Zamindars were collecting their Paiks for the purpose of resisting the Government and the whole country in the neighbourhood of Sambalpur was temporarily in the hands of the insurgents who were posted in strength at a distance of not more than three or four miles from the place and fired on the British pickets. Dr. Moore of the Madras Army who had been ordered to proceed with Hanson to afford medical aid to the troops at Sambalpur was murdered at Jujomora while on the march. Hanson

however escaped and wandered in the forest without food until rescued by a party of sebundys. Captain Leigh himself marched out with a considerable body of the Madras Corps to support the sebundis but was attacked by the rebels under cover of dense jungle and lost several of his men without being able to retaliate. By the beginning of December the Dak road to Bombay was obstructed.¹⁵

G.F. Cockburn, the Commissioner of Odisha, had despatched to Sambalpur the remainder of the 40th Madras native infantry under the command of Major Bat's and with him the guns and artillery man station at Cuttack. Meanwhile the Lieutenant Governor authorised the formed two companies for services in the district of Sambalpur under Captain Bird of the 40th Madras native infantry. He made a strong representation to the Government of India to take immediate measures for strengthening Sambalpur.

Kudopali Rebellion

In the meantime Captain Wood had arrived at Sambalpur from Nagpur. On December 30, 1857, Wood surprised the rebel in a grove of trees at Kudopali. It was most ghastly battle that took place in Kudopali and a memorable episode not only in the history of the Sambalpur but also in the history of the freedom movement in India.¹⁷

The Kudopali hill situated by the side of old Sambalpur Ranchi road is about one and half kilometer away from Sindurpank chowk on the Bombay Calcutta N.H.6. It is about eight kilometers away from Sambalpur town. This hill was a mute spectator to the historic Kudopali battle fought against the British force, led by his fourth brother Chhabila Sai. This hill was covered by dense forest with wild beasts. Chhabila Sai was in charge of the troop. As they were stationed

on the hill it was not convenient for the British force to attack. So Captain Wood pretended to retreat. The revolutionaries started chasing them in the open field by descending from the hill. The situation helped Capt. Wood and there was a fierce battle. The well-equipped and trained soldiers of Capt. Wood defeated Chhabila Sai. The revolutionaries suffered heavy loss, fifty three(53) were found dead on the battle field and eleven were taken as prisoners. Many British soldiers were also killed and injured. Capt. Wood was also injured but the great loss to Surendra Sai was the death of Chhabila Sai who was moving through the street of Kudopali village where he was shot at the back and died.¹⁷ The event became a part of folklore forever.

Uli uli uli uli

Chhabila Sai Dihen Bajila Guli

Kudopali Majha Khuli

Baulire, Kudopali Majha Khulire

The Kudopali hill is a witness to the heroism of the great fighter.

Note:- Facts and the figures taken from his book “Veer Surendra Sai” Bhubaneswar, 1985 by Dr. N.K.Sahu who has identified Kudopali to be the village Papanga hill in present Bargarh district. But the popular belief is that the Kudopali village is in Sambalpur and the Kudopali Dungiri(Hill) on old Sambalpur-Ranchi road are the sites of the Kudopali battle.¹⁸

This onslaught which involves a prestigious loss to the rebels was promptly dealt with at Paharsirgida where the rebels beheaded Capt. Wood. As a sequel to the proactive role of Kharsal Zamindar Dayal Singh in the battle of Paharsirgida, he was hanged on 04.03.1858.²⁰ The Zamindar of Bheden was killed in the battle of 1858. During this historical period of fighting

against the Britishers, some were also acting as informers on behalf of Britishers for example with the help of Sarangarh Raja Sangram Singh Britishers could capture Kamal Singh.

Major Impey became the Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur in April 1861. He suggested some peace proposals on 22.06.1861 including granting of pardon to the revolutionaries. Who would surrender will get in return the seized property and lead a formal life. Commissioner of Cuttack issued a Proclamation on 24.09.1861 to free the rebels confined in the jails of Sambalpur and Cuttack. As a matter of good will gesture, prisoners were released. He also declared a package of pension to the members of the royal family including Surendra Sai. However, some revolutionaries namely Udanta Sai, Dhurba Sai (Brother of Surendra Sai) surrendered on 07.01.1862 subsequently, Surendra Sai and some of his strong rebel colleagues namely Gajaraj Singh, Khageswar Dao, Fate Singh and Kunjal Singh surrendered on 16.05.1862 on guarantee of life liberally and free pardon.²¹ But after the death of Major Impey in December 1863 things changed rapidly.

The submission of Surendra Sai either discontinued or brought the unrest to an end in Sambalpur. British rulers found him to be a strong centre of problem even after his surrender. At last with the help of one Dayanidhi Meher, he was arrested in a treacherous way on his birthday i.e. 23-01-1864 and also the full moon day of Pausa an important day of festivities of Western Odisha. the treacherous work of Dayanidhi Meher, he had received rupees eight and revenue of village of Tabla. There was no fight, There was no opposition as well.²² There was no bloodshed too. His arrest was due to conspiracy. Immediately after two days on 26.01.1864, he was sent with

his close associates to Asurgarh Jail after 24 years, he passed away in that dungeon on 28.02.1884.

On official record he spent 39 years in jail in two spells. In the history of freedom struggle in India no one has been put into the confinement for so many years, perhaps no political prisoners in the known history of the world has ever spent such a length of 39 years in jail.²³

While Surendra Sai is remembered for his unwavering spirit to resist infamy and injustice by one and all, he is hailed as the primary factor for a synthetic cultures. In Western Odisha in which there is a fine blending of tribal and upper class culture. There arose a “Free for all” situation in Sambalpur region, at a time when untouchability and detestation of lower castes were social custom and facilitated social economic upliftment of the lower status of the society.²⁴

Even today, the heroic spirit of Surendra is an unfailing source of inspiration to the young of the country. His courageous spirit of advantage and patriotism are examples to one and all.

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