



## Veer Surendra Sai, The Great Freedom Fighter

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Veer Surendra Sai was a great patriot and actively participated in the Revolution of 1857 i.e. the Sepoy Mutiny. The rebel hero of Sambalpur revolted in rising against the British Rule and that continued for seven years, whereas in India, the Sepoy Mutiny collapsed in 1858. *Raja Arjun Singh*, the *Raja of Porahat*, *Ramachandra Samantasinghar*, Ex-Zamindar of *Balia* in the district of Cuttack and *Chakhi Khuntia* alias Chandan Hazuri, the sepoy panda of Puri were the other rebels of Odisha. Similarly, *Kunj Singh*, *Hatee Singh* and *Madho Singh*, the *Ghens* zamindar were the close associates of *Surendra* and fought against the British troops. No doubt the British were terrified and took revenge on them. At last they were victimised but their sacrifice for motherland was inscribed in golden letters of history. *Surendra's* heroism and bravery made him a legendary figure.



*Surendra Sai* (23<sup>rd</sup> January 1809 – 28<sup>th</sup> February 1884) was an Indian freedom fighter and sacrificed his life fighting against the British East India Company. He was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1809 in a village called *Khinda* about

40 kilometres to the north of Sambalpur, Odisha. He was one of the seven children of Dharma Singh. The family was a part of the Sambalpur state ruling clan. He belonged to the branch initiated by *Aniruddha Sai*, son of *Madhukar Sai*, the ruler of Sambalpur. *Surendra* was a direct descendant from *Madhukar Sai* and the legal heir to be crowned after the death of King *Maharaja Sai* (1827). But he was not accepted by British power for his revolutionary character and

the company government considered *Surendra* their dead enemy. Truly he was an uncompromising enemy of British Raj from his young age. Being annoyed the British Government



installed the widow queen of *Maharaja Sai Rani Mohan Kumari* as the ruler of the state. This was against the customs and traditions where only the male rulers were acceptable by the population. Thus disturbance broke out and conflicts developed between the recognised ruler and the claimants for the throne of Sambalpur. Among other claimants *Surendra* being one of the descendants of the ruling clan, had the most prominent claim. But the Company Government stood as an iron bar in front of *Surendra* and he was deprived of his legal rights. On the other hand, *Rani Mohan Kumari* became unpopular and her administration made the subjects suffocated. Her land revenue policy was critical and did not satisfy the *Gond* and *Binjhal* tribal landlords. They were afraid of the loss of power to the British. The British authorities took drastic steps and dethroned *Rani Mohan Kumari*. In her place put *Narayan Singh*, a descendant of royal family but born in a low caste as the king of Sambalpur. That hurt the sentiment of *Surendra Sai* and he was completely ignored by the British Government. *Surendra* and his close associates, the *Gond* Zamindars created disturbances. That took a violent shape of rebellion. *Surendra* took a vow to take revenge on the British. Time and again encounters occurred with British troops. Finally, *Surendra*, his brother *Udanta Sai* and his uncle *Balaram Singh* were captured and sent to Hazaribag jail. During imprisonment *Balaram Singh* died. Gradually the fate of Sambalpur became pale due to revengeful attitude of the British power. King *Narayan Sing* died in 1847 and had no male child. Lord Dalhousie implemented the Doctrine of lapse and annexed Sambalpur in 1849. Time passed by. The great revolution of the Indian Sepoys started in 1857. The angry Sepoys of *Ramgarh* battalion broke open the iron bars of *Hazaribag* Jail and set

*Surendra Sai*, his brother *Udanta Sai* free. Resistance to British continued and took a volcanic shape in Sambalpur under the leadership of *Surendra*. He got immense support from his brothers, sons, relatives and the zamindars. They sacrificed their every drop of blood for the motherland. No doubt *Surendra* was a noted hero of the Sepoy Mutiny. He was one among the great freedom fighters and Indian history was glorified for him. Similarly, *Chakhi Khuntia* contributed a lot to the Sepoy Mutiny being a close associate of *Jhansi Rani Laxmibai*, one of the frontline leaders of the great revolution.

*Surendra Sai* was very much kind-hearted and sympathetic towards economically backward people. He also espoused the cause of the downtrodden tribal people in Sambalpur by promoting their language and culture. That was a strong response to the higher castes. On the contrary, British tried to exploit them to establish their political power in Sambalpur region. *Surendra* vehemently opposed their inhuman treatment and money exploiting attitude and protested them at the age of 18 in 1827. During the Sepoy Mutiny *Surendra* became a constant headache for the British until his surrender in 1862. He had spent a prisoner's life of 17 years in *Hazaribag* jail. After his final arrest he served a term of 20 years and that included his detention of 19 years in the remote *Asirgarh* hill fort until he breathed his last.

*Surendra Sai* was a great fighter, well trained in guerrilla warfare and horsemanship. He was looked upon by many as their leader. He got tremendous support from some zamindars and tribal people. After he was set free from the *Hazaribag* jail, moved straight to Sambalpur and warmly accepted by the people. He acquired a fighting force of about 1500 men and started



guerrilla warfare from 1857 to 1862. On the other hand the British Army created horror and started inhuman treatment. They burnt the houses of common people and punished the innocents for the support to *Surendra*. Many times *Surendra* escaped from the hawk – eyes of Britons and kept burning freedom struggle.

The revolt at Sambalpur in 1857 was mainly a tribal rebellion. The tribal zamindars of *Ghens, Kolabira, Paharsirgira, Machida, Kodabaga, Laida, Loisinga, Lakhampur, Bheden, Patkulanda* etc. joined their hands with *Surendra* giving up their comforts and luxury. Some of them had to hide themselves in the nearby jungles. Some lost their states; some were brutally killed in the battle and some were arrested and hanged. Many were imprisoned. But the tribal people were better known for their sacrifice and unbelievable courage. *Surendra* challenged the mighty British power solely relying on their strength. *Surendra* was very much cunning and continued protest in a planned manner. He organised several groups under the leadership of zamindars and his own relatives. The British were surprised and puzzled because they had to face several attacks at a time in different places.

The climate in Sambalpur was not favourable for the British officers and they were frequently subjected to illness. Owing to frequent attacks by *Surendra* and his associates G.F. Cockburn, the commissioner of Cuttack was perturbed. He was not at all in a position to withdraw the British troops from the unhealthy climate of the jungle and was forced to send medical teams to them headed by Dr. Moore and Dr. Hanson. They were accompanied by a corps of *Sebundee* soldiers. But they were severely attacked by the rebels near *Jujunara*. Dr. Moore

was killed and Dr. Hanson had a difficult escape in disguise in the jungles. Later on, captain Leigh with fifty soldiers moved to the spot. But the rebels were bloodthirsty. In the battle with them some of the British soldiers were killed and some wounded. The Britons got a terrible setback and prepared to take revenge on *Surendra*. Cockburn sent more and more soldiers to Sambalpur to face the situation. Capt. Wood, Capt. Woodbridge, Captain Shakespeare, Capt. Knocker, Capt. *Hadow*, Capt. Sweeny, Lt. Vallance etc. were the British Military officers and they worked hard to defeat the rebels. The close of 1857 and the following years witnessed a horrible period in the history of Sambalpur. The British troops were very strong and well equipped with arms and ammunition. The rebels were also equally strong. But they were no match for the British in open plain. For that they returned to guerrilla warfare. Both the sides sustained heavy loss due to revenge, cruelty and retaliation. Besides the rebels, the sufferings of the common villagers knew no bound. Their houses looted, innocents were killed and sometimes capital punishment was imposed. But the people of Sambalpur were spirited. They were ready to sacrifice everything including their lives for the nation. Patriotism reached the climax. For the British military officers *Surendra Sai* and other rebels became a nightmare.

Captain Wood with a powerful army invaded a centre of the rebels on *Papanaga* hill. Most of his soldiers assembled at *Kudapali* at the foot of the hill and a few soldiers climbed up the hill. On meeting the rebels, they pretended to turn away. The rebels were encouraged and chased the party to the plain. They could not understand the shrewd policy of Wood. Wood was successful in bringing the enemy to the plain and immediately charged down with cavalry. The



situation was horrible. Fifty-three rebels were dead, many wounded and eleven were taken into prison. Unfortunately, their leader *Chhabila Sai*, the fifth brother of *Surendra* was killed in the battle field. The incident occurred on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1857. Another significant battle was fought on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1858 and Captain Woodbridge besieged the fort of *Paharsirgira*. In the battle Captain Woodbridge was shot dead by the violent rebels. They chopped off his head and threw him naked. This incident made the British troops more aggressive and they adopted brutal measures. Froster established a reign of terror at Sambalpur. The Rajas and zamindars were severely dealt with. *Ujjal Sai*, the brother of *Surendra* took shelter near the *Raja* of Patna. In order to escape from the fine of Rupees one thousand, imposed by the Britons on the *Raja*, he arrested *Ujjal* and handed over to Froster. Col. Froster hanged him without a trial. Forster started military rule and tyranny in Sambalpur.

Major Impey was appointed as the Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur (April 1861). He adopted a separate policy and believed in conciliatory measures and not in military operation. That could be successful and the rebels would surrender. Proclamation of amnesty was issued on the 24<sup>th</sup> September and accordingly the rebels would be pardoned if they surrender. The policy of Impey was successful. *Mitrabhanu*, the only son of *Surendra Sai* was the first to lay down his arms. He met Impey on the 7<sup>th</sup> January and cordially received. Being inspired *Dhruba Sai* and *Udanta Sai* declared surrender. Then *Hatee Singh*, a strong leader of the rebels surrendered and that compelled *Surendra* to negotiate with the British. He sent a letter of proposal for surrender and negotiation to Gadi for consideration. Impey negated the proposals and

conditions proposed by *Surendra* but agreed to grant some liberal pension. *Surendra* made up his mind and requested to send some money for the arrear payment of his soldiers. Immediately Impey sent him a sum of rupees five hundred. *Surendra* was moved by the liberal attitude of Impey and sent his intimation to surrender. On the 16<sup>th</sup> May 1862 the surrender drama had its climax. *Surendra* surrendered on a guarantee of 'Life, liberty and free pardon'. He was granted pension of 1200/- per annum. Liberal pension was also granted to the other family members of *Surendra*. The other rebels were leaderless and surrendered their ammunitions with a hope of liberal treatment and financial gain. Expect *Kunjai Singh* and *Kamal Singh* all other rebel leaders surrendered. Thus, the rebel started before the Sepoy Mutiny in Sambalpur, took momentum in 1858 and at last came to an end in 1862.

Some arrogant British officers did not support the conciliatory policy of their government. The rebels were criminals in the eyes of the Britons and pardon to them was not at all acceptable by them. Especially pardon to criminals like *Ghens* brothers was illegal in their eyes and the Deputy Commissioner, Raipur demanded rejection of pardon of them. J.N. *Derill*, the Superintendent of Police, Sambalpur asserted that *Surendra* had direct connection with *Kunjai Singh* and *Kamal Singh* and involved in criminal offences and dacoities with them. He suggested immediate arrest of *Surendra*. Meanwhile Sir Richard Temple visited Sambalpur in March 1863. Some distinguished persons met him with a representation and demanded for a *Chauhan* to be restored to the *Gadi* for peace and tranquillity in Sambalpur. They made it clear that the people of the district were suffocated by the tyrannical attitude and British



maladministration. The chief commissioner rejected their demands and suspected *Surendra* that he instigated the people for such an anti-government representation. In spite of heavy pressure from the British officers *Surendra* escaped arrest because Major Impey had deep faith in the honesty and integrity of *Surendra*.

Time kills and time heals. Situation was made tense for *Surendra*. Major Impey died in Sambalpur (1863) and Captain Cambridge joined as the Deputy Commissioner in his place. *Surendra's* misfortune began. Cambridge denounced the conciliatory policy and was quite apprehensive of another rebellion from the side of *Surendra*. He immediately planned to arrest *Surendra*. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1864 night the secret plan to capture *Surendra* was materialised. Two police officers, Stewart and *Beril* obtained permission from the higher authorities and arrested *Surendra*, his brothers, close friends and other follower rebels. They were sent to Raipur jail. The British did not feel safe to keep *Surendra* in any jails of Odisha. His presence might give birth to another agitation and that was the forecast of some officers. The decision was taken for the trial of *Surendra* in the Raipur jail. The Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur submitted the evidences and charges against *Surendra* and other convicts. When their arrest was a conspiracy; the trial was a mockery. The commissioner of *Chhatisgarh* sentenced *Surendra* and other convicts with transportation of life and fate of the rebels along with *Surendra* was doomed forever. The accused *Surendra* file an appeal against the order of the commissioner but no favourable order could be obtained. The British officers were preoccupied in mind to keep *Surendra* behind bars and they knew the consequences in opening the wounded tiger from the cage. In spite of the observation of Judicial Commissioner John

Scarlett Campbell that the documents against the convicts were gross forgeries and no real proof was against the accused. Still *Surendra* and six other prisoners were detained at *Nagpur* under regulation III of 1818 and kept in *Nagpur* jail till April 1866. After that the prisoners were taken to *Asirgarh* jail.

*Asirgarh* fort jail was the silent spectator of the last miserable days of the great freedom fighter *Surendra Sai*. In the jail *Medini Sai* died in 1876. *Dhruba* and *Mitrabhanu* were set free on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1876. The last day of *Surendra Sai* in the dark cell of the *Asirgarh* jail was still in darkness. It was reported that, he passed away on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1884.

Freedom movement is the golden aspect for any nation. In India it was spectacular one and it continued for years to achieve the goal. In every step of freedom fight Odisha was far ahead. The first war of independence sprouted in Odisha in 1817 and the English historians restricted it to *Paik* Rebellion without giving due importance. If considered from many an angle it would not be unfair to mention the *Paik* Rebellion-1817 as the first war of Independence. Similarly, the armed rebellion of 1857 against the company government was named the Sepoy Mutiny by some foreign historians. But *Dr. Pattavi Sitaramaya* described it the first war of Independence and accepted by the Indians without any controversy. In the *Said* rebellion the role of *Veer Surendra Sai* was heroic one. Even before and after the Sepoy Mutiny he had shaken the British Rule in Odisha. The British military officer Major Impey could realise the futility of military operation against *Veer Surendra Sai* and changed his policy. He rightly described that *Surendra Sai* could never be defeated. It justified the strength and strong fighting spirit of *Surendra Sai*.



The sacrifice of Veer Surendra Sai, Ujjal, Udanta, Dhruba, Medini, Mitrabhanu, Sri Krushna Bora, Madhu Gauntia, Jagudiwan, Arjuna Singh, Kamal Singh and others were of high admiration during the Sepoy Mutiny and the British government frightened. *Surendra* was the frontline leader. His six brothers, Madho Singh the Raja of Ghens and his all sons were severely punished. Some of them were hanged and shot dead. Some were banished and *Surendra*'s last days perished in the dark cell of the jail. But history had never given proper importance to them. Mr. *Surendra* Nath Sen the writer of the book 'Eighteen fifty-seven - 1857'. The preface of the book was written by the then centre education minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. In that book *Surendra Sai* of Odisha was not given deserving justice. Only a few sentences were written on the great patriot. The first centenary of the Sepoy Mutiny was observed in 1957. In the Indian history compilation, the researchers did not describe the bravery and sacrifice of Veer *Surendra Sai* as it ought to be. Still then *Surendra Sai* is great and remains great for all time to come.

The people of Sambalpur region feel *Surendra Sai* should have been recorded with greater importance in the history of Indian freedom movement. Historians and research scholars also have been blamed. Many important documents and papers relating to *Surendra Sai* are said to be still in different archives of Bhopal, Nagpur and Raipur. The historians have to go through those records and history on *Surendra Sai* be properly written. Government of Odisha have taken some steps to glorify the great freedom fighter *Surendra*. In the honour of *Sai* the name of the University College of the oldest engineering college is changed to Veer *Surendra Sai* University of Technology (2009). The government

of India put a statue of *Surendra Sai* in the premises of Parliament of India (2005). One of the oldest colleges in Odisha has been named after him as Veer *Surendra Sai* Medical College, located in Burla. Government of India has released a postal stamp in his honour. Veer *Surendra Sai* stadium is also named after him. The Jharsuguda Air Port in Odisha is named in the honour of *Surendra Sai* (2018). VSS (Veer *Surendra Sai*) Market Complex has been made in his honour at Chhend Colony of Rourkela, Odisha.

Time progresses. Past history becomes a legend for the future generation. But *Veer Surendra Sai* lives in history as a great martyr. He fought against the British almost single handed and more importantly against the most formidable of British imperialism. He suffered untold miseries throughout his life. He was really a lion whom the British Empire dare not to kill or to see him moving freely. The then British Major Impey had no hesitation to declare that *Surendra Sai* was never defeated and would never be defeated. The name of the great freedom fighter dazzles in the pages of history and to dazzle for all time to come.

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