

The Revolt of 1857 and Veer Surendra Sai

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It is an accepted fact that nations evolve their history under circumstances encountered, managed and transmitted from the past. And therefore, historical legacy is indispensable in the collective memory of a nation, hence creation of a collective identity formation through a national event as a cultural exercise is universally accepted as a natural urge. On the basis of it, the event of 1857 was a watershed development in the historical life of modern India where the political identity of the Indian nation state began to take shape. It is, therefore, the revolt of 1857 must be viewed as a prelude to a long process of collective identity formation for national liberation. It was on this backdrop the events in Orissa in 1857 have to be viewed and interpreted.

The most unique and conspicuous happening that epitomizes the contribution of Orissa to the freedom struggle of India was spearheaded by Veer Surendra Sai in the remote hilly tracts of West Orissa and the terrains of Chhatisgarh. The Uprising and its consequences



appear to be singular because nowhere in the length and breath of India such resistance was offered to British administration. Veer Surendra Sai after being released from Hajaribag Jail heralded a new phase of confrontation with British

by coming back to Sambalpur in July 1857, to inspire and give leadership to his old associates and fellowmen whose unflinching support and sacrifices for the cause of freedom was ever burning in their memory. His revolution was an integral part of the historic revolution of 1857. In spite of its regional significance, his revolution can not be dissociated from its national character and the History of Indian Revolution of 1857 will remain imperfect and incomplete

without taking into account the role of Veer Surendra Sai in their great national upheaval. It is an injustice to refer the event of 1857 as a 'Mutiny or Revolt' since there are enough evidence to say that its echoes were felt in Great Britain as a 'popular movement' against British authority. Stanly, Secretary of State, Govt. of Great Britain informed the Parliament that there has been a great



uprising in India in 1857. Metcalfe is also known to have termed this event as a 'social churning'. Even the Daily Tribune reported this matter recognizing mass character of the event. The leader of the opposition of the Parliament of Great Britain Disraeli warned the Govt. about display of popular discontentment by the Indians against the British access. On analysis it is, in fact found that various community groups have come together across the society with unity of purpose to oust the British from their sway once for all. The event was largely characterised by a spontaneous violent reaction of the people against ill-tempered policies of the company regime.

The very presence of Veer Surendra Sai at Sambalpur was viewed seriously by Capt. Dalton, who immediately informed the Asst. Commissioner, Sambalpur, Capt. Leigh to be very careful since popular support of Sambalpur was overwhelming for Veer Surendra Sai and the loyalty of Ramagarh Battalion Station at Sambalpur was doubtful. Even if there was calm at Sambalpur and Veer Surendra Sai was not well Capt. Leigh apprehended trouble and requested the Commissioner of Chhotnagpur and Cuttack to supplement troops to meet the urgency. The initial attempts for settlement of the problems connected with the punishment of Veer Surendra Sai did not materialize for which there arose unprecedented zeal among the followers. To reorganize the depleted forces to come forward for a fresh uprising, Karuna Gantia of "Kolabira" took the initiative and organized militia by contacting Madho Singh(Ghens), Janardan Singh(Pahadsirgida), Pitambar Singh (Patkulinda), Manohar Singh(Bheden), Dayal Sarkar (Kharsal), Dhanu Singh (Marchida) and others.

Meanwhile Sambalpur was deserted by the elites and well to do families apprehending turmoil

at any time. It was during this period support poured in for Veer Surendra Sai from all quarters precisely because of ill feeling towards British administration and sudden rise of revenue payment i.e. an unprecedented increase from Rs.8,000/- to Rs.75,000/- at a stretch. It is on record that during this period Balmukunda Patnaik, son of Jagu Dewan was Naik Tahasildar at Sambalpur who organized secret meetings of the rebels and subscribed Rs.500/- through Pakir Singh, brother of late Raja Narayan Singh. Balaram Patnaik, Tahasildar of Baragarh is also known to have contributed Rs.80/- to Surendra Sai and party. The common people who were tortured are known to have submitted before Surendra Sai promising him all help and assistance since they will be denied their hearth and house if they come forward openly against British administration. It appears that a common platform consisting of all walks of people was raised against the British authority under the leadership of Veer Surendra Sai. This phenomenon clearly demonstrates that there was an uprising by involving everyone of Sambalpur region against the British authority. Here, there was no question of any narrow or personal motive of Surendra Sai, on the other hand, he was acknowledged as the supreme leader of the fight between the people and the Govt. wherein the aim was freedom from foreign yoke. Having assured popular support and the militia organized by the different zamindars, Surendra Sai heralded the banner of defiance against the British authority in early August 1857, by organizing 5 strategic posts, 2 on the road from Sambalpur to Nagpur, 2 on the road from Ranchi to Hajaribag and one on the road from Sambalpur to Cuttack and stationed himself at Debrigarh with a sizable force at his command. As per description given by Warloo the strategic points were having high and thick walls with



boulders hanging on the trees in the entry path. In fact some of the boulders used by Surendra Sai of different size and shapes are still found in the Dr.N.K.Sahu, Museum, Sambalpur University. It is wonder that a man without formal education and bereft of modern arms and ammunitions could organize so strong a base that it baffled the British soldiers. It is indeed an example of powerful organization, super vigilance and electrifying leadership. The vigorous encounters at Jujumura on 19th November 1857 resulting with the death of Dr. Moore, the battle at Kudepali, the battle at Singora created ripples in the rank and file of British forces forcing the authorities to strengthen the military base involving battalions from every quarters. The death of Woodbridge at the hands of Janardan Singh at Pahadsirgida on 12th February 1858 heightened the prestige of rebels who divided themselves into groups to organize guerilla fight at different strategic places. Meanwhile Capt. Forster replacing Capt. Leigh created a hide and seek situation between the Rebels and British forces adjusting to cope with the changing situation. The situation that came after joining Forster was marked by fiendish cruelty of the British who after suppressing the revolution in other parts of India boasted of superiority of power and on the other hand the revenge and retaliation of the rebels who resorted strictly to guerilla fighting. The revolution in Sambalpur from April 1858 was more severe and methodical and ultimately mighty British forces have to bow down before it. The policy of Forster was to isolate Surendra Sai from the support and sympathy of the feudatory chiefs and Jamindars which according to him will cripple his resources and strength. He further started a policy of coercion and terror as deterrent measure for those who supported or were suspected to have support

for the rebels. The Sambalpur jail having capacity for less than 100 prisoners accommodated about 300 convicts and many innocent persons were put to torture on mere suspicion. It was during this period Veer Surendra Sai with the close support of a few trusted zamindars entered into understanding with the state of Rewa, Pendra, Surguja in the adjoining of Central Province and stationed himself in the Manikgarh hill fort. Surendra Sai's new strategy was not to fight the British forces direct but to attack the supporters of the British and to smash them in order to terrify and discourage such supporters and collected sustenance and resources for his troops. He was not afraid of encountering the British forces and build up huge defences to meet any eventuality. He instructed his followers not to march from place to place in large number but move in groups of twos or threes to avoid notice of the enemies and not have an occasion for a big clash. By this way he thwarted the various moves by the Deputy Commissioner of Raipur, Sambalpur to apprehend him. The situation was so perplexing for the British authority that Capt. Forster in spite of his military plannings and iron administration found himself helpless and was unable to control the vigour of the revolution. His policy of coercion and terror proved ineffective and he had to quit Sambalpur discredited and utterly dejected in April 1861 giving way to Major H.B.Impey as his successor. The appointment of Major Impey as Deputy Commissioner marked a turning point in the history of Sambalpur. The large piles of arms and ammunitions was futile and nothing positive was achieved. He was forced to follow a policy of conciliation and pardon to set right the shimmering condition in Sambalpur and entered into negotiation with rebels. After availing positive response from R.N.Shore, Commissioner of



Cuttack, he issued a proclamation on 24th September 1861 to free the rebels confined in the jails of Cuttack and Sambalpur. Attempts were made to ascertain whereabouts of Surendra Sai. After having submission of Udanta Sai and others, that affected the surrender of Surendra Sai along with strong followers Gajaraj Singh, Khageswar Dao, Fate Singh, Kunjal Singh, assuring them with pardon and sanction of pension for maintenance. Lord Elgin in his letter dated 22nd November 1862 reported to Secretary of State for India that Surendra Sai "Sambalpur Rebel" had surrendered.

The surrender of Surendra Sai did not put to end the unrest in Sambalpur, and the British Govt. found him to be a strong centre of trouble even after he adopted a life of peace. To meet the urgency Sambalpur was transferred from the jurisdiction of the Commissioner of Cuttack to that of the administration of Central Provinces on 30th April 1862. The rebels like Kamal Singh, Kundan Singh, Mohan Singh and Salikram Bariha refused to surrender and they continued to revolt with greater vehemence with avowed object of removing the British. Subsequently a cry was raised in Sambalpur that Surendra Sai has run off again into jungle. Be that as it may be, the Britishers found the presence of Surendra Sai at Sambalpur as a constant problem and hatched a plot to get rid of him. Finally with the help of one Dayanidhi Meher Surendra Sai was apprehended, faced trial and sent to Asirgarh jail. His detention was subject of controversy between the British administration and judiciary and on analysis it was found that the case, trial and detention of Surendra Sai was illegal. However, he continued to stay in Asirgarh jail till he breathed last.

In retrospect it is visualized that the patriotism and heroism exhibited by Veer

Surendra Sai is unparalleled in the history of freedom movement of India. He was not only a great revolutionist throughout his life but also an inspiring leader. Here was a person who was found as dangerous in peace as he was in war. It is most befitting to end, with the assessment of this great soul in the words of my Guru Dr. N.K.Sahoo, who said a dispassionate analysis of the revolutionary activities of Veer Surendra Sai reveals that the ideal for which he fought was much above regional pettinesses as his aim was against alien domination over the country. In this respect he merits comparison with his contemporary rebel leaders Garibaldi of Italy and Kossuth of Hungary. What is more, he fought, almost single handed, against the most formidable forces of imperialism, staking all that was near and dear to him and suffered untold miseries all through his life. In the annals of freedom movement against British rule in India he stands firm and unique and deserves homage of the whole nation.

But tell me when was freedom bought
Without a bitter price to pay ?
This is a truth I feel and know
I'll die to make my country free

Thus sings the Russian revolutionist Nalivaiko, leader of the peasant and Cossack uprising in the Ukraine. Veer Surendra Sai embodies this idealism.

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