

SURENDRA SAI: AN INBORN REBEL AND INDOMITABLE LEADER OF RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN SAMBALPUR AGAINST BRITISH COLONIALISM.

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ABSTRACT:

The role of Veer Surendra Sai in the resistance movement against the British colonialism is a landmark in the annals of history of Sambalpur in particular and Orissa in general. Surendra Sai was a born rebel and an uncompromising enemy of the British Authority. His father Dharam Singh was a descendant of Aniruddha Sai, son of Madhukar Sai, the fourth Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. The member of this Sai family demanded the throne of Sambalpur after the death of Maharaja Sai in 1827 A.D. However, the British set aside the claims of Surendra and installed Mohan Kumari, the widow Rani of Maharaja Sai, the throne of Sambalpur without caring for the legitimate right of Veer Surendra Sai. As a result, revolt erupted whole region of Western Odisha. Surendra Sai began protesting the British at the age of 18 in 1827. He revolted against the colonial power relentlessly for 20 years i.e. From 1827 to 1840 in the first phase and from 1857 to 1864 in the second phase but had never bowed down his head before the enemies. He spent 37 years of his life inside the prison. During this resistance movement his six brothers, uncle Dharam Singh and many Zamindars and Tribals helped him whole heartedly. This great rebel returned to his immortal soul on 28th February 1884 in Ashirgarh fort but he remained unsung, unrecognized and neglected.

Keywords: Sambalpur, Chauhans, Surendra Sai, British, resistance movement.

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1. Introduction:

Veer Surendra Sai, the indomitable leader of resistance movement of Sambalpur was born on 23rd January 1809 A.D. in Chauhan royal family in village Rajpur- Khinda situated at a distance of 21 miles, on the north of Sambalpur town. He had six brothers – Udanta Sai, Dhruva Sai, Ujjal Sai, Chhabila Sai, Jajjala Sai and Medina Sai – who stood him in sunshine and shower. His only sister Anjana was a celebate throughout her life.

Surendra had his early education in village school. However, he was more interested in military training than in scholastic education and it is said that he used to absent himself from the school to learn archery and guerilla warfare from the Gonds and Binjhals. His organizing capacity and imposing personality won the love of the Zamindars, the Gauntias and the common people who came in touch with him.

He had married the daughter of Hatibadi Zamindar of the then Gangpur state and had become the father of a son named Mitrabhanu Sai and one daughter. His father Dharam Singh was a descendant of Aniruddha Sai, son of Madhukar Sai, the fourth Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. The member of this Sai family demanded the throne, being the next to the main line of Sambalpur after the death of Maharaja Sai in 1827 AD. Apart from that, another claimant to the throne of Sambalpur was Govinda Singh, the eldest son of the Zamindar of Jharsuguda who was a descendant of Chhatra Sai, the seventh Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. It before the British forces had already occupied Sambalpur in January 1804 AD. After defeating the Bhonsal Raja in the Third Anglo - Maratha war of 1817, the British decided to establish their paramount over Sambalpur. In 1818 AD, after the death of Jayanta Singh, Maharaja Sai succeeded to the throne. As Maharaja Sai had no son, Surendra Sai who then represented the Rajpur-Khinda family, asserted his claims for the 'Gadi' of Sambalpur. However, British set aside the claims of Surendra and Govinda Singh and installed Mohan Kumari, the widow Rani of Maharaja Sai, the throne of Sambalpur. This was done in flagrant violation of the custom and convention of the land and conservative people were shocked at this decision. She was completely unfit for the managing the State Administration. The inefficiency of the Rani leading to nepotism, corruption and exploitation, embittered the situation. Therefore, disturbances immediately broke out and for some years there was constant discord between the recognized ruler and other claimants to the chiefship.

Surendra Sai was an able general whose unique organizing capacity and sound military knowledge had become a constant source of headache for the British rulers. The British Ramgarh Battalion stationed at Sambalpur under the command of Captain Higgins could not face Surendra Sai as he was an expert in guerrilla warfare¹. In order to crush the rebellion, another battalion of British soldiers under Captain Wilkinson rushed to Sambalpur from Hazaribagh of Bihar. Captain Wilkinson hanged many of the insurgents and put a large number of them in prison. Though the rebellion was crushed to some extent it could not be wiped out completely. Hence, the British Government under compulsion of the situation dethroned Queen Mohan Kumari and sent Rani Mohan Kumari to Cuttack to remain as a pensioner in 1833 AD. Narayan Singh's mother was of inferior caste. He was for sometimes a personal attendant of Rani Mohan Kumari, who had a special liking for him and she herself probably suggested his name. The decision came as a surprise to Narayan Singh and he 'prayed the Agent no to exalt him to so dangerous position'. On 11th October, 1833, the British installed Narayan Singh the throne of Sambalpur. He had no capacity to manage administration due to extreme old age.

As a result of which, the right to the throne was challenged by other contending members of Rajpur-Khinda family Balaram Singh, a brother of Dharam Singh of the Khinda family took up the cause of his nephew, Surendra Sai and guided the rebellion on the ground that they had more legitimate claims over the throne. The Gond (tribal) people also revolted against Narayan Singh. So, once again, the rebellion erupted at Sambalpur. In 1837 Surendra Sai, Udanta Sai, Balaram Singh and Balabhadra Deo, the Zamindar of Lakhanpur assembled together at Debrigarh to decide the future course of action. Debrigarh in Barapahar was the most important stronghold of the insurgents. There, on one occasion, Surendra Sai and his friend, Balabhadra Deo were enjoying mid day siesta, when they were taken by surprise by the Sepoys of Narayana Singh who led to that place by Pahadu Ganda, a traitorous deserter of Surendra Sai. In this skirmish that followed, Balabhadra Deo, the Gond Zamindar of Lakhanpur, who was a supporter of Surendra Sai was killed mercilessly. Fortunately Surendra Sai and his followers escaped to continue the agitation still more vigorously¹. (Das-39) (**Das, A. Life of Surendra Sai,p.39**)

2. Rebellion of Surendra Sai – (First Phase: 1827-1840)

Since 1827 AD both Balaram Singh and his nephew Surendra Sai had been claiming the 'Gadi' of

Sambalpur as the legal heir apparent. But the British authority repeatedly ignored the claim of Surendra Sai regarding the throne of Sambalpur. That is why, Surendra Sai decided to rebel against the British policy with the help of his uncle Balam Sai, his own six brothers namely Udyanta, Dhruva, Ujjala, Chhabila, Jajjala and Medini, the local Zamindars and Gauntias.

Durjaya Singh, the Zamindar of Rampur, was an active supporter of Narayana Singh against the insurgents. Surendra Sai, with the hope of winning him to his side, sent him a messenger who came back insulted. Thereupon, Surendra Sai with a group of followers attacked Rampur in 1840 and razed the fort to the ground. Durjay Singh fled to Himgiri but his father and his son were killed in the battle² (Malley-31). Shortly after this incident, when Surendra Sai was proceeding to Patna State, he was made onus of this incident and he was attacked by the British army on his way and arrested with his brother Udyanta Sai and uncle Balam Singh. They were tried for their complicity in the Rampur murder case and on being sentenced to imprisonment for life, were sent them to the Hazaribagh for detention there in 1840 AD³.(Mukherjee-267) Balam Singh who was a guide of the rebels died in jail some time, after his imprisonment.

During staying of Surendra Sai at Hazaribagh jail, Narayan Singh died on 10th September, 1849 leaving no son to succeed him. The Governor General, Lord Dalhousie then annexed Sambalpur by applying the Doctrine of Lapse. The claim of Surendra Sai upon the throne of Sambalpur was justifiable and legal but the British authorities were afraid of his strong personality and extreme popularity. After annexation of Sambalpur, the British took some measures which caused dissatisfaction among Zamindars as well as the common people. The British authorities showed no sympathy for the tribal Zamindars and Gauntias and brought them under their rigorous control. The revenue paid by them was indiscriminately raised. It is revealed from a record that, the amount paid by the State as annual tribute previous in 1849 was Rs. 8,800 whereas that amount rose to Rs. 74,000 in 1854 A. D. At that time none of the tribal Zamindars had the capacity of giving leadership to their people and awaiting their favourite leader Surendra. This opportunity came when mutineers broke into Hazaribagh jail and released all prisoners including Surendra Sai in 1857. Thereafter, the tribal of Sambalpur burst into open rebellion under the leadership of Surendra Sai.

3. Rebellion of Surendra Sai – (Second Phase: 1857-1864)

On 30th July 1857 at the time of Sepoy Mutiny, the rebellious sepoys forcibly dashed inside the Hazaribagh Jail and freed Surendra Sai along with 32 prisoners. He had already spent as many as 17 years before the mutineers broke open the jail in 1857. Surendra Sai returned to Sambalpur and organised the people to fight against the Britishers. Surendra Sai was fugitive and an escaped prisoner. He was declared as a rebel by the British authority and a reward of Rs.250/- had been declared for his arrest and his brother.

On 13th October, 1857 Surendra Sai accompanied by the supporters made a representation to Captain R.T. Leigh, the Senior Assistant Commissioner of Sambalpur for the remission of the sentence of imprisonment on him and for his installation as the Raja of Sambalpur. G.F.Cockburn, the Commissioner of Orissa opposed to any leniency being shown to Surendra Sai. He strongly instructed Surendra Sai's deportation. In the meantime, in anticipation of rebellion; the British Government brought more troops to Sambalpur. In Sambalpur, Surendra Sai was treated as a political prisoner. His residence was strictly guarded and his movement closely watched. In such circumstances, Surendra Sai anticipated troubles and fled to the Khinda where his brother Udyant was staying. On the night of 31st October, 1857, he then broke into rebellion and appealed to the people to join him in liberating Sambalpur from the British paramount. Many tribal Zamindars and Gauntias had joined hands with him.

The Rebellion of Sambalpur in 1857 was mainly a tribal rebellion. The tribal Zamindars of Ghens, Kolabira, Paharsirgira, Machida, Kodabaga, Laida, Loisingha, Lakhanpur, Bheden, Pakulanda etc had joined it espousing the cause of Surendra Sai. They gave up their comforts and resorted to jungle life. Some of them lost their estates, some were killed in the battle, some were arrested and hanged and many were imprisoned. The tribal were noted for their sacrifice and heroism. Surendra Sai could challenge the mighty British power through their strength and support. Surendra Sai organized the rebels into several groups in different places. Sambalpur's connection with Hazaribagh, Ranchi, Cuttack and Nagpur were for sometime cut off by the rebels.

4. The British took aggressive measures to suppress the rebellion.

It became difficult for the Government troops to carry on operations against the rebels in

the jungles. Two British Medical Officers named Dr T.More and Dr D. Hanson, who were proceeding to Sambalpur to give medical aid to the soldiers, were assaulted by the rebels at Jujumara. In the skirmish, Dr. Moore was killed. Dr. Hanson escaped with much difficulty by hiding in the jungle and was rescued after two days by Government soldiers. Later on, when Captain Leigh with fifty soldiers visited the spot, the rebels attacked his party and succeeded in killing and wounding several men of his detachment. G.F.Cockburn dispatched more and more troops and reinforcement Sambalpur to meet the situation.

During this time, the British Government transferred Sambalpur for the time being to the Orissa Division for the effective handling of the situation with effect from 19th December, 1857. The reason was that, it was difficult to control Sambalpur from north and the Commissioner of Chhotnagpur was hard-pressed with work. So, the district of Sambalpur, which originally belonged to Chhotnagpur Division, was proposed to be permanently transferred to the Cuttack Division.

In the meantime, Captain Wood arrived at Sambalpur from Nagpur with a cavalry. On 30th December 1857, he made a surprise attack on the rebels at Kudopali. A skirmish followed, in which fifty-three rebels including Chhabila Sai, the brother of Surendra Sai were killed. However, Surendra Sai was able to escape from the site.

On 7th January 1858, Major Bates arrived at Sambalpur and assumed overall charge of putting down the rebellion. He occupied the Jharghati Pass, situated on the way to Ranchi, which was being blocked by Udyanta Sai. He also destroyed the village Kolabira and the house of the Gauntia who was a rebel leader. The Gauntia was arrested and afterwards hanged. On 20th January 1858, G.F. Cockburn arrived at Sambalpur with troops.

On 12th February, 1858 Captain Woodbridge and Captain Wood launched an attack on the fort of Paharsirgira, the mountain stronghold of the rebels. In this encounter, the rebels shot Captain Woodbridge dead. Two days later, the naked and headless body of Woodbridge was recovered by English.

In March 1858, Colonel Forster took charge of the Sambalpur district from Captain Leigh

invested with wide military and civil power. Forster stern measures like seize of the entire food stock of the rebels for suppressing all rebellious activities. He called a meeting of the neighbouring Rajas and Zamindars and sought their co-operation for the suppression of the rebellious activities of Surendra Sai and his followers. The Raja of Patna had been fined one thousand rupees by Cockburn as he was suspected of giving shelter to Ujjal Sai, the brother of Surendra Sai, was hanged at Bolangir without undergoing any trial by British authorities. Forster also captured and hanged the Zamindars of Kharsal and Ghens. But in spite of all the repressive measures, Forster could not capture Surendra Sai, the prime mover of the rebellion.

5. Period of Conciliation in April 1861:

Major Impey was appointed as the Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur in place of Colonel Forster. He firmly believed that only conciliatory measures would induce the rebels including the leader Surendra Sai to Surrender. On studying the critical situation, Impey adopted this policy for the voluntarily surrender of rebels. On 24th September 1861, amnesty was proclaimed for all except Surendra, his brother Udyant and his son Mitrabhanu. The second Proclamation was issued on 11th October, 1861 offering free pardon to all rebels who would surrender. The proclamations attracted a large number of rebels who wanted to settle peacefully with their family and friends. Because of proclamations, many rebels returned from jungles and surrendered. The mutineers who surrendered themselves were pardoned and their confiscated properties were restored to them. When the brothers and only son of Surendra Sai, Mitrabhanu, surrendered, Major Impey treated them with respect and dignity and allowed them to stay at their village Khinda. On 16th May 1862, Surendra Sai met Major Impey inside the dense forest at night and surrendered himself. He was also allowed to stay in his village.

Towards the end of 1861 Mr. R.N. Shore, the Commissioner of Cuttack came to Sambalpur under express orders of the Government to enquire into matters connected with the rebellion. He found that Major Impey had succeeded to create ample confidence in the minds of local people and his conciliatory policy was highly appreciated. The Government of Bengal also confirmed the terms of proclamation regarding the restoration of the property to the rebels. The Zamindar of Kolabira, a staunch supporter of Surendra received very generous treatment after his surrender and Impey's conciliatory gesture convinced the rebels about the sincerity of the British Government to restore peace

and order in the long troubled district. Negotiations continued with rebels and ultimately the policy of Major Impey was crowned with success. Mitrabhanu, the only son of Surendra Sai, was the first man of the Sai family, who surrendered to Major Impey on 7th January, 1862. Two days after that Dhruva Sai and Udyant Sai announced their surrender. Hatee Singh of Ghens also surrendered before British authorities in the first week of February, 1862 AD.

Early in May, 1862 Surendra Sai started negotiation with the British authorities. He again asked for recognition of his claim to the throne of Sambalpur. But that claim was rejected by British authority. Major Impey assured him that he would be given liberal pension for that. Surendra Sai then demanded some money to pay the arrears to his soldiers. Major Impey sanctioned five hundred rupees to him. Thereafter, he surrendered to Major Impey on 16th May, 1862. He was granted a pension of Rs.1200/- per annum. Liberal pensions (Rs.4, 400) were also granted to other members of his family. Almost all other rebel leaders except Kunjal Singh and Kamal Singh surrendered to Major Impey. The resistance movement of Sambalpur thus came to an end. In 1863 Major Impey passed away.

6. Revival of repressive policy of the British:

After the death of Major Impey, the political scenarios of Sambalpur completely changed. In place of Major Impey, Captain Cumberledge became the Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur on 19th January, 1864. In the night of 23rd January, 1864,. He did not prefer to follow the policy of peace. In order to crush the rebellion from the bud, Captain Cumberledge conspired with Captain Stewart and Mr. Berryel and ransacked the hide out of Surendra Sai on 23rd January 1864 at midnight while he was asleep with his relatives and made them captives. They were taken to Raipur at the dead hour of the night. Later on Surendra Sai and his family members were sent to Nagpur Jail and finally to Ashirgarh Fort in the year 1866.

7. Period of Conspiracy:

Some British officers were not happy of the conciliatory measures of their Government. The Deputy Commissioner, Raipur, objected the grant of pardon to criminals like the Ghens brothers and demanded that the order should be withdrawn. J.N. Berial, the Superintendent of Police of Sambalpur, asserted that Surendra Sai was connected with the dacoity committed by Kamal Singh and Kunjal Singh and suggested his immediate arrest. In March 1863, Sir Richard Temple, the

Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces visited Sambalpur. Some prominent persons of the district made a representation that they had been adversely affected by the British administration and that "final tranquility would never exist at Sambalpur till a Chauhan resorted to Gadi". The Chief Commissioner categorically rejected their demand. The British Officers put pressure on the Deputy Commissioner for the arrest of Surendra Sai. Surendra Sai, his son and close followers were arrested at his residence in the Khinda village. His brothers Udyant Sai and Medini Sai were also captured from a different place. They were altogether sent to Raipur. It was decided that their case would be tried in the Court of Raipur and not in Sambalpur. The Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur submitted the evidences and charges against the convicts and after a mock trial, the Commissioner of Chhatisgarh sentenced them to deportation for life.

8. Judgment of Conspiracy

An appeal against this sentence was filed by Surendra Sai and his followers in the Court of the Judicial Commissioner, John Scarlett Campbell, which was Principal Court of Appeal in Central Provinces. John Scarlet Campbell gave the verdict that the charges against Surendra Sai and his followers were baseless and fabricated and that the Police had leveled such charges, being unable to capture Kamal Singh and other dacoits.

In spite of strong verdict of the Judicial Commissioner, Surendra Sai and six other prisoners were detained at Nagpur under Regulation III of 1818. The British officers further feared that, the presence of Surendra Sai and his followers would unsettle the mind of the people and disturb the tranquility in the district of Sambalpur. They were kept in the Nagpur Jail till April, 1866 and thereafter sent to the Fort of Ashirgarh. Surendra Sai's brother Medini Sai breathed his last in Ashirgarh Fort in 1876. Dhruva and Mitrabhanu were released on 1st January 1876. The eventful story of the great freedom fighter ended with the return of Mitrabhanu Sai to Sambalpur. But Surendra Sai was kept confined in the Fort till the end of his life. There is no authentic record regarding the last days of Surendra Sai. The last hero of the resistance movement of 1857 did not come out alive from the Fort of Ashirgarh. It was merely reported by the Commandant of the Fort of Ashirgarh that Surendra Sai, one of the State prisoners died on 28th February, 1884 at the age of about ninety.

9. Recognition to Surendra Sai:

Citizens of Sambalpur region feels Surendra Sai, should have been recorded with greater importance in the history of India's struggle for independence. According to them, he is yet to get the right place because of the state administration's ignorance and carelessness. Even historians and research scholars also have been blamed. Many important documents and papers relating to Surendra Sai are said to still exist at different archives in Bhopal, Nagpur and Raipur. The Government of Odisha is said to have done nothing in this regard.

- One of the oldest colleges in Odisha has been named after him as Veer Surendra Sai Medical College, located in Burla, Sambalpur, it is operating since 1959.
- In 2005, Government of India decided to put a statue of Surendra Sai at the premises of Parliament of India.
- In 2009, The Government of Orissa changed the name of University College of Engineering the oldest engineering college of the state to Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology, Burla in honour of this great leader.
- On 23 January 2009 people of Odisha as well as India celebrated the 2nd Birth Centenary of Surendra Sai. On the occasion, 'Paschim Odisha Agrani Sangathan' of Bhubaneswar brought out a book titled *Surendra Sai* edited by Dr. Chitrasen Pasayat and Dr. Prabhas Kumar Singh. Also, another book titled *Veer Surendra Sai: The Great Revolutionary* edited by Dr. Chitrasen Pasayat and Sri Sasanka Sekhar Panda has been published by Anusheelan, Sambalpur.
- Government of India has released a postal stamp in his honour.
- Veer Surendra Sai Stadium in Sambalpur, Orissa is named after him.

10. Unsung hero of freedom movement:

The heroes who fought against the Britishers to keep the prestige and dignity of Mother India shall be remembered by the countrymen forever. Veer Surendra Sai who was a great revolutionary has glorified the pages of Indian history for his deep patriotism, rare courage, indomitable spirit and relentless struggle against the foreign rulers. The First War of Independence, better known as the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 could not be sustained for long time in other parts of India. But it was Veer Surendra Sai who could sustain the flame of revolution till 1864 due to his uncommon mental strength and unique guerrilla warfare. In spite of his great role

in the process of freedom struggle in India, this longest prisoner has been neglected and remained unsung. His name is not found in the pages of history of the first war of Indian.

11. Conclusion:

It is clearly known from the above discussion that Veer Surendra Sai was a valiant fighter against the British imperialism. His whole life had been devoted in struggle for the cause of people such type of fighter is rare in the history of freedom movement in Orissa. He carried on an uncompromising war against the forces of British till 1862. Surendra Sai was not only a great revolutionary throughout his life but also an inspiring leader of the tribal people. He was always in favour of the down-trodden tribal people who were being exploited by the British officials. Surendra Sai spent 37 years in jail in two phases. The first phase is being 17 years i.e. from 1840-1857 A.D. and the second being 20 years i.e. from 1864 -1884 AD. The main aim of Surendra Sai was to drive British out of Sambalpur. Although he could not achieve the goal of his life but the vigorous struggle of this hero deserves to be remembered as one of those valiant fighters who defied the British colonialism in the pre nationalist period. The greatest ambition of this hero was futile due to the repressive policy adopted by the British authorities. Both patriotism and heroism have been exhibited by Surendra Sai, which is unparallel in the history of freedom movement. Really the activities of Surendra Sai in the resistance movement were like that of a gallant lion that the British authorities could neither dare to kill nor to see moving freely on his soil. Thus, the role of Surendra Sai against the British colonialism undoubtedly occupies a unique place in the annals of armed resistance movement in Orissa.

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