International Journal of Multidisciplinary Horizon

ISSN: **3049-2017**
IJMH 2026; 3(1): 18-22
© 2026 IJMH
www.themultijournal.com

Received: 24-12-2025
Accepted: 13-01-2026
Publish : 14-01-2026

Tarun Mahato
Department of History,
Rabindrabharati University

Correspondence:
Tarun Mahato
Department of History,
Rabindrabharati University

A Brief History of the Santal Movement in India

Tarun Mahato

Abstract
The Santal movement is a significant tribal uprising in the history of India, reflecting the struggle of the Santal community against exploitation, feudal oppression, and colonial policies during the 19th century. This journal examines the causes, progression, leadership, impact, and legacy of the Santal movement, highlighting its role in shaping tribal consciousness and resistance in India. The Santal Movement, also known as the Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856, was one of the earliest organized tribal uprisings against British colonial authority and feudal exploitation in India. The Santals, under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, revolted against oppressive landlords, moneylenders, and unjust revenue policies that threatened their land, livelihood, and cultural identity. Despite its brutal suppression, the movement highlighted the Santals' courage, unity, and resistance against systemic injustice. The uprising not only shaped tribal consciousness but also influenced subsequent tribal and peasant movements in India, making it a landmark in the history of tribal resistance.
Key Words:
Santal , Tribal Uprising, British , Land Exploitation, Revenue System, Tribal Identity.

1. Introduction

The Santal Movement, also known as the Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856, holds a unique place in the history of India's tribal resistance against colonial rule. The Santals, one of the largest tribal communities in India, were primarily concentrated in the regions that now constitute Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. Traditionally, they were agrarian people who lived in self-sufficient villages, practicing communal farming and maintaining a strong sense of social and cultural identity. The advent of British colonial rule brought significant disruption to the Santals' traditional lifestyle. The introduction of the zamindari system, excessive land taxes, and revenue collection policies created widespread economic distress. Local landlords, moneylenders, and traders exploited the Santals through unfair loans, high-interest rates, and forced labor practices. These exploitative conditions not only threatened their economic survival but also undermined their social structure and cultural values. The rebellion emerged as a response to these systemic injustices. Under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, the Santals organized themselves to resist the exploitative forces. They attacked revenue offices, landlords' estates, and colonial establishments in a coordinated effort to assert their rights and reclaim their dignity. While the revolt was eventually suppressed with brutal force, resulting in heavy casualties, it became a defining moment in India's history of tribal uprisings. The Santal Movement not only highlighted the resilience and unity of the Santals but also drew attention to the plight of tribal communities under colonial rule. It served as an early example of organized tribal resistance and inspired subsequent movements aimed at protecting indigenous rights, land, and culture. Studying the Santal Movement is crucial for understanding the broader patterns of resistance among India's tribal populations. It illustrates the ways in which indigenous communities have historically mobilized against economic exploitation and social marginalization while striving to preserve their cultural identity and autonomy. The Santals are one of the

largest tribal communities in India, primarily residing in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam. They traditionally practiced agriculture and lived in self-sufficient communities. During the British colonial period, the Santals faced economic exploitation by landlords, moneylenders, and British revenue policies. The Santal Movement, also known as the Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856, was a historic uprising where the Santals resisted oppressive systems to protect their land, livelihood, and dignity.

2. Methodology

The present study on the Santal Movement of 1855–1856 is based on a combination of historical research, qualitative analysis, and review of primary and secondary sources. The methodology adopted aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes, course, leadership, and impact of the movement.

2. Data Collection Methods

- **Primary Sources:**
  - Archival records from British colonial administration, including revenue reports, official correspondences, and gazetteers.
  - Eyewitness accounts and contemporary reports documenting the uprising and its suppression.
- **Secondary Sources:**
  - Scholarly books, journal articles, and research papers on the Santal community, tribal movements, and colonial policies.
  - Ethnographic studies, folklore, and oral histories documenting Santal traditions and collective memory.
  - The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, identifying recurring themes such as economic exploitation, social oppression, and leadership dynamics.
  - A chronological approach was used to reconstruct the timeline of events, ensuring clarity in understanding the progression of the movement.
  - Comparative analysis was employed to examine the impact on colonial policies and influence on later tribal movements.

3. Background and Causes of the Movement

The Santal Movement of 1855–1856 was not an isolated incident; it was the culmination of long-standing grievances faced by the Santal community due to colonial exploitation, feudal oppression, and social disruption. To fully understand the rebellion, it is essential to examine both the historical background and the key causes that triggered it.

4. Historical Background

The Santals are an indigenous tribal community primarily settled in the forested regions of present-day Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. They were traditionally agriculturists, relying on jhum (shifting cultivation) and settled farming. Their villages were self-sufficient, governed by community councils known as Majhi (village head) and Pargana (regional head), which ensured social harmony and equitable distribution of land and resources. With the arrival of the British in India, the Santals' traditional system of landholding and governance came under threat. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and the zamindari system transferred land ownership to landlords, making the Santals tenants on their own lands. Additionally, the influx of moneylenders, traders, and non-tribal officials into Santal territories disrupted the local economy and social structure. The movement also had a significant administrative impact. Although the uprising was brutally suppressed by the British army, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Santals, it compelled the colonial government to reconsider its policies toward tribal regions.

5. Land Alienation and the Zamindari System

The introduction of the Permanent Settlement Act (1793) placed Santal lands under the control of landlords (zamindars). Santals, who had previously owned and cultivated their lands communally, became tenants on their own land. Land taxes imposed by the British were exorbitantly high, and failure to pay led to eviction or loss of property.

6. Exploitative Moneylenders (Mahajans)

Moneylenders and traders entered Santal territories, offering loans at usurious interest rates. Many Santals were forced into debt to pay taxes or meet emergencies. When unable to repay, they lost their lands or were subjected to forced labor. The system of debt bondage created a cycle of perpetual economic subjugation, causing widespread discontent.

7. Agricultural Disruption

The Santals' traditional agricultural methods, such as shifting cultivation (jhum) and community-based farming, were disrupted by colonial policies. British interference, combined with encroachment by non-tribal landlords, reduced access to fertile land, leading to declining agricultural productivity. Economic pressure forced many Santals into menial jobs or labor for landlords, undermining their independence.

8. Tax Burden and Exploitation by Colonial Authorities

The British imposed heavy land revenue and forest taxes without understanding the tribal economy. Officials often used coercive measures to collect taxes, further aggravating the Santals' financial distress.This economic pressure created a fertile ground for organized resistance. British revenue policies, such as heavy taxation and land surveys, disrupted traditional Santal landholding patterns. Moneylenders and landlords (zamindars) exploited Santals through debt and high-interest loans.

9. Social and Cultural Oppression

The intrusion of outsiders into Santal territory threatened their social, cultural, and religious autonomy. Indigenous practices were disregarded, and Santals were often subjected to humiliation and discrimination. Alongside

economic exploitation, social and cultural oppression was a major factor that fueled the Santal Movement. The Santals, with their distinct language, customs, and traditional governance systems, faced marginalization and interference from colonial authorities, landlords, and outsiders, which disrupted their social fabric and cultural identity.

10. Political Factors

British colonial expansion marginalized tribal authority structures.The appointment of non-tribal officials over Santal areas created resentment. Political oppression was a crucial driver behind the Santal Movement of 1855–1856. The Santals, who had long maintained autonomous village governance and community decision-making systems, found their authority systematically undermined under British colonial rule and local feudal structures. This political marginalization created widespread resentment and laid the foundation for rebellion. The movement also influenced the broader anti-colonial struggle by highlighting the role of peasants and tribal communities in resisting British rule. Indian nationalism in its early phases was largely dominated by educated urban elites, but tribal uprisings like the Santal Hul revealed that resistance to colonial exploitation was widespread and deeply rooted among rural and marginalized communities.

11. Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu – The Pioneers

Sidhu Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, brothers from the Murmu clan, emerged as the principal leaders of the Santal rebellion. They were respected community members, familiar with both Santal traditions and the grievances of their people. Sidhu and Kanhu acted as strategists, organizers, and symbols of resistance, mobilizing the Santals across several districts in present-day Jharkhand and West Bengal. The success and organization of the Santal Movement of 1855–1856 were largely due to the strong, visionary leadership of the Santal community. The rebellion was not a spontaneous revolt, but a well-coordinated movement under leaders who united the Santals against colonial exploitation and feudal oppression.

12. Vision and Goals

Sidhu and Kanhu's leadership was guided by the vision of protecting Santal land, livelihood, and dignity. They sought to resist unfair taxes, land confiscation, and social humiliation while preserving Santal customs and governance systems.Their leadership instilled a sense of collective identity and courage, inspiring thousands to join the rebellion despite the risks of facing colonial repression. The movement was led by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, two prominent Santal leaders who united the community against exploitation.

13. Timeline of Events

The Santals began organizing resistance against oppressive landlords and moneylenders. On June 30 1855: The revolt officially started, primarily in the districts of present-day Jharkhand and West Bengal. The Santals attacked revenue offices, police stations, and estates of exploitative landlords. In the period of 1856 The British government deployed armed forces to suppress the rebellion.

14. Suppression and Casualties

The Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856, despite its organization and widespread support, faced the overwhelming military and administrative power of the British. The suppression of the uprising was brutal and devastating, resulting in massive loss of life, destruction of property, and long-term social disruption among the Santals. The revolt was brutally suppressed, resulting in the death of thousands of Santals.

15. Impact and Significance

The Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856 was a landmark event in India's history of tribal resistance. While it was ultimately suppressed, its impact on the Santals, colonial policies, and subsequent tribal movements was profound. The immediate consequence was brutal suppression by the British. Thousands of Santals were killed, and many villages were destroyed or confiscated. The leaders, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, were executed, and the rebellion was quelled within a year. Land confiscation, imprisonment, and displacement caused immense suffering and economic disruption among the Santals.

16. Tribal Awakening and Identity

One of the most significant outcomes of the Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856 was the awakening of tribal consciousness and the strengthening of Santal identity. Though the uprising was violently suppressed, it left a profound legacy in shaping the social, cultural, and political awareness of the Santals and other tribal communities in India. The rebellion highlighted the power of collective action among the Santals, uniting thousands of men and women across villages. The leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu fostered a sense of communal solidarity, transcending individual or village-level disputes. This unity became a template for future tribal movements, showing that organized resistance was possible even against a powerful colonial administration. The Santals' struggle was not limited to economic or political grievances; it was also about preserving cultural autonomy. Traditional governance, religious practices, and social customs were defended as part of the rebellion, strengthening pride in tribal heritage.

17. Influence on Later Movements

The Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856 had a profound and lasting impact on India's history of tribal and peasant resistance. Although it was eventually suppressed, the uprising inspired subsequent movements, shaping strategies of protest, leadership, and community mobilization among indigenous populations.

18. Impact on Colonial Policies

The rebellion alerted the British to the dangers of neglecting tribal grievances. Subsequent policies included more regulated revenue collection, limited interference in

tribal governance, and better administration in tribal areas. The Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856 not only highlighted the grievances of the Santals but also forced the British colonial administration to reconsider their policies toward tribal regions. While the uprising was violently suppressed, it exposed the dangers of neglecting tribal interests and became a catalyst for administrative adjustments in Santhal-inhabited areas.

19. Impact of Santal Movement in India:

The Santal Movement, also known as the Santal Hul of 1855–56, occupies a significant place in the history of popular resistance in India. It was one of the earliest, most organized tribal uprisings against British colonial rule and the exploitative socio-economic system imposed by the British, zamindars, moneylenders, and traders. The impact of the Santal Movement in India was profound and long-lasting, as it not only challenged colonial authority but also influenced future tribal policies, administrative reforms, and the broader anti-colonial consciousness of the country. The movement emerged in the Rajmahal Hills region, covering present-day Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha, where the Santals had been encouraged by the British to settle and cultivate land. Initially, the British policy appeared beneficial, as forests were cleared and agriculture expanded. However, over time, the Santals were trapped in a harsh system of exploitation. Zamindars imposed excessive rents, moneylenders charged exorbitant interest rates, and traders manipulated prices. The legal and administrative systems were alien to tribal customs, leaving the Santals helpless against oppression. This growing discontent culminated in a mass uprising under the leadership of Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairav Murmu.

Another major impact of the Santal Movement was its contribution to the evolution of tribal consciousness in India. The Hul fostered a sense of unity and collective identity among the Santals, transcending clan and village divisions. It emphasized the idea that resistance against injustice was both necessary and legitimate. This consciousness did not disappear with the suppression of the movement; rather, it continued to inspire later tribal uprisings such as the Munda Ulgulan led by Birsa Munda, the Kol rebellion, and other regional movements. In this sense, the Santal Movement laid the foundation for a tradition of organized tribal resistance in India. Politically, the Santal Movement demonstrated that even communities considered “backward” or “primitive” by colonial standards were capable of organized political action.

20. Loss of Life and Leadership

The Santal Movement involved immense loss of life and the destruction of its leadership, making it one of the most tragic episodes in the history of tribal resistance in India. When the uprising began in 1855, thousands of Santals—men, women, and even children—participated with the hope of ending exploitation and restoring justice in their land. However, the British colonial state responded with overwhelming military force. Trained troops armed with modern weapons were deployed against largely unarmed tribal rebels who relied on traditional weapons such as bows, arrows, axes, and spears. As a result, the confrontation turned into a massacre rather than a balanced conflict. Contemporary records and later historical estimates suggest that more than ten thousand Santals lost their lives during the suppression of the movement. Entire villages were destroyed, houses were burnt, crops were ruined, and families were displaced, leaving deep scars on the Santal society.The loss of life was not limited to those who fought directly against the British forces. Many Santals died due to starvation, disease, and exhaustion after fleeing into forests to escape military operations. Women and children suffered disproportionately, as they were left without protection, shelter, or food. The scale of violence revealed the brutality of colonial rule and its willingness to use extreme force to maintain control. This heavy human cost weakened the immediate capacity of the Santals to continue armed resistance and created a climate of fear in the region.

Along with the massive loss of life, the Santal Movement suffered a devastating blow with the elimination of its leadership. Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, the principal leaders of the Hul, were central to mobilizing and uniting the Santals across a wide area. Their leadership was not merely military but also moral and spiritual, as they were seen as representatives of divine justice and protectors of tribal rights. The British recognized the importance of these leaders and made their capture and elimination a priority.

21. Immediate suppression caused heavy loss of life and property.

The immediate suppression of the Santal Movement by the British colonial government resulted in an enormous loss of life and widespread destruction of property, leaving the Santal community devastated. When the uprising spread rapidly across the Rajmahal Hills region in 1855, the British authorities reacted with panic and deployed military forces to crush the rebellion without restraint. The Santals, armed mostly with traditional weapons and driven by desperation rather than military training, were no match for the well-equipped colonial army. As a result, thousands of Santals were killed in direct encounters, while many others lost their lives during forced evacuations, reprisals, and pursuit operations carried out by British troops. The violence extended far beyond the battlefield. Entire Santal villages were set on fire as a punitive measure, destroying homes, granaries, and agricultural tools. This systematic destruction of property was intended to break the economic base of the Santals and prevent them from regrouping. Fields were left uncultivated, livestock was seized or killed, and food supplies were ruined, pushing survivors into starvation and extreme hardship.

This harsh suppression clearly demonstrated the repressive character of colonial rule in tribal areas. The British priority was not justice or reconciliation but the rapid restoration of authority through force. Although the movement was crushed militarily, the heavy loss of life and property left a lasting imprint on the collective memory of the Santals and exposed the moral cost of colonial domination. The brutality of the immediate suppression thus transformed the Santal Movement into a powerful symbol of sacrifice and resistance in Indian history.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Santal Movement was more than a revolt; it was a statement of dignity, justice, and self-determination. It highlighted the resilience of tribal communities in the face of systemic exploitation and remains a vital chapter in the study of India's history of social and political resistance.

The Santal Movement of 1855–1856 stands as a landmark in the history of tribal resistance in India. Driven by economic exploitation, social oppression, and political marginalization, the Santals rose in a unified struggle against the combined forces of British colonial authority, exploitative landlords, and moneylenders. The leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu played a pivotal role in organizing the community, maintaining morale, and coordinating strategic resistance. Though the rebellion was brutally suppressed, with heavy loss of life and destruction of property, it left a lasting legacy that went beyond the immediate devastation. The movement had significant short-term and long-term impacts: in the short term, it caused widespread casualties and economic disruption, while in the long term, it inspired a sense of tribal consciousness, unity, and cultural pride. The British, alarmed by the uprising, tightened administrative control, adjusted taxation methods, and created the Santhal Parganas district, reflecting the rebellion's influence on colonial policy. Moreover, the Santal Rebellion served as a blueprint for later tribal and peasant movements, demonstrating the effectiveness of collective action, organized leadership, and communal solidarity. It reinforced the importance of preserving tribal identity, autonomy, and cultural heritage, making it a symbol of resistance and pride for generations of Santals and other indigenous communities in India.

References:

1. Bipan Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Penguin Books, New Delhi. This book discusses early tribal uprisings, including the Santal Hul, and highlights the repression and loss caused by British suppression.
2. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press. Guha provides an analytical interpretation of tribal and peasant rebellions and explains the violent suppression of movements like the Santal uprising.
3. K.S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi. This work gives a detailed account of tribal resistance, including the loss of life, destruction of villages, and long-term effects of colonial repression.
4. R.C. Majumdar (ed.), *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The volume on British rule includes references to the Santal rebellion and the harsh military action taken against it.
5. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947*, Macmillan. While focusing on later nationalism, Sarkar contextualizes early popular and tribal resistance movements and their suppression.
6. Wikipedia, "Santal Rebellion (1855–56)". This source provides a concise summary of events, casualties, destruction of property, and immediate consequences of British action, useful for quick factual reference.