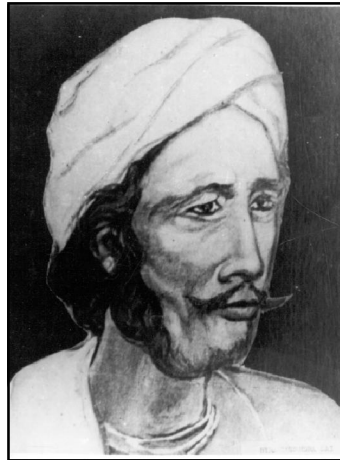


Role of Veer Surendra Sai Against the British Colonialism in Sambalpur

Ratnakar Mohapatra

The role of Veer Surendra Sai in the resistance movement of Sambalpur against the British colonialism is a landmark in the history of freedom movement of Orissa. The achievements of Surendra Sai and his uncommon heroism for the safety of the tribal people of Sambalpur have few parallels in the history of India. Surendra Sai was a born rebel and an uncompromising enemy of the British Authority. Surendra Sai popularly known as Surendra, was born in the Chauhan family of Rajpur-Khinda. His father Dharam Singh was a descendant of Aniruddha Sai, son of Madhukara 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 demise of Maharaja Sai in 1827 AD.

As Maharaja Sai had no son, Surendra Sai who then represented the Rajpur-Khinda family, asserted his claims for the 'Gadi' of Sambalpur. At that time British set aside the claims of Surendra because he was a man of independent thinking. The first choice of British went in favour of Mohan Kumari, the widow Rani of Maharaja Sai. The British forces had already occupied Sambalpur in January 1804 AD. After defeating



the Bhonsla Raja in the Third Anglo-Maratha war of 1817, the British decided to establish their paramountcy over Sambalpur. In 1818 AD, after the death of Jayanta Singh, Maharaja Sai succeeded to the throne. Maharaja Sai died in 1827, leaving no son to succeed him. Thereafter, the British authorities allowed his widow Rani Mohana Kumari to rule over the State. This was done against the local customs and laws of the land. Never in the history of Chauhan rule of Sambalpur, a woman had been raised to such a position. Disturbances immediately broke out, and for some years there was constant discord between the recognized ruler and other claimants to the chiefship.

Ultimately, Rani Mohan Kumari proved herself an incapable ruler. Due to her defective measures, the people revolted against her authority.

Preparation of Rebellion

The British authorities suppressed the violent activities of rebels and sent Rani Mohan Kumari to Cuttack to remain as a pensioner in 1833 AD. On 11th October, 1833 the British installed Narayan Singh an offspring of the Chauhan family as the ruler. Narayan Singh had

no capacity for administration due to extreme old age. His 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. In this chaotic state of affairs 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. For that reason Surendra Sai and his supporters revolted against the British imperialism over Sambalpur. The claim of Surendra Sai upon the throne of Sambalpur was justifiable and legal. But Surendra Sai was debarred from occupying his legitimate position because the British authorities were afraid of his strong personality and extreme popularity.

Surendra Sai's revolution against the British colonialism started in 1827 AD. He valiantly fought against the British authorities till 1864 and then finally arrested in that year. The detail activities of this great freedom fighter are briefly discussed below.

Rebellion of Surendra Sai

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 with the help of his uncle Balaram Sai and his own brothers. The local Zamindars and 'Gauntias' also supported Surendra Sai against the British policy. Surendra Sai had six brothers such as Udyanta, Dhruva, Ujjala, Chhabila, Jajjala and Medini. All of them took active part in the rebellion. While Surendra Sai was

mobilizing his supporters for rebellion, Raja Narayan Singh's men killed Balabhadra Deo, the 'Gond Zamindar' of Lakhanpur, who was a supporter of Surendra Sai. At this situation, the Gonds became incensed and decided to take up the cause of Surendra Sai. The supporters of Surendra Sai then avenged the murder of Balabhadra Deo by murdering the father and son of Durjaya Singh, the unpopular 'Zamindar' of Rampur who was a supporter of Raja Narayan Singh. This was a spontaneous revolt but Surendra Sai had no role in it. But the British Government implicated Surendra Sai in this case and arrested him and his uncle Balaram Singh and brother Udyanta Sai. They were sent to the Hazaribag Jail as prisoners for life in 1840 AD. Balaram Singh who was a guide of the rebels died in jail some time, after his imprisonment. There Surendra Sai spent as many as 17 years till the mutineers broke open the jail in 1857.

After annexation, the British took some measures which caused dissatisfaction among the Zamindars as well as the common people of Sambalpur. 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 AD. At that time none of the tribal Zamindars had the capacity of giving leadership to their people. When the revolt of 1857 took place, then the accumulated discontentment of the tribal people of Sambalpur burst into open rebellion under the leadership of Surendra Sai.

The second phase of Surendra Sai's war against the British began in 1857 when the great explosion occurred and it convulsed the whole country. In this great historic Revolution of 1857,

the Sypoys at Hazaribagh rose in rebellion. They broke open the Hazaribagh Jail and released the prisoners. Consequently Surendra Sai and his brother Udyant Sai got released. At that time, 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 apprehension and for the arrest of his brother. On return to Sambalpur, Surendra Sai was enthusiastically received by the people, Zamindars and Gauntias. 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. Under such circumstances, Surendra Sai anticipated troubles and fled to the Khinda village 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 Paramountcy. Many tribals, tribal Zamindars and Gauntias 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, Loisinga, Lakhanpur, Bheden, Patkulanda, 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 people 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. Early in December, 1857, the 'dawk' road to Bombay was obstructed and two 'dawk' stations were set on fire. For sometime the situation in Sambalpur became uncontrollable for the British authorities. Many of the principal Zamindars were collecting their Paikas for the purpose of resisting the Government. It became difficult for the Government troops to carry on operations against the rebels in the jungles. Two British Medical Officers named Dr. T. Moore 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 himself 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 despatched more and more reinforcement to Sambalpur to meet the situation. 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. But 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 Udyant Sai. He also destroyed the village of Kolabira, the gauntia of which 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 adopted stern measures like seizure 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. Ujjal Sai was hanged at Balangir 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.

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 Sai, his brother Udyant Sai 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. 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 property to the rebels. The Zamindar of Kolabira, a staunch supporter of Surendra Sai, 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. Hati Singh of Ghens also surrendered before British authorities in the first week of February, 1862 AD. Early in May

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.

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. Major Impey died at Sambalpur in December 1863 and in his place Captain Cumberledge joined as Deputy Commissioner on 19th January, 1864. In the night of 23rd January, 1864 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.

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 Scarlett 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 Asirgarh. Surendra Sai's brother Medini Sai breathed his last in Asirgarh 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. We have no authentic records 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 Asirgarh. It was merely reported by

the Commandant of the Fort of Asirgarh that Surendra Sai, one of the State prisoners died on 28th February, 1884 at the age of about ninety.

It is 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 being 17 years i.e. from 1840-1857 AD 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. Truly the role of Surendra Sai had acted as one of the milestones for the succeeding freedom fighters to achieve the final independence of our motherland. That is why, it can be rightly said that Surendra Sai was a forerunner of the freedom fighters of India. Prior to the rise of national consciousness in the minds of our freedom fighters, he fought almost single minded-against the most formidable forces of British imperialism. He had tried his best to oust the British authorities from our motherland. 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 unparalleled in the history of freedom movement in India. Surendra Sai has suffered untold miseries throughout his life for the end of British. Considering the dedication of his life, the

struggle of Surendra Sai can be compared with his contemporary rebel leader like Garibaldi of Italy. Really, the activities of Surendra Sai in the resistance movement were like that of a gallant lion whom 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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Ratnakar Mohapatra is an ICHR Research Fellow, P.G. Department of History, Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar, Sambalpur.