

# Gandhi's Ideology And The Santal Uprising In North Bengal During British India

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*Abstract: After the Santal Rebellion of 1855 the Santal population was increasing day by day and within 1931 their number reached around two lakh over the Northern Bengal. In very soon they were faced in hostile with the local mahajans, landlords, gomostās, money lenders and some officials of civil court. A big amount of land was passed way from Santals to aforesaid persons. In 1910 they started their movement against the mahajans and money lenders. After the entrance of M. K. Gandhi in Indian politics, Santals also followed Gandhi's ideology and participated and contributed in various movements in India. Santal Guru Sri Sri Kashishwar Chakrabarty took vital role in this regards. Thousands songs were made on Gandhi in Santali language and they took charka and khadi to make popular movement among the Santals. Different prominent leaders of Indian National Congress including Gandhi came in Dinajpur district and inaugurated Santali Kali temple. From 1924 Santals were started no tax movement, civil disobedient movement and finally in 1932 the Adina battle was held between the British police and the Santals. Several Santals shot died and some were wounded. Some British police also died and wounded by poison arrows. Gandhi was the charismatic leader to build the Santal movement in North Bengal.*

**Keywords:** Santal, mahajan, charka, Indian National Congress, bows and arrows.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Northern part of the Bengal province was involved in different movements during British India. Malda, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogura, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Darjeeling and some parts of Purnia and Assam were included in North Bengal. During 1920s more than 2.5 lakh Santals habitants had been found in the region. Since 1910 Santals of the place started movement against the mahajans, zamindars and unscrupulous money lenders. Gradually this movement converted against the British Government and a lot of Gandhian ideology and policy were adopted by the Santals which led them toward strong movement.

Progress of Santal population			
District	Census 1872	Census 1881	Census 1901
Dinajpur	1039	6813	74,101
Malda	215	833	52,126
Rangpur	....	7	...
Rajshahi	75	252	8,000

& Bogra			
Darjeeling	....	19	14,000
Jalpaiguri	...	...	10,857

Table 1

The Santals were not the son of soil of North Bengal. After the Santal rebellion (1855) a large part of Santal population was forced to migrate from the Santal Parganas for different reasons. Since 1860s Santals were started to take shelter in some districts of the region. Santals were given opportunities for their immigration. For example, rent free land, rights of hunting and gathering from forest etc. maximum habitants of the Santals lived in Dinajpur and Malda districts. With the passing of time the Santal people were started to divide by social customs, religious order, food habits, dress and occupation. Many Santals were converted in Hinduism, Christianity and Kherwar etc. From 1905 Santals were converting Hinduism from animism by Santal Guru Sannyasi Baba Sri Sri Kashishwar Chakrabarty in the line of Arya Samaj. He was a former lawyer of Allahabad High

Court. Mr. Chakrabarty lived in Balubari in Dinajpur district. He was an active follower of Gandhi and elected as the Secretary of Dinajpur Congress Committee. In 1921 he resigned the Government service and devoted himself for service of the Santals which was the order of Mahatma Gandhi. He was given the duty to bring the Santals into the national movement. Thence he was known as “Santal Guru” to the local people. Hindu Santals used to worship Kali and established Kali temple in each Hindu Santali Village. They worshiped Lord Shiva, Rama, Krishna and other Hindu deities also.

Santals were exploiting by the local zamindars, mahajans, money lenders, gomostas, peadas and some unscrupulous officials of the civil courts since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Santals were settled in the condition of rent free or small rent pay in jungles and waste lands or less important lands during 19<sup>th</sup> century. With passing of time different kind of taxes were imposed on the Santals like *Tahuri* (clerk’s dues), *Amlāgan* (office expenditure and printing charges), *Phārākānā* (fee for granting pharak or rent receipts), *Peādgōn* (fees for peons), *Bhāngan* (a certain amount per *bighā* of rent in lieu of enhancement), Extra cesses- 6 pies per rupee besides the legal cesses, Marriage tax- (Some estates collected tax when marriage ceremonies took place in a tenant’s house, the rate was Rs. 5 for a son and Rs. 2 – 8 for a daughter.), *Hāldāri tax* (Chowdhury estate of English Bazar collected a tax in Gazole police- station on each plough.), *Dramatic club tax* (Harischandrapur zamindars realised one anna per rupee as a contribution to their drama club). For mortgage deed and simple bond Santals had lost 38.64 square mile land through ex-party decree by the civil court only in Malda district within 1931. M. O. Carter said that “at a rough estimate I should say that not less than three-quarters of the area in the first four thanas (*Bamangola, Habibpur, Gazole, Malda*), and half of area in the remaining three thanas (*Gomastapur, Nachole, Nawabganj*) formerly belonged to Santals. That means that in about 25,000 acres, the Santals have lost their occupancy right. And probably in the majority of cases have become adhiars without any rights.” This picture was common in Dinajpur and other Santal populated areas also.

Santals always felt helpless, and thought how to get return their lost lands. They used to hear the story of Mahatma Gandhi from their Guru Baba. Gandhi brought return tenant’s right in Champaran and Kheda campaign Satyagrah movement. They also dreamed that their exploitation might be removed with the line of Gandhi. So conversion into Hinduism among the Santals rapidly increased after 1921. Following tables proved the situation in Dinajpur and Malda.

Santals in Dinajpur District				Santals in Malda District		
Santal population	Census 1911	Census 1921	Census 1931	Santal population	Census 1921	Census 1931
Hindu	20,004	31,262	77,685	Hindu	678	38,309
Tribal (Animist)	89,616	88,949	48,887	Tribal (Animist)	71,462	32,879
Christian	624	1964	3,756	Christian	.....	957
Total	1,10,244	1,20,211	1,30,328	Total	72,140	72,145

Table 2

Since 1924 several Santal Sardars including Jitu Sardar had joined in Faridpur (now Bangla Desh) Congress and Santals used to pay contribution to the fund of Congress Swaraj Party. They received popular instruction to make

Santal agitation from the leaders of Congress party. According to James Peddie “*He (Jitu Sardar) had also been taken up by the Swaraj Party and since 1924 has been constantly in touch with them, was sent to the Faridpur Congress and received instructions from them on the art of popular agitation. One of the aims of the Swaraj Party was to make the Santal Hindus.*” They cordially accepted the Charka and handloom and made khadi for own uses and sale. One sermon was written for the Santal that “*kāchkom chāchh ābon bābāreyāng hakum, orā regi kichri teyāb. Dokānre āng kichri bābon hātā oyā. Kichri nij bināo sutante, āiyo reyā mahāprān pujā purna hoyā.*” (Meaning: cultivation of cotton is the sermon of our Baba (Gandhi Baba). For that we (Santals) should weave cloths (Khadi). We would not purchase cloths from shop. Weave cloths by own hand and thus our efforts will be succeeded.) Not only khadi they also given order to cultivate jute and weaving *Dhokra* (mat of jute), sacks etc. Plantation of fruits like mango, wood apple, pineapple, *kagji* lime and other essential fruits were encouraged to the Santal which were written in their religious book. It was also committed that duck and goat and grindstone and spinning wheel (*Gere ār Merom ār Jānte ār charkā*) will have to be kept at every house. *Khadi* cloth will have to be weaved by all which is the order of Guru Baba (*kichari tei ābon tabe noyādor āhao hor noyā Bābā ren hokum*). Recently in Habibpur Police Station, many Sapha Hor Santals admitted that *charka* and *khadi* had been the part of their Sapha Hor religion. The following song represents their sentiment on *Khadi* and *Charka*.

*Nijērā khet re kāskom chāsh me  
Onā kāskom te sutam bināome  
Nij kāmhārte kichri tin me ār  
Onā te dingā bāndi me  
tabe ui tābon Satya dharma mahāprān purna Pujau  
Un re dharma dape bujha dāroyā.*

Meaning: Cotton plant will have to be cultivated at own field, thread will have to be twisted from cotton. Weaving khadi clothes (*kichri*) make the dresses of males and females using spinning wheel (*Charka*), which is a part of our religion. Only then you can understand the Satya dharma properly.

To improve the condition of the Santals, Guru Baba Kashishwar Chakrabarty had written three books in Santali language with mentioning Gandhi’s ideology. In the books he had given the priority for basic education, logical life and self-awareness etc. Santals changed their culture and habits. They were forbid to hold the Govt. service. Rather than they were encourage for cultivation and business. After November of 1926 Santals had stopped to pay rent to the local landlords, and rumour circulated that Gandhi Baba forbade them to pay. Several rent collector including Chakidary, forest rent (*Bonkar*) collectors were beating out from the Santali villages. Rumour was spread over the Barind that Jitu Sardar would be the Raja of Barind and tenants would be paid one *kulā* paddy (about five seers) per household. Gandhi Baba has given the charge on Jitu of the area and thus he was known as “*Senapati Gandhi*” to the local people. Jitu’s volunteers preached the news of agitation against the mahajans and the British Government in local markets and his Ram Raya would be started from *Agun* month of 1926. In 1927 thousands of Santals took plan a Santali Kalipuja in Malda town avoiding 144 Cr. P. C and several Santals including Jitu, Arjun, Amla

Sardar were arrested. A number of songs regarding Gandhi Baba were made and circulated to the people. One song was sent to the chief secretary of the Bengal Govt. by the Commissioner of Rajshahi Division translating from a Christian Santal.

Santali Song	Translated in English by a Christian Santal in 1927
<i>Māldaha jilāre jilkānāre Jitu Arjun jehelawākānā Magistrate Sāheb metāt kin kānā Bāro barsha gimat ket kin kānā. Postchim diswam khan Rām Lokkon ārgoukānā Bujhan Bujhanpe dharti mānwā Sermān topkhāndāphiri Bijlī mālākākar bilīt bilit Bujhan Bujhanpe dharti mānwā Rām Lokkon seliā birkin Kāmān kojit. Etom koye sār kapi tengoupe thārethār Gangā umbon ārgo chālāk ā Gangan umkāte mā Kāli sewewskatā Krom kop elbon bānsāo mārā Chetān dison khon Gāndhi Mahārāj Dharma puthie kaplākāde Bujhante honpi dharti mānwē Koramrigi wu jiu meneklā.”</i>	In the prison of the Malda district Jitu and Arjun were imprisoned The District Magistrate tell them In your hands I put the whole of India. From the region of the West are descending Ram and Lakkon (Lakshaman) understand, understand, o’ men of the world in the sky the Canon, the army and the shield are fleshing like lightening of fire Understand, understand, o’ men of this world Ram and Lakkon are coming to crop the jungle In the proper way stand up on the left And on the right arrows and axes Let us go to bath in the Gangas, Having bathed in the Gangas and having worshipped Kali the mother we will change the destiny (fate). From the upper region Gandhi the king Has sent down the holy book Understand O men of this world In our heart there is the life (we have courage)

Table 3

Moreover, they made several rebellious song these were much fruitful for mass movement. One such is

Santali Song	Translated in English
<i>Jhāpi ākā dharti mānowā, Even peho keliōr sonā. Sonār Bānglā shasān ā kānā, Tāhen kānā rupor tākā, Tāhe kānā kuthi chāuli Ingrej duku loot idike ākā disham. Birid piha jubu korāku Sāp piha kāpi khāndā Ingrej koyah bāhā boyhā deban tain.</i>	Wakeup my dear Santal brothers and sisters. Why are you sleeping? The Golden Bengal has turned into cheerless desert ( <i>shasan aa kana</i> ), all rupees of silver, the whole rice of <i>kuthi</i> (big terracotta pot, the Santals used it to put rice), all are looted by the Englishmen and sending their own

	country. Rebellious young men take arms with great aim and cut down the head of English and hang them (like Kali Goddess).
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Table 4

When Santal Sardars were imprisoned in jail, thousands of Santals of Barind were collecting the subscription with singing patriotic song, Gandhi’s song, song of exploitations etc. from Santals and a much amount of fund was made. In this way they were able to free from jail of the Santals leaders spending large amount of money and their movement turned into masses.

Since 1928 the Santals of North Bengal of different places started to loot of *vadoi* (autumn) paddy, fish of pond and committed dacoits in the house of unscrupulous mahajans. At the time of committing robbery, they used to give slogans like “Gandhiji-ki-jai”, “Kalimai-ki-jai”, etc. In 1928 Air Survey Company started to make map and aeroplanes were flying over the Barind. Rumour was circulated that Gandhi Baba looking them from sky and in very soon they would get returned their lost lands and rights. In 1931 Jitu Santal and other Sardars set up a “Gandhi Bank” collecting subscription from the Santals in Malda. It was said to the ordinary Santals that Gandhi Baba has given advised to make the bank. A large number of “charka” and handlooms were distributed among the Santals. In this way Santals started “Swadeshi” and “boycott” movement. Moreover, Biji Mondal of Singhpara of Malda had complaint against the Santal Sardars like Jitu, Arjun, Richi, Gopal Santal of Kokabari, Ragad Santal of Tulshidanga and others in Habibpur police station (Case No. 6 dated 13.06.1931 under 420/120B IPC). Their accusation was that Sardars cheated people giving promised that they would provide “Gandhi loan” without interest. They realized money but gave not loan. Several Santal Sardars were arrested and Arjun Sardar of Bijoil (brother-in-law of Jitu) and Richi had been killed in jail in December 1931 before trial. Jitu and others were could not be sent charge sheet for want of sufficient document. Not only this, since 1931 several complaints were raised against the “Gandhi Bank” and issued case file in Habibpur police station (for example, Case No. 1, 06.07.1931, Case No. 4 19.05.1932 etc.). Thus, Gandhi’s reflection created more attraction among the Santal movement.

The Santals of North Bengal had participated in the Gandhian movement several times earlier. A big number of the Santals of Dinajpur district had participated in the Non-Co-operation movement (1921) under the leadership of Sardar Hari Mardi and Rampada Sen. In 1925 Mahatma Gandhi had come to Dinajpur for a few days after the death of Desh Bandu Chityaranjan Das. He stayed at Jogindra Chandra Chakrabarty’s house, who was the President of Dinajpur District Congress Committee. Kashishwar Chakrabarty was then the Secretary of the same. They received Gandhiji at the Dinajpur Railway Station and brought him to the town in open taxi through a procession. Gandhiji addressed Congress workers in the nearby ground (*maydān*) which was arranged by Jogindra Chandra Chakrabarty. Gandhiji praised the patriotism of local people as well as the Santals. Mahatma Gandhi also inaugurated a Santali Kali temple in Dinajpur

town on that day. Jitu and his followers were present on the scene and for the first time they got the chance to see Gandhiji. Santali Kali Puja was popular among the Sapha Hor Santals. They used to worship goddess Kali in their villages. In 1926 Sorojini Naidu came to Dinajpur and in her address, she urged the Congress workers to act in cooperation with the Congress Swaraj Party. Her speech was translated in Bengali by Jogesh Datta. Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy also came there for the same purpose. The arrival of great leaders in Dinajpur and Malda attracted local people including the Santals and drew them into the vortex of nationalist politics.

By 1928 Santal had started civil disobedient movement in Dinajpur and Malda stopping payment of Chokidary tax and thousands of Santal committed slogan and procession at Thakurgaon in Sept. 1929. Police played lathi in danger way on the procession which was reported to the Commissioner of Rajshahi from District officer of Dinajpur on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1929. Looking this situation Government had expected risky Santal movement in Dinajpur. So the District Magistrate wrote to the Commissioner that "The only direction in which a "No Tax" campaign with expected to be fairly successful is in connection with union board. Trouble may be created by the Santals who are led an extremely ignorant people and blindly led by their guru Babu Kashishwar Chakrabarty, pleader. Nothing is easier than to combine the people for the purpose of refusing payment of taxes to the union boards." On 28<sup>th</sup> June 1932 a dangerous fighting had been held between Santals and police of Gangarampur police station regarding the no tax and civil disobedient movement. Deb Murmu, Benga Mardi and others were died and several Santals were seriously injured by police. Some police also wounded. Government realized that Santal Guru Kashishwar Chakrabarty was creating mass movement among the Santals hearing imaginary stories of Gandhi. District Magistrate was given special power against him and Chakrabarty was driven out from the district. On 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1932 thousands of Santals from Malda, Dinajpur, Assam, Munger, Behar occupied Adina mosque and tried to establish Santali state. Ram Santal of Banshihari of Dinajpur was nominated as Gandhi of the place and he declared Santali Ram Raya. His moderate and nonviolence policy did not like the Santals when he left with his gang from the Adina mosque by the advice of Superintendent of police of Malda. Then the charge was handover to Jitu Sardar who was known as "Senapati Gandhi" to establish Hindu Raya occupying the Adina mosque. On 14<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1932 several Santal Sardars including Jitu had died in the Adina battle between Santal and British police. During fight Santals had not get help from the Congress Swaraj party. Downcast Santals denounced the Congress party and made different songs on the matter. One such is

*Hindu duku me Gandhi Baba day Iswar ā kānā*

*Bīr māi husuren Congress sājāoyen*

*Hāy re! Congress pārti āle dhāle.*

Meaning: Gandhi Baba is considered as the God among the Hindus, he has organized the Congress party at evening like great hero. Alas! This esteemed party is suffering from sickness.

In 1933 a special circle officer (Mr. Kshitish Chandra Barman) was appointed to improve the condition of tribals in Malda. He introduced Parganait system among the Santals in

Barind and proposed to revision of Bengal Tenancy Act (section 75, 58, 49M, 49J, 49H, 49K). He reported that "general law and regulations are not at all suitable for the uncivilized Santhals." Health, water supply, Santal central cooperative bank and several other welfare proposals were given. Looking charka and handlooms among the Santals Mr. K.C. Barman also recommended a weaving school at Kochhakandar and Jadab Chandra Sarkar donated a room for the school. Government granted Rs. 500 per annum and Rs. 300 for furniture and handlooms.

The Santal movement continued in Dinajpur district after the Adina battle. In 1936 the Sarba Bharat Santal Committee took many efforts to reorganize the Santals movement. From 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> January 1936 the *Maibonga Kalipuja* and general conferences were held in Dinajpur town under the management of Sarba Bharat Santal Committee. More than three hundred Santals from 25 Santali villages participated in the Puja. A separate committee for the Santali women was formed in the conference and several reform proposals were taken like awareness on education, health, economic development, and entrance into the *Bangiya Pradesik Sabha* etc. Kanu Hembram (Sardar) of Nirmalgar in Dinajpur district was a most popular leader among the Santal Sardars. Santals also took share in the quit India movement in Dinajpur district when Gandhiji urged the countrymen for participation in Quit India Movement. Under the leadership of Ganguram Oraon more than three thousand Santals & Oraons were participated in 1942's movement. On 13<sup>th</sup> September 1942 around 15,000 people gathered in villages near Balurghat town who were divided into 100 separate groups for the Balurghat expedition. Next day (14<sup>th</sup> Sep.) they were entering into the town at 8 a.m. with procession. Most of the people came from Tapan, Porsha, Dhamaihat etc. Among the people Rajbanshis, Santals and Oraons were greatly involved. They set fire on Balurghat court, Sub-registry office, Co-operative bank, post office, jute inspection office, union board office and looted several food storehouses and distributed on deprived persons. Thus, the town was isolated for three days from the British Government. The Malda district also had involved in the Quit India movement. Among the Santals Birsha Oraon, Sitaram Sardar and Chhotaka Santal were the chief leaders. A large number of Santals were engaged with others in the incident of setting fire on the Bhaluka Union Board (Malda) office in 1942. However, according to the Census Report of 1941, the Hindu Santals were counted in Dinajpur and Malda district as numbering 87,732 and 38,345 respectively. According to this census, the total Santal population of Malda was 66,449 which was 5696 persons shorter than the 1931 Census. Some Santals told that many Santals ran away from the Barind area due to police oppression. Again in 1945-46, Prof. K. P. Chattopadhyay was given the charge of investigation on the condition of Santals in Bengal. On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1945 he started investigation and he had finished within February 1946. At that time, he had found only 2 grain *gola* in Barind area, barely 4% people were literate, a few free primary school set up for the Santals by the special officer and the prevalence Parganait system etc. Overall his report mentioned that the condition of the Santals was not good in Malda.

After that in 1946-47 the Tebhaga movement took a vital role in Dinajpur and Malda district against the landlords and

mahajans, and a large number of Santals participated in the movement. In the Tebhaga movement around 86 persons were killed in hostility between police/mahajans and share cropper of undivided Bengal. Among them a large number of aboriginals were involved in the movement. In Dinajpur Hopna Mardi, Majhi Soren, Khato Hembram, Narayan Marmu, Gahanuya Mahato, Shukurchand, Surma (wife of Shukurchand), Hemen Hembram, Gechhe Hembram, Rabiram Sardar, Paglu Sardar, Bairi Sardar and Ratiram Sardar were shot dead by the British police on 20<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> February 1947. On the other hand, in Malda four Santals died on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1947 by police firing. The quit India movement and the Tebhaga movement proved that despite police repression and occasional set back the movement of the Santals continued unabated.

With the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics the freedom movement of India took a vital role including lower class people. A strong anti-mahajan and anti-British movement was possible to make among the Santals in North Bengal only for Gandhi's charismatic influence. Gandhi was the magnetic name leader among the Santals. They imagined Gandhi as Kali deity and worshiped her. They believed that if the Santals worship Kali most attentively, one-day rail will stop, gun of British will not fire and one over of arrow of Santals will carry three *kos*. Santals trusted on the name of Gandhi and the Santal movement became a mass movement.

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- [12] Interview with Mr. Megra Sardar (Hembram) at Mestara Kali temple of Habibpur police station on 30th March 2013.
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- [15] West Bengal Home Political Confidential Records File No. 629 /26, Report of Salku Santal and Ramanan Bhuniya to the District Magistrate on 2nd Dec. 1926. Ramanan said that Jaghan Roy, his younger brother took lease "Bonkar" at Kalnigha Duba. When Jaghan went to collect his dues from the Santals, a lot of Santals with armed rush and beating up him. Finally Jaghan fly through arhar field, otherwise he would kill.
- [16] West Bengal Home Political Confidential Records File No 629 /26, different reports.
- [17] West Bengal Home Political Confidential Record, file no 185/27, report of J. N Roy (the Commissioner of Rajshahi Division) on 21st March 1927.
- [18] I have collected the song from Mestar Para Kali temple, in Habibpur police station in Malda on 30th March 2013. The Sapha Hor Santals sing the song collectively at the temple. They arrange the religious assemblage in every Tuesday at the temple premise.
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- [35] Das, Susnata., Abibhakta Banglar Krishak Sangram tebhaga andoloner artha-rajnaitik prekshit-parjalochana-punarbichar, Kolkata, Nakshatra Prakashan, 2002, p.162.
- [36] West Bengal Home Political Confidential Records File No. 629/26, Pendu Mondal reported to the District Magistrate of Malda on 1st December 1926. One kos equal to 3.07 km. It is the standard unit of distance in ancient India which have mentioned in Arthashastra.