

## **Forest, Land Use, and Water: A Study of the Santal Adivasi World of Colonial Maldah, 1900-1947**

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***Abstract:** Environmental narratives on the anthropocentric modification of nature are now a significant trend in South Asian history writing. Large gaps, however, continue to persist – a major one being the interaction between adivasis/forest-based communities and their environments. While studies on adivasi protests against encroachments on their natural resources abound, few have ventured into exploring the ecological basis of such struggles. This paper aims to provide, concentrating on Maldah Santal adivasis, a far more defining role for the environment by exploring how notions about the adivasi communal self were marked by specific ecological features, involving the recurrent modification of their lived and productive ecological spaces. Attempt will be made to show that though the Santal adivasis of Maldah retained their subsistence-based environmental ideology, they could not contend against the settled agriculture-centric colonial policies. On the backdrop of forested landscape of Barind region of Maldah, the present paper seeks to argue that the Santal discontent in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century inevitably simmered as*

*they repeatedly sought to recover their traditional rights on forest, land, free access to fisheries, and preference for a pre-colonial environmental ideology.*

**Keywords:** *Santal, Environment, Adivasi Traditional Rights, Maldah, Adivasi Movement.*

### ***Introduction***

In 1992, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha lamented ‘the almost universal neglect of Indian ecological history’.<sup>1</sup> Recent years however have seen a remarkable volume of writing on the subject. In fact, environmental history has added an important new dimension to the earlier discussion of *adivasi* protest and rural rebellion pioneered by Sumit Sarkar and others in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the same time the new environmental history has often been critical of earlier scholarship for failing to take ecological factors into fuller consideration in discussing *adivasi* society and protest movements. While studies of tribal protests against encroachments on their natural resources abound, few have ventured into exploring the ecological basis of such struggles. In my paper, I will aim to provide, concentrating on Maldah Santal *adivasis*, a far more defining role for the environment by exploring how notions about the *adivasi* communal self were marked by specific ecological features, involving the recurrent modification of their lived and productive ecological spaces. On

the backdrop of the forested landscape of Barind region of Maldah, the present paper seeks to argue that the Santal discontent in the early years of the twentieth century inevitably simmered as they repeatedly sought to recover their traditional rights on forest, land, free access to fisheries and preference for a pre-colonial environmental ideology.

### ***Setting the area of study***

The river Mahananda, flowing from north to south, roughly divided the district into two equal parts, corresponding to the local tradition regarding the old boundary line of *Rarh* and *Barendra*.<sup>2</sup> The region to the east of the Mahananda was called Barind. The name was derived from the word *Barendra*. It stretched into Dinajpur and Rajshahi and formed a marked contrast to the other half of the district.<sup>3</sup> The Barind sub-region of Malda was relatively high agricultural land of red clay soil of the old alluviums, a least fertile land.<sup>4</sup>

During Mughal rule, Barind was densely populated and prosperous. It lay within a day's journey of the capital of Gour and Pandua.<sup>5</sup> However, after the removal of the capital to Murshidabad and consequent decay of Gour, Barind must have gradually become depopulated and overgrown with jungle. By the time of the revenue survey in 1880 much of the northern portion, including the whole of Habibpur and most of Bamongola police station areas, was covered

with forest and jungle, though the southern portion was largely under cultivation.<sup>6</sup> In the 1870s, Hunter noticed the cultivation of winter rice in the region from Kalindri river to the borders of the *jungle*. The remainder of the tract was entirely occupied by thorny tree *jungle* called '*katal*.'<sup>7</sup> However, by the time of survey and settlement operations in the 1930s the Barind was transformed into a developed agricultural zone mainly due to the efforts of the migrant Santals from the neighboring district of Santal Parganas.<sup>8</sup> The Santals, employed by the zamindars of Barind, had cleaned up *jungles*, terraced the slopes and transformed the region into flourishing agricultural zone. The package offered to Santals was land on extremely low rent, common rights of hunting, fishing, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Santal migration to Barind***

Before focusing on the central concern of this paper it is necessary to make a brief survey on the migration of the Santal *adivasis into Maldah*. Santal migration to Maldah seems to have taken place around the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The census of 1931 mentioned that almost the entire Santal population concentrated in the Barind region comprising the p.s. of Bamongola, Gajol, Habibpur, Old Maldah, Gomastapur, Nachol and Nababganj. It gives the

number of Santal population as 72,145.<sup>10</sup> There are two distinct hypotheses for the Santal migration in Maldah. One states that in the first half of the nineteenth century the indigo planters engaged them in plantation works of the district. The second mentions that a great number of Santal *adivasis* crossed the Ganges after their *Hool* of 1855 to escape administrative torture. Consequently, local zamindars employed them for clearing of *jungle* lands of *Barind*. Stiff red clay of *Barind* was another consideration which needed sturdy *adivasi* peasants for cultivation.<sup>11</sup> We assume that the second hypothesis is more close to truth as the *Barind*, the seat of *adivasi* migrants, was never noted for indigo plantation.

Apart from these reasons, if we delve into the contemporary situation of Santal Pargana some other issues could be considered as reasons for *adivasi* immigration in Maldah. In 1866, a terrible famine broke out in Santal Pargana and price of food-grain rocketed up. Cholera was another important issue.<sup>12</sup> Price of rice increased from 7.5 *seer per anna* to 6.5 *seer per anna*. In 1874 paucity of rain led to further rise in prices of essential commodities. In 1897 another famine broke out in Santal Pargana.<sup>13</sup> In September 1899 a tremendous flood devastated the region. More than two hundred fifty villages were severely

affected. Over twenty five thousand households were demolished.<sup>14</sup> People were in search of shelter.

Apart from these natural calamities, mal-administration and coercion by zamindars also played a role in *adivasi* immigration. It was seen that in lieu of Rs. 25 the Santal gave their consent to be a life-time labourers. And sometimes, their sons also became labourers.<sup>15</sup> After the Hool of 1855, the colonial government adopted some measures to ameliorate the conditions of the *adivasis*. However, these steps were not sufficient to emancipate the Santals from the clutches of the zamindars-mahajans. A major grievance of the Santals against the zamindars was that some zamindars even charged rents on trees, *jungle*, fisheries, etc., on their estates, in addition to even charging rent on *bari* (homestead) land which the Santals enjoyed as rent-free.<sup>16</sup> It was a field day for the mahajans as well in this overall atmosphere of change. What went in favour of the mahajans 'was the non-existence of any alternative source of credit for the Santals in their hour of dire need'.<sup>17</sup> The Santals needed credit for the purchase of seeds, implements and cattle and the zamindars were not willing to support this. Government help was not enough as it remained confined to merely providing short-term relief. In this situation, the Santals had to avail of

the only source of credit available to them, i.e. the moneylenders.<sup>18</sup> When once a *ryot* had been compelled to borrow to tide over difficulties, he was seldom or never able to clear himself of his obligation as a result of which the mahajan took hold of his land.

Hence, in order to avert such hardship and exploitation they moved out to safer place. This way, Santal *adivasis* from Bhagalpur, Hajaribag, Manbhum, and even from the entire Santal Parganas came to Purnia, Maldah, Murshidabad, Birbhum, and Burdwan.<sup>19</sup> They also went up to Assam and Nepal. According to the census report of 1901, eighty three thousand Santals left their homeland and came to the eastern region.<sup>20</sup> These people entered Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Jalpaiguri and Assam. In 1901 more than fifty two thousand Santals made their settlement at Maldah. The census of 1931 mentions that almost the entire Santal population concentrated in Bamongola, Gajol, Habibpur, Old Maldah, Gomastapur, Nachol and Nababganj p.s. It gives the number of Santal population as 72,145.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Struggle for customary rights over jal, jungle, and jamin***

During this period, forests covering an equal amount of land area in Barind were left in the jurisdiction of zamindars – first designated as wasteland and by

the 1900s, recognized increasingly as forests. The *jungle* areas of Barind were characterized by a higher proportion of zamindari *khas* to raiyati lands with extensive tracts of wastes and *jungles* in most estate. As James Paddy, the highly knowledgeable and deeply sympathetic Collector of Maldah put it ‘the land had all been cleared at a comparatively recent date by Santal pioneers, who had boldly entered the *jungle* braving the terror of wild beasts and malaria, and had by original engineering works ....reduced the bed of torrents to fertile rice fields...’,<sup>22</sup>

The zamindar financed the migration of the *adivasi* community and their subsistence until the land became productive. The zamindars and their agents in the Barind entered into a keen competition to entice the migrant *adivasis* to their lands for greater productivity and rent. The package offered to Santals was land on extremely low rent, common rights of hunting, fishing, and so on.<sup>23</sup> A gradually flourishing Santal colony thus grew up in the Barind in east Maldah. Santal colonization and the spread of rice cultivation in this region proved an extremely successful enterprise.

As the *Barind* area began to be transformed into a developed agricultural zone, the zamindars of Barind began to enhance the rent and curb the rights so far enjoyed by the *Santals* from 1910 onwards. The new development caused a deep resentment among the Santals.<sup>24</sup> Cases were commonly found, M. O. Carter mentions, in which the lands cultivated by the *adhiars* were previously

their occupancy holdings but had been sold up in rent or mortgage sales.<sup>25</sup> In a few cases it was found that *adhiars* had been cultivating the same land for several generations.<sup>26</sup> A comparative table on the incidence of rent differentially paid by the occupancy Raiyats and under-Raiyats at Barind in 1930 highlights the plights of the Santals who were the main under-tenant group in that region:

**Table 1**

**Average rate of rents of Raiyats and under-Raiyats**

Thanas	Occupancy Raiyats			Under-Raiyats		
	Rupees	Anna	Paisa	Rupees	Anna	Paisa
Habjbpur	1	15	3	3	10	6
Old Malda	1	12	7	5	6	7
Gajol	1	8	5	4	15	0
Bamongola	2	1	6	5	1	9

Source : A. Mitra (ed.), Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks, Malda, New Delhi, 1954, pp. 1 xix

In addition, they were oppressively loaded with a plethora of cesses and *abwabs*. The total amount realized as *abwabs* was not less than the actual land revenue of Barind.<sup>27</sup> The greater part of the *abwabs* went to the *gomastas*, but in some cases the landlords also took their share. These impositions varied in both size and character from estate to estate.<sup>28</sup> The *Gourdoot* gives an elaborate list of *abwabs* which the Barind zamindars imposed on the Santal under-tenants.<sup>29</sup>

- a) *Tahuri*: Payable to the *naib* or *gomastas*. It amounts to not less than two *annas* in the rupee.

- b) *Peadagan*: Payable to the *naib's* underlings. It amounted to one *anna* in the rupee.
- c) *Haldari*: The Choudhury Estate of Englishbazar used to collect a tax in Gajol P.S. on each plough.
- d) *Puja Kharach*: Most of the estates levied a special tax on various ceremonies in the zamindar's house.
- e) For a rent receipt: One *anna*.
- f) Some estates levied a 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.
- g) Some estates made special levies for the purchase of a motor car, an elephant or a gun.
- h) The tenants had to pay a *najrana* to meet the zamindars.

These *abwabs* varied from estate to estate. The Census Report of 1951 gives the following picture of estate-wise variation of *abwabs* in the Barind.<sup>30</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Estate-wise variation of *abwabs* in the Barind**

Thanas	Estates	Abwabs
Habibpur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Porsha Shaha</li> <li>ii) Harihar Satiar</li> <li>iii) Bulbuli-Singhabad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) 8 <i>anna</i> in the rupee</li> <li>ii) 12 <i>anna</i> in the rupee</li> <li>iii) On the average of 4 <i>anna</i> in the rupee. The tenant had to pay between Rs. 1 and Rs.2 to see the zamindar.</li> </ul>
Gazol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Jadu Nandan Choudhury</li> <li>ii) Girija Kanta Das</li> <li>iii) The Sannyals</li> </ul>	The average <i>abwabs</i> is over 4 <i>anna</i> in the rupee. Tahsildars were either not paid or were paid a nominal amount, made the rest out of tenants.

Old Malda	Girija Kanta Das and others	J. N. Choudhury levied a tax on each plough. The <i>abwabs</i> varied from 4 to 8 <i>anna</i> per rupee. Fees for the Tahsildars and peons, the cost of establishment, the cost of rent receipts and subscription to various festivities were realized. On the average a tenant paid as <i>abwabs</i> not less than one-third of the legal rent.
Gomastapur	Taherpur Estate, Brajendra Moitra, Begum Saheba of Rohanpur	The general rate of <i>abwab</i> varied from 2 to 8 <i>anna</i> per rupee. The <i>abwab</i> in Begum Saheba Estate was 3 to 9 <i>anna</i> which was fairly moderate in the <i>Barind</i> .
Source : A. Mitra (ed.), Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks, Malda, New Delhi, 1954, p. Ixxiii		

Due to the greater farming expertise of the Muslim Shershabadiya<sup>31</sup> cultivators, Santals were often displaced by the zamindars in favour of the former, further aggravating their social and environmental dislocation. The zamindars tried to use the loopholes of the prevalent legal devices to deprive them of their holdings. In doing so they were assisted by the mahajans and pleaders. In fact, the mahajans were far more effective than the zamindars in converting outstanding loans into land mortgages and then foreclosing on them when the borrower failed to pay. The Santals lost their lands to the mahajans not only in consequence of their debt to them. They were dispossessed of their land also by means of deliberate fraud committed on them, which was possible because of their complete ignorance of the laws relating to occupancy rights.<sup>32</sup> According to the Malda Census Handbook of 1951, not less than three quarters of the area in the four police stations, and half of the area in the other police

stations formerly belonged to Santals. That means that in about 25,000 acres of land the *Santals* had lost their occupancy rights, and probably in the majority of cases became *adhiars* without any rights.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 3**  
**Survey of Expropriated Area from *Adivasis***

Thanas	Area expropriated in sq. miles	Area in sq. Miles	Estimated area expropriated from aborigines
Bamongala	69.32	1.46	1.10
Habibpur	156.73	9.00	6.75
Gajol	196.84	6.36	4.77
Malda	87.15	8.10	6.08
Gomastapur	122.64	20.34	10.17
Nachol	109.70	10.53	5.27
Nababganj	55.90	9.00	4.50
Total :	798.28	64.77	38.64
Source : A. Mitra (ed.), Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks, Malda, New Delhi, 1954, p. Ixxiv			

With the elimination of *adivasi* tenants, the Bengali mahajan landlords and the large zamindari estate came to control land resources, raising rents drastically and eliminating many of the forest use rights previously enjoyed by Santal *adivasis*.<sup>34</sup> Loss of lands meant to them loss of identity. The question of land had not only economic and political implications but had a spiritual value

too. W. J. Culshaw and W.H.Archer has rightly pointed out, 'A Santal's land not only provides economic security, but is powerful link with his ancestors; and this applies to newly entered areas no less than the old, for he will not take possession till the spirits approve. The land is part of his spiritual as well as economic heritage.'<sup>35</sup> Jitu Santal, the leader of the Santal revolt of 1932 in Maldah, often preached that the Santals had cleaned the *jungle* and made the land arable. As such, the land belongs to them.<sup>36</sup> Thus to the Santal *adivasis* of Maldah, land became the most explosive source of discontent.

Forests were intrinsically connected with *adivasi* existence. But most importantly, forests symbolised freedom and it constituted an important source of livelihood to the Santals. They roamed the forest areas freely, hunted the animals there, and were in fact, the sole beneficiaries of the forest produce. The forests were also to provide a source of medicine. The folk tale signifies that the forests have serious religious, aesthetic and existential significance for the *adivasis*. The Santal songs were replete with their association with the forests, their communion with Nature, the forest and the woodlands. Be it birth or love, or marriage hunt or recreation, death or misery --- all are surrounded by the forest as the background.<sup>37</sup>

Till the closing decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Santal *adivasis* of Barind had pabsolute rights to the neighbouring forests.<sup>38</sup> The belief system of the Santal *adivasis* was strongly grounded in the worship of nature. Religious festivals are

tied to both the agricultural cycle and the flowering and fruiting of the forest trees. The Santal new year, for example, begins with the blossoming of the Sal tree in March. The links in tribal belief between the health of the forest, fertility, and prosperity are clear in the Santali folk-songs of Barind.<sup>39</sup> As the Collector of Maldah wrote in 1895, '[In] a bad year the bulk of the Santal Raiyats can barely support life...but the fruits of the tree, roots and insects...enable them to tide over the difficulties...[T]he scope to extend cultivation is limited as large tracts will be more valuable as jungle rather than cultivation.'<sup>40</sup> It was only after the introduction of the Forest Policy of 1894 that forest officials appeared on the scene and claimed the authority to limit and regulate *adivasi* rights on behalf of colonial government. In fact, since the 1860s, at the all-India level, forests came to be recognized as a 'resource within a wider system of production', a propertied zone or as a 'zone of commerce'; thereby a potential revenue earner.<sup>41</sup> With the introduction of railway system in Maldah in 1909, pressure on the forests of Barind grew further as the railway system demanded immense quantities of Sal logs to provide sleepers for the rail bed.<sup>42</sup> Commercial demand for timber accelerated forest cutting, and raised the value of forest lands. Timber merchants rushed in, even before the rail lines opened and began leasing or purchasing large tracts from the zamindars of Barind. Leaseholders and zamindars began imposing strict control on forest use by *adivasi* communities as the value of the forest increased, restricting or eliminating traditional forest rights enjoyed by the Santal *adivasis*.<sup>43</sup>

How did popular perceptions relate to these changes? A common feeling was that traditional means of relaxation and rights over the forests were being 'stolen' away. Worse still, after being 'stolen' away, the access to these depended on payment of duties, cesses and fines. As a result, one's freedom to which a lot of importance was attached and which had existed for generations was being lost. Since the concept of 'profit' motive came before the material conditions existed and that too in a sudden and superimposed fashion, it created a sense of confusion, deprivation and anger at all those who were responsible for the changes.

As customary access to the forest was restricted, friction between *adivasis* and local zamindars grew. The Private Fisheries Protection Act of 1889 had allowed greater consolidation of zamindari control over fisheries, irrigation tanks, and other such water-bodies in permanently settled estates of Bengal. The restriction of access to forests and fresh-water fisheries resulted in a wave of protest among the Santal *adivasis* of Maldah. These were fuelled by memories of better times, by stories of their father's times when all *jungles* were free and all beels (ponds) were open to public fishing. From the 1930s Santal sharecroppers of Habibpur and Singhabad went on a spree of fishpond looting and cut Sal *jungles* belonging to zamindars.<sup>44</sup> In this context we would like to mention a few cases of fish-looting by the Santal *adivasis* at Barind.

In February 1922, disturbances cropped up at Singhabad Estate when a spate of fish-looting broke out in which other local ethnic groups like the Polia, Rabansi, and Momins also joined the Santals. The leaseholders attempted to restrain the Santals from fishing in the ponds. The Santals, on the other hand, were convinced that they had been following a traditional custom. A violent clash took place and three cases were started against the Santals.<sup>45</sup>

In April 1938 violent clashes between the police and an *adivasi* mob took place at Darail *beel*. It was a large natural lake within the jurisdiction of Habibpur P.S. The zamindar of Singhabad owned the *beel* which was known for the great quantity of fish it yielded every year. A large number of Santals lived in the villages in the vicinity of Darail *beel*. On 6 April 1938 the Santal tenants gathered around the *beel* to catch fish. The Gourdoot, a contemporary local newspaper, informed that this type of fish-looting was customary in the Santal tradition. They called it *bahich* and it usually took place after the Fagua.<sup>46</sup> The Santals considered it their birth-right. Mr. Vas, then the Divisional Commissioner, ordered in the 1920s that the Santals could observe this traditional custom at each pond for one day at Barind region. Since then the Santals had been observing this custom without any resistance from the zamindars.<sup>47</sup>

The zamindar of Singhabad sought the assistance of the police to prevent the Santals from catching fish in Darail *beel*. A police force rushed to the spot and

asked the Santals not to catch fish in the *beel*. But the Santals refused to obey. The officer-in-charge of the Habibpur P.S. fired a shot. The crowd became violent and attacked the police force. A Peada was injured and later succumbed to death. Many policemen were injured.<sup>48</sup> As the news of violence reached Englishbazar, the headquarters of the district, a large police force led by the Superintendent of Police rushed to the spot. The adjacent *adivasi* villages were searched. The police arrested some leaders of the Santals. A criminal case was filed against them. In his verdict, the assistant session judge of Malda sentenced four Santals to rigorous imprisonment of two years each.<sup>49</sup>

Sumit Sarkar has cited a number of instances of fish-pond looting by Santal *adivasis* in north-west Midnapur and Bankura in 1922 and 1923. Crowds of up to 5000 consisting of Santals as well as low-caste Bengali peasants looted fish-ponds in daylight, asserting what they felt was a natural right.<sup>50</sup> It may be argued that Santal use of collective fishing of this kind in Barind and elsewhere in Bengal was a means of mobilizing for protest. This type of ‘pond-looting’ was an assertion of a ‘traditional’ claim to access which pre-dates the refashioning of *jalkar* under the colonial land revenue system. In the earlier situation, the peasants – whether fishers, labourers or agriculturists – could fish and, in return, pay dues for the zamindar. In the new situation, peasants could only fish if they bought the right to do so from the lessee or were employed by the lessee. The nature of controls over water and fisheries – and, with this

control, the nature of rights of access to, and utilization of, the fisheries – had been fundamentally altered by the Permanent Settlement and the legislation and regulations which flowed from it; but the memories of that freer period remained.<sup>51</sup> The Santal *adivasis* of Maldah believed, as the local newspaper reported, that they were simply carrying an old tradition, bringing back a ‘golden age’ when all jungles were free and all ponds open to the *adivasis*.<sup>52</sup>

### ***The Sandals in revolt***

British forest reservation laws had thus proved irksome to the Santal *adivasis* of Maldah and in the context of the degradation of their forest environment, exploitation by zamindars and moneylenders they rose in protest. Indeed the revolt of the Santals *adivasis* of Barind under the leadership of Jitu Santal in 1932 can be viewed as a logical culmination of the distress and discontents of the Santal sharecroppers caused by these changes. In December 1932, a large number of Santals marched to Pandua<sup>53</sup> and occupied the ruins of the Adina<sup>54</sup> mosque. Jitu declared that the Adina mosque was in reality the temple of Adinath or Siva which was later transformed into *masjid* by the Muslims.<sup>55</sup> Jitu stated that they would perform a *puja* (worship) of the Goddess Kali within the mosque. At the same time Jitu, who now called himself ‘*Senapati Gandhi*’, declared the end of the British Raj and proclaimed his own government: ‘The English has gone. Our Raj, Our Desh is established. We have our own

Government. '*Larai*' (fight) has begun to drive English and Muslims out of Barind.<sup>56</sup>

The *Santals* now resorted to violence. Houses of zamindars and mahajans were attacked. Police outpost was attacked at Habibpur. From Habibpur the outbreak spread in other areas of Barind region like fire.<sup>57</sup> The long oppressed Santals of Barind at last found in it a chance of getting free from the zamindars and moneylenders and establishing themselves as a free people. A magical vision of the breakdown of English power was projected by Jitu: 'Our bows and arrows will carry three *kos* and the guns of the English will not fire.'<sup>58</sup>

The district administration sent a large group of armed police force to Pandua to put down the revolt of Santals of *Barind*. The then District Magistrate ordered the Santals to leave the Adina mosque, but they refused to obey. A pitched battle followed between Jitu's men and armed police force which opened fire after the Santals refused to come out. Six Santals, including Jitu himself, were shot dead, while a police was killed by a poisoned arrow and some others were wounded.<sup>59</sup> The police entered the mosque and arrested the Santal rebels. In this task the police were assisted by some zamindars and mahajans of Malda. The prominent among them was Abul Hayat Khan Choudhury, the zamindar of Kotwali.<sup>60</sup> The revolt of Jitu which aimed to establish a Santal Desh came to an end.

It is important to remember in this context that the Santal revolt of 1932 was not like other peasant movements aimed primarily at redressing their immediate grievances. It was a struggle to bring back the golden days of their past and achieve independence, which they valued more than anything else. Nourishing this objective during the revolt was legitimate in the sense that attached to it was their belief that they were fighting for a noble cause, for the revival of their culture and tradition and above everything else for the creation of an independent Santal raj. Their rights regarding their lands and forests including the sentiment attached to them was based on solid ground that their forefathers were the original clearers of the *jungle* land and made it habitable and cultivable. Thus the main objective of Jitu's movement was to protect customary rights in their lands and forests, to put an end to the exploitation on the zamindars and mahajans and to work for the materialization of their dream of an independent Santal Raj.

In fact, a marked feature of Jitu's movement was a sense of territory and a concern for land and awareness about customary rights over forests and other natural resources. 'All the land will be ours' was a slogan repeated again and again.<sup>61</sup> 'Desh' or homeland was a theme that occurred again and again in Jitu's preaching: 'The English Raj has gone; our *desh* is coming'.<sup>62</sup> In fact, Jitu had his own vision of Santal Raj. In his Raj, 'there will be no more zamindars and mahajans. There will be no more zamindar's rent...zamindars will be driven

away...our Raj, our *desh* is coming'.<sup>63</sup> Thus the Santal Raj, as conceptualized by Jitu, promised to deliver the Santal masses of Barind from exploitation, oppression and miseries and promised them the restoration of their customary rights over *jal* ( water), *jungle* (forests), and *zamin* (land).<sup>64</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

It may be summed up that the *adivasi* consciousness in the twentieth century Maldah, beginning with the urge to bring about reforms, started to drift towards the increasing assertion and crystallization of their ethnic identity. Prior to the revolt led by Jitu Santal this notion of ethnicity had been devoid any sense of territory. The resistance offered was primarily aimed at putting an end to the exploitation perpetrated by the zamindars, mahajans and others whom they called 'dikus'. A sense of territory had been totally absent thus far in *adivasi* consciousness. A concern for land and awareness about customary rights over forests and other natural resources, however, had existed earlier. But harnessing the sentiments for reaping political mileage was not thought of. Gradually, a greater consciousness developed among the Santals of Barind under Jitu's leadership as they came to believe that the land (*jamin*), water (*jal*) and forest (*jungle*) of their territory were their exclusive preserve since they had cleared the jingles and had a role in shaping the territory. Thus, territory began to constitute an 'existential geography' for them. This attitude was increased with

the spread of Jitu's movement. Thus began a different genre of protest which raised the call for an independent Santal raj.

***Endnotes:***

1. Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, University of California Press, p. 6.
2. S. C. Majumdar, *Rivers of the Bengal Delta*, B.G.Press, Alipore, Calcutta, 1941, p.43.
3. *Ibid.*
4. A. Mitra, *Malda Census 1951*, Calcutta, 1953, p.4.
5. F. J. Monaham, *Verendra*, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1914, pp. 97-98.
6. W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol. VII, Districts of Maldah, Ranjpur and Dinajpur*, London, 1876, Indian Reprint 2004, p.22.
7. *Ibid.*, p.23.
8. K. C. Barman, *Report on the Conditions of the Santals in Malda*, Calcutta, 1934, p.2.
9. *Ibid.*
10. (G.E. Lambourn, *Bengal District Gazetteers:Maldah*, Calcutta, 1918, Reprint 2004, p.108.
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12. L.S.S. O'Malley, Bengal District Gazetteers: Santal Parganas, Kolkata, 1910, p. 204.
13. *Ibid.* p. 205.
14. *Ibid.* p. 208.
15. *Ibid.* p. 57.
16. Pradip Chattopadhyay, *Redifining Tribal Identity: The Changing Identity of the Santhals in South-West Bengal*, Primus Books, New Delhi, 2014, p. 65.
17. B.B. Chaudhuri, 'Tribal Society in Transition', in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (ed.), *Indias Colonial Encounter*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2004, p. 119.
18. Pradip Chattopadhyay, *Redifining Tribal Identity, Op. Cit.*, p. 66.
19. C. Palit, Six Lectures on Santhal Society, Corpus Research Institute, Kolkata, 2009, pp.68-69.
20. O'Malley, *Santal Parganas, Op. Cit.*, p. 76.
21. A. Mitra (ed.), Malda: Census 1951, *Op.Cit.*, p.xx.
22. M. O. Carter, *Malda Survey and Settlement Operations 1928-35, Op.Cit.*, p.55.
23. Lalbihari Majumdar, Maldah Abalambane Jibansmriti, *Gourdoot*, 13 August 1949.
24. Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924-32: A Study in Tribal Politics', in Ranjit Guha ed. *Subaltern Studies*, vol. iv, Delhi, 1985, P.144.

25. M.O. Carter, *Final Report, Op.Cit.*, p.72.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, P. 79.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti, Op.Cit.*, Gourdoot, 20 August 1949.
30. A. Mitra ed., *Malda : Census 1951, Op.Cit.* P. 1xxiii.
31. Among the Muslim agriculturists, the most noteworthy people were those known as the *Shersabadias*, or more generally as the *badias*. The name is derived from Shersabad Pargana of Murshidabad district, from which they were forced to emigrate owing to the erosion of the Ganges. They were found mostly at Kaliachak, Manikchak and Ratua p.s.
- 32.. Shivaji Koyal and Ramkrishna Chatterjee, 'The Unsettled Adivasi World of Malda in the First Three Decades of the Present Century', in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Essays in Modern Indian Economic History*, Munshiram Monoharlal Publisher Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1987, P. 319.
33. A. Mitra ed., *Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbook, Maldah*, New Delhi, 1954.  
P. 81.
34. M. O. Carter, *Malda Survey and Settlement Operations 1928-35, Op.Cit.*, p.72.
35. W. J. Culshaw and W.G. Archer, 'The Santal Rebellion' in *Man in India*, vol. Xxv,  
December 1945, p. 215.

36. Tanika Sarkar, 'Tribals in Colonial Bengal: Jitu Santal's Rebellion in Malda' in *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2009, pp. 299-332.
37. P.O. Bodding, *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals*, Broggers & Boktrykkare, Oslo, 1942, p. 102.
38. K.C. Barman, *Report on the Condition of Santals in Malda in 1934*, *Op.Cit.*, p. 23.
39. Chittabrata Palit, *Six Lectures on Santhal Society*, *Op.Cit.*, p 52.
40. Quoted in M.O. Carter, *Final Report*, *Op.Cit.* p. 42.
41. Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, OUP, New Delhi, 1999, pp.8, 19-21, 55-56; David Hardiman, 'Power in the Forests: The Dangs 1820-1940', in *Subaltern Studies*, vol.VIII, OUP, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 89-147.
42. Shivaji Koyal and Ramkrishna Chatterjee, 'The Unsettled Adivasi World of Malda in the First Three Decades of the Present Century', *Op. Cit.*, p. 319.
43. K.C. Barman, *Report on the Condition of Santals in Malda in 1934*, *Op.Cit.*, p. 23.
44. *Ibid*, p. 25.
45. GB, Home Poll. File No. 18/1922, District Magistrate, Maldah to the Chief Secretary, Govt. Of Bengal, 11 April, 1922. WBSA.
46. One of the most important Santal festivities is Fagua. The Fagua is counterpart of the Doljatra festival. On the appointed day the villagers go to the place of worship and

offer sacrifices. On the way back to the village they sprinkle each other with water, but it is considered highly objectionable to use coloured water : see A. Mitra ed. Malda : Census 1951, *Op. Cit.*, P xxii.

47. *The Gourdoot*, 1 May 1947.

48. Case No. G 238 of 1938. Emperor Vs. Mangla Santal and others, file A 246, Malda District Records.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Sumit Sarkar, 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, c. 1905-22' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III*, Delhi, 1984, p. 303.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *The Gourdoot*, 1 May 1947.

53. Pandua is situated at a distance of 17km. from Englishbazar on the road to Balurghat. It was for sometime the capital city of Bengal during the reign of Muslim Sultans. It was also known as Firuzabad at that time : see J.C. Sengupta ed., *West Bengal District Gazetteers: Malda*, Calcutta, 1969 P. 261.

54. This celebrated mosque was built by Sultan Sikandar Shah between 1364 and 1374 AD : see *Ibid.*

55. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *Op.Cit.*, 10 September 1949.

56. *Ibid*; Prabal Ray, 'Maldaher Santal Gana – asantosh' in *Joar*, March 1991, p. 10.

57. A.B. Chaudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals, op. cit.*, P. 153; Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti, Op. Cit.*, 7 October 1949.
58. GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 629(1-3) / 1932.
59. The Statesman, 16 December 1932.
60. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti, Op.Cit.*, 10 September 1949.
61. GB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 629 (1-3)/ 1932, WBSA.
62. *Ibid.* The entry of the Bengali word, *desh*, denoting homeland, into Jitu's discourse indicates the pervasiveness of the nationalist vocabulary that since the Non-Cooperation, had invoked popular movements in the name of freeing the *desh*: signifying a static object in the name of saving. In Santal sentences, in striking contrast, *desh* is an active entity, it is 'coming' to save. It seems to have a temporal rather than a spatial connotation. Otherwise firmly attached to the notion of immovable substances like earth and soil, it acquires here a dynamic movement. It is both the companion and the condition of Jitu's Raj: they come together to perform the same function for Jitu's followers, to liberate them from zamindars and rent, colonial courts and the local administrative machinery. The relationship between Raj and *desh* is close but complex. If Raj exclusively signifies Jitu's power and authority, *desh* would probably encompass all Santal *adhiars* who abide by Jitu's laws.
63. Testimonies in GB, Poll. Conf. F.N. (1-3)/1932 and GB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 622 (1-2)/1932, WBSA.
64. A. B. Chaudhuri, *State Formation among Tribals, Op. Cit.*, p. 128.



