Jangal Santal and the Peasant Movement of Naxalbari: A Glance over a Forgotten Chapter of Indian History

Ichhimuddin Sarkar

The Naxalbari movement and the participation of the peasants have been studied from different angles. But in most of the works, an adivasi leader named Jangal has hardly been highlighted. The present article is an investigation to find out the personality and the revolutionary mind of JangalSantal who started his humble life in Nepal and at a certain time settled at a village near Bagdogra, Darjeeling. Comrade Jangal started a full-fledged political life in 1952 and gradually took basic knowledge of politics as a member of KishakSabha. Incidentally, he got enrolled himself as a member of the Communist Party of India in 1953 and it is said that comrade KanuSanyal was the monitor behind this lift. JangalSantal was a born leader and he was identified with the term ladai (struggle) and he concentrated his activities in the Naxalbari-Hatighisha region, Darjeeling. Being involved in various strikes and movements organized by the tea garden workers of Darjeeling, he gradually became concerned about the problems of the peasants of the region and how they were victims of the jotedar's gundas who did not spare the peasants from physical torture. Comrade Jangal came in touch with many leading leaders like CharuMazumdar, AzizulHaque, KadamMallick, SourenBasu and the like who jointly organized programmes in the Tarai region. As per programme, Jangal and his associates took up the case of the tea garden workers and also to search out the illegal lands of the jotedars who had established a monopoly right to exploit and torture poor people on various excuses and occasions. JangalSantal did not believe in the movement leading to killing and murder or bloodshed (khatam line) of the class enemies. The rise of JangalSantal was again not an accident but a reality, and his style of leadership from a down-trodden community no doubt broke the traditional belief and so called historical truth that a political leader might come from a man of lower origin too. In a caste-ridden society like India, the rise of comrade JangalSantal may thus be an uncommon incident in the historiography of India. He was given a membership in the Provincial Committee of the CPI (ML) and obviously it was recognition as a mass leader. The most interesting side of his personality and leadership was that he was identified with the interest of the peasants and toiling people and his voice was the last one to mobilize the people of all level for a movement. Lastly this so-called extremist line of action did not impress him because until his death he did not appreciate the said principle in the name of peoples' right vis-à-vis peoples' movement.

Key Words: bargadar (share-cropper), jail- breaking movement, krishak-sabha, jotedars, tebhaga, peasant movement, comrade, mass leader

The historical literature of peasant history of India is fairly rich and it is under this trend of historiography we hear about the peasant movement of Naxalbari – which by its course and action was a shock to the age old feudal society. Leaders like comrade CharuMazumder, KanuSanyal, KeshabSarkar, KhokanMazumder, SaurenBasu, SantoshRana, AzizulHaque, Sushital Roy Chaudhury, JangalSantal and few others are some of the names who got involved in this movement and the peasants of North Bengal specially that of Naxalbari region vis a vis of India at least for the first time found some people to be identified with their rights and aspirations. But it is a surprise

that when a good number of scholars have noted down the history of movement from different angles, they are conspicuously silent about comrade JangalSantal who was not only the son of the soil but also a leader worth the name to lead the peasants for such a multidimensional movement. For example, we have in our disposal a well-documented book titled *Left Extremist* Movement in West Bengal: An Experiment in Armed Agrarian Struggle by Amiya K Samanta which is a well-researched work but surprisingly this peasant leader has been mentioned herein some insignificant occasions along with the key leaders of the movement. It is a fact that comrade Jangal was an 'adivasi', a member of a downtrodden community but his plan of action sparked the fire of the Naxalites to unite against the jotedars of the region who had been exploiting the peasants and the poor people by various means and excuses. In this light it is no less a curious matter that the author of such an acclaimed work could analyze this peasant movement by some stray references to comrade JangalSantaljust as a nominated CPI (M) candidate from Phansidewa Assembly constituency (Siliguri Sub-division) for the general election in 1967.² A good number of other known titles both in Bengali and English are there to enrich our knowledge about Naxalite movement but most of them have assessed the contributions of comrade Jangal with one or two sentences. Even in Bangladesh there are serious studies about Naxalite movement but there too one may hardly come across the reference to this *adivasi* peasant leader. The list of such works may be multiplied but a question arises why this comrade JangalSantal who initiated the Naxalite movement could not or did not draw the attention of the historians and only some memories of his contemporary leaders have come down to us as sources to study the leader as a person or his ideology and background that prompted him to protest against the injustice and exploitation of the peasants and workers down the ages. This may be a background of investigation of the present article to find out the silence of the scholars about this personality and whether the so-called established norm and methodology of writing Indian history where the subaltern people are hardly referred to or ignored, and if at all discussed, it is under mere obligation. Keeping in mind such a trend of historical research in Bengal nay India the present study is an attempt to focus some of the unexplored issues of the life and activities rather achievements of comrade JangalSantal whohas never been brought to public notice side by side with the comrades who came forward to organize popular movements in the region concerned. The main source of the information are some of the leaflets, pamphlets and rare interviews published in book form or memoirs which provide us some hints about JangalSantal and his mechanism to mobilize the people of the region.

It may be noted that comrade JangalSantal started his humble political life in Nepal sometime during 1949. The name of his KannaKisku and from this it seems that his family title was Kisku. KannaKisku was a tea garden labourer of Kamalpur Tea Estate, Bagdogra, in the district of Darjeeling. However, comradeJangal was associated with direct politics for about thirty years and it was an eventful carrierwhen he became known all over Indiaas an active peasant leader. According to comradeKanuSanyal, after the death of his(Jangal's) father his mother brought him to Naxalbari along with his other two brothers and one sister. Comrade KanuSanyal also informs that comrade Jangal settled at Naxalbari as a *bargadar* (share-cropper) under a *jotedar* named Durlabh Mohammad. After few years he again went to Nepal (1949) and started a family life with his first

wife GanguHansda. It was sometime in 1949, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal jointly organized a jail-breaking movement against the Ranashahi. Incidentally, this was a movement of Nepal named 'Chandragadi Jail Breaking Movement' in order to force the Government for the release of the detainees. A born rebel like comrade Jangal could not sit idle and naturally got involved in it. But as the movement failed, arrest and inhuman torture on the agitators started. At this juncture comrade Jangal had no alternative but to come back to Naxalbari sometime in 1950.¹⁰

As we have been reported, comrade Jangal had started a full-fledged political life in 1952 and first of all he took basic knowledge of politics as a member of *KishakSabha*. ¹¹ He then enrolled himself as a member of the Communist Party of India (1953) and comrade KanuSanyal seems to have been the monitor behind this lift. ¹²Inspite of any proper ideological training or association with any Marxist leader comrade Jangal soon earned reputation as a leader and gradually turned into a leading figure in the party due to his extra-ordinary commitment and unparallel sympathy for the poverty-stricken people of his locality. In no time he became a symbol of 'class struggle.'

Comrade JangalSantal was ever a leader of masses and his confidence on this account gave him an honoured position among the suffering people. This may be the reason why he could counter the dictation of the superiors. Example may be sought in his strong voice against the principles and decision of distribution of the illegal landed property of the jotedars/zamindars within the existing rules. This was a decision of the KrishakSabha. In the conference of the KrishakSabha held in 1959, he protested against it even if he was a President of the KrishakSabha of Naxalbari-Hatighisha region. According to a report Jangal could not welcome and appreciate the land issue or its distribution among the landless as a means to capturepower. 13 According to comrade KanuSanyal this was the background or origin of the outburst known as Naxalbari Movement and comrade Jangal was brought to the lime light as a peasant leader. ¹⁴ Incidentally, comrade Biswanath Mukherjee, the then leading communist leader was present in the said conference but curiously he remain silent while hearing the comments from Jangal. 15 Infact comrade Jangal was very much adamant on this issue and it seems that he might have experienced the matter in view of his fight against the jotedars and he realized that it was not at all possible for the peasants to enjoy land right, whatever in its form, so easily and on the question there might be unnecessary bloodshed, laws of lives of the unarmed poor people of India.

So far as the leadership of comrade Jangal is concerned it appears that he was a born-leader and was identified with the term*ladai*(struggle). ¹⁶It was not only concerned with peasant issues but was also linked up with working class people. It is said that being in constant touch with the tea garden labourers he was deeply associated with their day to day problems and if anybody looks at the reporting of comrade KanuSanyal, JangalSantal played a historic role in the strike of the tea garden workers of Darjeeling in 1955 who stood up with protest for legal bonus. ¹⁷ This was followed by the programme of the capture of illegal lands. Thus the time was not far when he took up a leading role to form a wing of Communist Party of India in strictest sense of the term. This may be the probable background which prompted him and his followers to organize and form CPI (ML) in 2nd April, 1969. ¹⁸

The testing points of comrade Jangal's leadership for the cause of the peasants had, in fact, started in 1952 when he came into an open conflict with a *jotedar* named Serket Sing of Hatighisa on the question of *tebhaga* issue. ¹⁹But as it is said his organization at that time was so weak that he and his followers were brutally beaten by Serket Sing and his associates. In fact comrade KanuSanyal

was also a victim of this *jotedar 'sgundas* who did not spare him from physical torture. According to comrade KanuSanyal, the issue of bonus of the tea garden workers (1955) and his stand for *tebhaga* movement of 1952 made comrade Jangal a popular figure as a leader. Because comrade Jangal had the capability to bridge the toiling classes and stood beside them in time of crisis. In fact thiswas a favourable trend of politics and there was no difficulty to mobilize people on 24th May, 1967 whencomrade JangalSantal and other leaders could call for the historic peasant movement of Naxalbari.²⁰

The rise of comrade JangalSantal as a popular peasant leader was spontaneous like leaders named Titumir, BirsaMunda, Sidhu and Kanhu and so on. According to comrade AsimChattopadhyay, comrade JangalSantal had no opportunity of any traditional education, political background or training to become a mass leader.²¹He was not a theorist but a leader from within. Incidentally, we come to know from a source that at first he came to know about Karl Marx and peasants from one milkman named Chunilal.²²It is interesting that once comrade SourenBasu asked him how comrade JangalSantal had come to politics. To quote comrade SourenBasu the reply was "One ChunilalGoala (milkman) talked about Marxism and agrarian movements to me for the first time and it impressed me very much. In fact it was the first step of my coming to politics. This had taken place sometime in 1951."²³Comrade SourenBasu, one of the prominent figures of Naxalbari movement says about the originality of comrade JangalSantal as a peasant leader. In his opinion "Any man may acquire knowledge and wisdom through study and interaction with the academic intellectuals. But in no circumstances are we able to distinguish these two wings of our human quality. But the uniqueness of comrade Jangal's leadership is that his course of action always showed what knowledge and wisdom stand for.²⁴It is said that themeasures, steps and principles he used to take up for any party-programme or action were based on reality and not on any theory. This may be possible because comrade Jangal had no hazards of the so-called middle class identity or obligation which helped him to remain unnerved or could explain easily many crucial problems of politics of his time.

Comrade JangalSantal had come from a very big family in terms of its member consisting of his two wives and children. His whole family was a victim of his political activities and wives and children were not spared. Comrade SourenBasuinforms about a moment when the Naxalite movement was at its peak hours, the police had given a warning not to offer any job to his wives in any tea garden so that they (wives) along with their children would starve and die in the long run. Even then comrade Jangal is said to have remained unmoved rather took the challenge as a genuine communist. Over and above when in 1969 he was released from the jail he was offered Rs. 190 as relief from the *jotedar* in order to repair his broken cottage. As the matter may be he sought the permission from the party whether he would accept the money. Comrade Basu says, the party leaders at that point of time directed him to refuse the relief offer and he followed and his house remained unrepaired. Comrade SourenBasu again notes that, comrade JangalSantal was never found to repent on such a situation.²⁵

A unique quality of comrade Jangal's leadership was that he never supported the line of political 'action'through killing, murder and bloodshed which was known as *khatamline* (murder) of the Naxalites propounded by comrade Charu Mazumdar. Another interesting side of his leadership was his device of class struggle but not by bloodshed. There was also a common trend among the leaders to malign and slandering of the fellow comrades. This was overtly followed in

order to belittle the activities of comrade CharuMazumdarand also to disown his achievements, if any, at all level.²⁸In such a situation comrade JangalSantal is said to have been turned furious and had a warning to all comrades that, "I do not believe for all the disaster that has fallen on the party is due to Charubabu."29 This particular feeling and stand of comrade JangalSantal has fairly been reported by another comrade AzizulHaque who by referring a letter of comrade Santal writes about the quality of leadership of that leader and that how he could achieve the same through faith and confidence by showing due honour to the fellow comrades inaddition to the ideology of selfsacrifice. In this respect we may quote the reference of the letter of comrade Santal which is not only self evident but sufficient to assess the attitude of comrade Santal towards his fellow comrades. It is said that when the dilemma of faith and no-confidence on the leadership of comrade CharuMazumdar became an issue of discussion comrade Jangal requested all comrades to consider the matter in a straight way. To quote comrade AzizulHaque "Sangrame anek rakter badale katakgula namer upar manusher bishwas janmay, sei namgulake hathat nasyat karle manusher sangramer opar astha bhenge jay. Se astha ar sahaje gare othe na."30(i.e people develop confidence on some names (of great men) who shed blood in the struggle. If there is anattempt to wash out those names suddenly, people are supposed to lose confidence on any struggle and that lost confidence does never develop again easily). Comrade Haque has not produced the original letter but he admits that it is the exact version of the letter.

It is interesting that dilemma of faith and question of no-confidence are nothing new in the political culture of India. But this statement of comrade Santal is said to have reminded him the same political ideology of Russian scholar Plekhanov who is said to have categorically condemned such attitude of the political leaders and the disaster that may come over the prospect of party organization. According to comrade Haque it is no less a wonder how comrade Santal being an illiterate person could perceive the truth of political organization and the ideology propounded by the Russian scholar long before the Naxalite movement. Because it is sureand no less a reality that comrade Jangal had no opportunity to hear about Plekhanov nor did he get any chance to read the literature of the Russian Revolution.³¹

Comrade Jangal's course of action and the spirit of people's war is an excellent example of 'class struggle' in Indian history. There was a situation at *Terai* region when the outsiders had no right or capacity to mobilize the tea garden workers or to unite the peasants and *bargadars* of this region against the *jotedars* and *zamindars*. Infact, these *jotedars* and *zamindars* had established a monopoly right to exploit the people on various excuses. Union of the tea garden workers or any peasant association had no place there and the tea garden managers or the *jotedars* had never been ready to appreciate voice of protest from any quarter. Inspite of this awkward situation some secret societies and organizations came into being in course of time and this became much more prominent just during the middle of the 1950s and a few but spontaneous workers' movement on the question of wage began to take place. Side by side, the share-croppers of the area made united effort for three-fourth part of dues from the *jotedars*. Infact it was a moment when the workers and peasants together came forward in a common platform and leaders like comrade KanuSanyal, JangalSantal, KadamMallick, and SourenBasu came out as recognized communist leaders.³² In 1962 comrade JangalSantal contested in the General Election as a candidate of the undivided Communist Party, but he was defeated by the Congress candidate by a small margin.³³

In course of time there started a conflict within the Communist Party of India and the division

came much prominently with the emergence of CPI (M) and CPI. But right from 1966 workers, peasants were very much adamant for their rights and the defeat of the Congress in 1967 and formation of the United Front Government of West Bengal gave another leap to the toiling masses of the *Terai* region. As per programmes, comrade Jangal and his associates took up the cause of the tea garden workers and also to search out the illegal lands of the *jotedars* of the *Terai*. But unfortunately the torture of the police and the arrests of the leader gain pace on this issue. A good number of CPI (M) leaders were expelled from the party and thus the stage was prepared for the emergence of CPI (ML) on 22nd April, 1969.³⁴ But as comrade JangalSantal, comrade KanuSanyal, comrade CharuMazumdar took up the cause of the peasants and raised revolutionary voices against the *jotedars* and *zamindars*, a large scale arrest of the leaders started with a consequences of awe and tension in the region. In the long run the above mention leaders became famous and historical figures so far as the peasant history of India is concerned.

One of the interesting aspects of this development was that the volume of such movement at least convinced the Government as well as the *jotedars* regarding land reforms and one of the issues and programmes of the then West Bengal Government was to look after the interest of the peasants and workers in general and that of the tea gardens in particular.

In concludingthe paper, there is a need to look at the origin and popularity of the Naxalite movement for the cause of the peasantry and how it brought comrade JangalSantal to the lime light of history. His leadership was no doubt an exceptional example being a fore front leader of a downtrodden community of India named Santal. His emergence no doubt broke the traditional belief and so-called historical truth that a political leader might come also from a lower class and caste origin. In a caste-ridden society like India the rise of comrade JangalSantalmay thus be an uncommon incident in the historiography of India in which a clear bias is often experienced in the writings of the historians. He was given a membership in the Provincial Committee of the CPI (ML) and this is also another recognition of comrade Jangal as a mass leader. The most interesting side of his personality and leadership was that he was identified with the interest of the peasants and the toiling people and his voice was the last one to mobilize the people at large for a movement. We know how the so-called extremist line of 'action' (*khatam line*) had damaged the movement and in this respect comrade Jangal was an exceptional because he could not and did not appreciate this principle in the name of people's right vis-a-vis people's movement.

But inspite of the contradictions put forward by many quarters, fact remains that his rise was not an accidental but a reality. This has become clear when there is an opinion to assess the whole incident of Naxalbari in a way that "Sanyal (i.e.KanuSanyal), JangalSantal and others who had every reason to feel disgusted with the plant machinations of the Mazumder(CharuMazumdar) clique for taking all credit of the Naxalbari struggle..." So a clear picture emerges while studying comrade JangalSantal, his recognition as a mass leader has not received unanimously rather has been seen from a parochial standpoint. The literature that has developed on the Naxalite movement has also hardly made justice to him. Because if someone looks at the statement of comrade KanuSanyal, it may be clear the quality leadership of comrade JangalSantal. In his language "Jangal had not become a JangalSantal in a day. Its history is very cruel and at the same time very much pleasant. Indomitable courage, uncommon sincerity, unlimited loyalty, unbelievable diligence and above all genuine sympathy for the toiling masses and also human sense were the elements of his character and in totality these had raised him to a higher level of leadership." Comrade KanuSanyal

seems to have been touched with the so-called rumour against comrade JangalSantal who was very often identified with a Tarzan and, as if, being a hero of many adventures. In this way, he(comrade Sanyal) wandered, how a man like comrade JangalSantal was supposed to be a symbol of terror, bloodshed or murder.³⁷ But comrade KanuSanyal has emphatically stressed that the truth is something opposite of such comments and remarks against comrade JangalSantal. Here it may be relevant to refer a poem composed by one modern poet JayantaChoudhury by name with the title 'JangalSantal' and a few lines of the same are –

Agunergabhirataeinashtaupanibesher Hingsradant, nakhaar tar samastagaral Ki rakamdhelechhiloBanglayBihare,Andhre./

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Jachilotomarsamne, charpashe
Ja halo tomarsamne, chaturdike
EkhanoJangal tar mukhomukhi
Ekhano Bihar Bangla Andhra arpatakar rang
Saradesharoyaltar mukhomukhi
Tumimrita.Jangalersamuhabinashe
Jantrana, ghrinayaajasahay
Dhanukermotobenkejaoyaeidesh
Tumirekhegele..........38

(i.e. The gravity of fire /and how the harmful teeth, nails of the spoiled colonialism had poured its poison/

In Bengal, Bihar and in Andhra./

Whatever was in front of you, all around/

Whatever was at your front- step in all directions/

Jangal still stands face to face/

You are now dead, and due to the complete disappearance of Jangal /

(We are)at present helpless, there are pains and hatred/

You have left a country with the shape of a bent-bow).

The poet has portrayed here the feeling of a revolutionary that might have occurred in the mind of the departed leader and also the condition of our nation symbolized with a bent bow (i.e. backboneless) he left to the coming generation with his death. At the long last let us conclude with the famous statement of comrade KanuSanyal who could not but paid his homage by saying – "Samajjekhanesrenibibhaktamuktikamimanusherladaisekhaneabyahata. AreiabyahataladaiergatipathebarbaruchcharitahabeJangalSantalernam." 39(i.e. ... where the society is stratified, the fight of the emancipationists would remain unending. And in this fighting-march the name of Jangal would be uttered all the time to come). If the after generation considers comrade JangalSantal in this light and Indian history is written accordingly, it would be a great justice to this man and be a tribute to this son of India.

Notes and References:

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- 2. AmiyaK. Samanta has mentioned the name only but no detailed account has been given about JangalSantal.
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- 4. Mention may be made a book edited by M. R. AkhtarMukultitled*NakshalderShes Surya*, Dhaka, 1989.
- 5. AshisMaitraet el (ed.), *JangalSantal*, Calcutta, 1989, p.2. This book has recently been reprinted with the same title in 2007 from Radical, Kolkata. We have, however, utilized and followed the first edition of this book.
- 6. SudirghaSangramerEktiUtkrishtaPhasal Jangal, a lecture byKanuSanyal delivered on 24.12.1988 at Tripura Hitasadhani Hall, Calcutta, incorporated in the book JangalSantal edited by AshisMaita et el, Calcutta, 1989,(henceforth KanuSanyal), p.1.
- 7. *Ibid*.
- 8. *Ibid*, p.2.
- 9. Ibid.
- 10. *Ibid*.
- 11. *Ibid*.12. *Ibid*.
- 12. *Ibid*.
- 13. *Ibid.* p.3.
- 14. *Ibid*.
- 15. *Ibid*.
- 16. *Ibid.* p.4.
- 17. *Ibid*.
- 18. *Ibid*.
- 19. *Ibid*. p.3.
- 20. Ibid. p.4.
- 21. *Ibid.* p.15.
- 22. This information has been given by SourenBasu in AshisMaitra*etel*(ed.), *op.cit*. p.8.
- 23. *Ibid.* p.8.
- 24. A Bengali article by SaurenBasu, ChhinnabandhanPramithues in AshisMaitraetel (ed.), op.cit. p.9.
- 25. Ibid.
- 26. *Ibid.* p.10; and also the article titled *JangalSantal: EkSangramiAnuprerana* by AsimChattopadhyay in AshisMaitraet el (ed.), *op.cit.* p.15. Comrade AsimChattopadhyay has nicely stated the uselessness

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of this politics of terrorism vis a vis murder and bloodshed. From his experience he has noted that some comrades of the movement along with himself had wanted to materialize this course of action in some border areas of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. But he admits that everywhere he experienced the irrelevance of such a line of action.

- 27. Ibid. p.16.
- 28. For details see *JangaldaEktaSiksha*, *Ekta Pratik* by AzizulHaque in AshisMaitraet el (ed.), *op.cit*. p.20.
- 29. SaurenBasu, ChhinnabandhanPramithues in AshisMaitra, etel (ed.), op.cit. p.10.
- 30. AzizulHaqueop.cit.inAshisMaitraet el (ed.), op.cit. p.20.
- 31. *Ibid*
- 32. Pradip Banerjee, KingbadantirNayak: JangalSantal in AshisMaitraet el (ed.), op.cit. p.31.
- 33. *Ibid*.
- 34. KanuSanyal, p.4.
- 35. SajalBasu, Politics of Violence- A Case Study of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1982, p.105.
- 36. KanuSanyal, op.cit. p.3.
- 37. *Ibid*.
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- 39. KanuSanyal, op.cit. p.7.