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## Surendra Sai and Madho Singh: The great warriors of Sambalpur rebellion

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### Abstract

The primary objective of the paper is to unravel the distinguishing valour and contribution of Veer Surendra Sai and his close associate Madho Singh to the 1857 Sambalpur Rebellion. Unlike any other great warriors like Mangal Pandey, Nana Sahib, Tantia Tope and many others; Surendra and Madho are yet to find the deserving tribute from the nation for which they sacrificed their lives. Madho Singh appears even more distinct in the context because he even let his four sons and other family members to fight for freedom and dignity of the people.

**Keywords:** Gadi, Gauntia, Barhampura Temple, Singhoda glen, Kunjel Para

### Introduction

Odisha fell under British rule in 1803; however, the local populace waged a sustained and formidable resistance against the British administration. Guided by the resolute leadership of Bakshi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar, the Paiks of Khurdha initiated a rebellion in 1817. In 1816, the Khandas of Paralakhemundi and Ghumsur similarly rose in opposition, and by 1834, their rebellion had been largely quelled. Nevertheless, under the leadership of Chakra Bisoyee, they persisted in causing disruptions to British authority until 1856.

“It is said that the genius of Dalhousie was responsible for the Indian Revolution of 1857 and the stupidity of Nicholas-II was responsible for the Russian revolution.” (N.K. Sahu, *Veer Surendra Sai*) The Revolution of 1857 was indeed of much significance as it generated a sense of harmony and integration among the people leading to the spirit of nationalism.

Veer Surendra Sai, the resolute leader of the Sambalpur resistance movement, was born on January 23, 1809 A.D., into the Chauhan royal family in the village of Rajpur-Khinda, located 21 miles to the north of Sambalpur town. He had six brothers - Udanta Sai, Dhruva Sai, Ujjal Sai, Chhabila Sai, Jajjala Sai, and Medina Sai - who supported him in all circumstances. His only sister, Anjana, remained celibate throughout her life.

Surendra received his early education in the village school but was more interested in military training than scholastic pursuits. It is said that he frequently skipped school to learn archery and guerrilla warfare from the Gonds and Binjhals. His impressive organizational skills and imposing personality earned him the affection of Zamindars, Gauntias, and the common people who came into contact with him.

He married the daughter of the Hatibadi Zamindar from the then Gangpur state and had a son named Mitrabhanu Sai and a daughter. His father, Dharam Singh, was a descendant of Aniruddha Sai, the son of Madhukar Sai, the fourth Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. Members of the Sai family laid claim to the throne as the next in line after the main lineage of Sambalpur following the death of Maharaja Sai in 1827 AD. Another claimant to the throne was Govinda Singh, the eldest son of the Zamindar of Jharsuguda, who traced his lineage back to Chhatra Sai, the seventh Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. However, these claims were made moot as the British had already occupied Sambalpur in January 1804 AD. After defeating the Bhonsal Raja in the Third Anglo-Maratha War of 1817, the British decided to establish their authority over Sambalpur. In 1818 AD, after the death of Jayanta Singh, Maharaja Sai ascended to the throne. Since Maharaja Sai had no male heir, Surendra Sai, representing the Rajpur-Khinda family, asserted his claims to the 'Gadi' of Sambalpur.

However, the British disregarded the claims of both Surendra and Govinda Singh and instead installed Mohan Kumari, the widow Rani of Maharaja Sai, on the throne of Sambalpur. This

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decision flagrantly violated the customs and traditions of the region, shocking conservative people. Mohan Kumari proved unfit for managing the state administration, leading to nepotism, corruption, and exploitation, further worsening the situation. Consequently, disturbances erupted, and for several years, there was ongoing discord between the recognized ruler and other claimants to the chief ship.

Surendra Sai proved to be a skilled military leader, whose exceptional organizational abilities and deep knowledge of military strategy became a persistent challenge for the British rulers. The British Ramgarh Battalion, stationed in Sambalpur under the command of Captain Higgins, found themselves ill-equipped to confront Surendra Sai, given his expertise in guerrilla warfare. In their efforts to quell the rebellion, another British battalion led by Captain Wilkinson hurried from Hazaribagh in Bihar to Sambalpur.

Captain Wilkinson took harsh measures, including the hanging of many insurgents and the imprisonment of a significant number of them. Although the rebellion was somewhat suppressed, it could not be entirely extinguished. Consequently, due to the dire circumstances, the British Government dethroned Queen Mohan Kumari and relocated her to Cuttack as a pensioner in 1833 AD.

Narayan Singh, whose mother belonged to an inferior caste, had served as a personal attendant of Rani Mohan Kumari for a time. It is likely that she recommended him for the position. Narayan Singh was taken aback by the decision and even requested the Agent not to elevate him to such a perilous position. On October 11, 1833, the British appointed Narayan Singh as the ruler of Sambalpur. However, his advanced age rendered him incapable of effectively managing the administration.

As a consequence, the claim to the throne was contested by other members of the Rajpur-Khinda family. Balaram Singh, a brother of Dharam Singh from the Khinda family, championed the cause of his nephew, Surendra Sai, arguing that they had a more legitimate right to the throne. Additionally, the Gond tribal people rose in revolt against Narayan Singh, sparking a renewed rebellion in Sambalpur. In 1837, Surendra Sai, Udanta Sai, Balaram Singh, and Balabhadra Deo, the Zamindar of Lakhanpur, convened at Debrigarh to strategize their future course of action. Debrigarh, situated in Barapahar, served as a crucial stronghold for the insurgents. During one incident, while Surendra Sai and his comrade Balabhadra Deo were taking a midday nap, they were ambushed by Sepoys loyal to Narayana Singh, who had been led there by Pahadu Ganda, a traitorous deserter from Surendra Sai's camp. In the ensuing skirmish, Balabhadra Deo, the Gond Zamindar of Lakhanpur and a supporter of Surendra Sai, was ruthlessly killed. Fortunately, Surendra Sai and his followers managed to escape, intensifying their agitation even further (Das, A. Life of Surendra Sai).

### **First Phase of the Revolt (1827-1840)**

Since 1827 AD, both Balaram Singh and his nephew Surendra Sai had been asserting their claims to the throne, or 'Gadi,' of Sambalpur as the legitimate heirs. However, the British authorities consistently disregarded Surendra Sai's claim to the throne. Frustrated by this persistent denial, Surendra Sai made the bold decision to rebel against British policy, seeking the support of his uncle, Balaram Sai, as well as the assistance of his six brothers: Udyanta, Dhruva, Ujjala, Chhabila, Jajjala, and Medini, along with local

Zamindars and Gauntias.

One notable figure among the local supporters of the British was Durjaya Singh, the Zamindar of Rampur. He actively aligned himself with Narayana Singh, the British-appointed ruler of Sambalpur, against the insurgents led by Surendra Sai. In an attempt to win Durjaya Singh to his cause, Surendra Sai sent a messenger, hoping to persuade him to join the rebellion. However, the messenger returned humiliated, having been insulted by Durjaya Singh.

In response to this insult, Surendra Sai and his followers took drastic action. In 1840, they launched an attack on Rampur, laying siege to the fort and ultimately reducing it to rubble. Durjaya Singh fled to Himgiri to escape the onslaught, but his father and son lost their lives in the ensuing battle. This incident underscored the escalating conflict between the insurgents led by Surendra Sai and those loyal to the British-appointed ruler, Narayana Singh.

Shortly after the Rampur incident, as Surendra Sai was en route to the Patna State, he found himself accused of the Rampur murder case. The British army intercepted him on his journey and arrested him, along with his brother Udyanta Sai and Uncle Balaram Singh. They were subsequently tried for their alleged involvement in the Rampur murder case and were sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1840 AD, they were transported to Hazaribagh for detention.

Tragically, Balaram Singh, who had been a guide and supporter of the rebels, passed away while in jail, sometime after his imprisonment. This marked a significant chapter in the complex history of the Sambalpur rebellion, highlighting the determination and resilience of Surendra Sai and his supporters in their quest for the recognition of their rightful claims to the throne.

The period during Surendra Sai's incarceration in Hazaribagh jail was marked by significant developments in the history of Sambalpur. Narayan Singh, the British-appointed ruler of Sambalpur, passed away on September 10, 1849, without leaving behind a male heir to succeed him. (N.K. Sahu, Veer Surendra Sai). This created a vacancy in the leadership of Sambalpur, which the British Governor General, Lord Dalhousie, used as an opportunity to apply the Doctrine of Lapse. This policy allowed the British to annex territories ruled by Indian princes if they did not have a direct male heir.

Surendra Sai's claim to the throne of Sambalpur was not only justifiable but also legally sound. However, the British authorities were apprehensive about his formidable personality and widespread popularity among the people of Sambalpur. They were reluctant to recognize him as the legitimate ruler due to the potential threat he posed to their control.

After the annexation of Sambalpur, the British administration implemented policies and measures that generated dissatisfaction among both Zamindars (landlords) and the common people. One of the most significant sources of discontent was the treatment of tribal Zamindars and Gauntias, who were brought under rigorous British control. The British authorities indiscriminately raised the revenue levied on them, significantly increasing the financial burden. For example, a record indicates that the annual tribute paid by the state in 1849 amounted to Rs. 8,800, but by 1854, this figure had soared to Rs. 74,000. This drastic increase placed a heavy strain on the tribal Zamindars, who lacked the capacity to provide leadership to their communities and

were awaiting the return of their beloved leader, Surendra Sai.

The turning point came in 1857 when a group of mutineers stormed Hazaribagh jail, securing the release of all prisoners, including Surendra Sai. This event marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Sambalpur. With Surendra Sai now free, the tribal people of Sambalpur found their leader once again. They rallied under his banner and launched an open rebellion against British rule.

The uprising under the leadership of Surendra Sai in 1857 demonstrated the resilience and determination of the people of Sambalpur in their quest for self-determination and justice. It was a pivotal moment in the struggle for recognition of their legitimate claims and the restoration of their rights and freedoms.

### **Second Phase of the Revolt (1857-1864)**

The year 1857 marked a crucial turning point in the life and activities of Surendra Sai, the iconic leader of the Sambalpur resistance movement. On July 30, 1857, during the Sepoy Mutiny, rebellious sepoys forcefully breached the walls of Hazaribagh Jail and liberated Surendra Sai, along with 32 other prisoners. Remarkably, Surendra Sai had already spent 17 long years in captivity before the mutineers succeeded in freeing him.

Upon regaining his freedom, Surendra Sai returned to Sambalpur, where he quickly set about organizing the local populace to take a stand against British rule. However, in the eyes of the British authorities, Surendra Sai was a fugitive and an escaped prisoner. He was officially declared a rebel, and a reward of Rs. 250/- was offered for his arrest, along with that of his brother.

On October 13, 1857, Surendra Sai, accompanied by his supporters, made a formal representation to Captain R.T. Leigh, the Senior Assistant Commissioner of Sambalpur. (Panda SC "The Revolt of 1857 and Veer Surendra Sai") In this representation, Surendra Sai sought the remission of his imprisonment sentence and petitioned for his installation as the rightful Raja (king) of Sambalpur.

However GF, Cockburn, the Commissioner of Orissa, vehemently opposed any leniency towards Surendra Sai. He instead recommended Surendra Sai's deportation. In anticipation of potential rebellion, the British Government bolstered its military presence in Sambalpur, bringing in more troops to maintain control over the region.

In Sambalpur, Surendra Sai was treated as a political prisoner. His residence was closely guarded, and his movements were rigorously monitored. Under these restrictive circumstances, Surendra Sai foresaw impending trouble and decided to flee to Khinda, where his brother Udyant was residing. Then, on the fateful night of October 31, 1857, Surendra Sai initiated a rebellion against British rule and issued a passionate call to the people of Sambalpur to join him in liberating their homeland from British paramourty.

Many tribal Zamindars (Landlords) and Gauntias (local leaders) rallied to his cause, marking the beginning of a significant phase in the Sambalpur resistance movement. This marked the start of an intense struggle, with Surendra Sai at its forefront, as they sought to wrest control of Sambalpur from the British colonial authorities and restore the rights and freedoms of the local population. The events that unfolded in the wake of Surendra Sai's escape and his call to rebellion would leave a lasting impact on the history

of the region and the broader struggle for Indian independence.

The Rebellion of Sambalpur in 1857 primarily took the form of a tribal uprising. Tribal Zamindars from regions such as Ghens, Kolabira, Paharsirgira, Machida, Kodabaga, Laida, Loisingha, Lakhanpur, Bheden, Pakulanda, and others actively participated in this revolt, aligning themselves with the cause championed by Surendra Sai. In their commitment to the rebellion, these tribal Zamindars willingly abandoned their comforts and adopted a jungle-dwelling lifestyle. Their sacrifices were substantial, as some lost their estates, some met their demise in battle, some were captured and subsequently executed, and many others were imprisoned. The tribal individuals who joined the rebellion were renowned for their unwavering dedication and acts of heroism. It was through their strength and support that Surendra Sai was able to confront the formidable British colonial power. To maximize the effectiveness of the rebellion, Surendra Sai organized the insurgents into various groups situated in different locations.

As part of the rebellion's actions, the rebels disrupted the communication networks connecting Sambalpur with Hazaribagh, Ranchi, Cuttack, and Nagpur. For a considerable period, these crucial connections were severed due to the activities of the rebels, highlighting the extent of their defiance against British authority. The Rebellion of Sambalpur in 1857 was not only a symbol of resistance but also a testament to the determination and unity of the tribal population in their pursuit of justice and freedom.

### **Period of conciliation**

Major Impey assumed the role of Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur, replacing Colonel Forster. He held a steadfast belief that the most effective approach to persuade the rebels, including their leader Surendra Sai, to lay down their arms was through conciliatory measures.

After carefully assessing the critical situation, Major Impey chose to pursue a policy aimed at encouraging the voluntary surrender of rebels.

On September 24, 1861, an amnesty was officially declared, offering clemency to all rebels with the exception of Surendra Sai, his brother Udyant, and his son Mitrabhanu. A second proclamation followed on October 11, 1861, which extended a free pardon to all rebels who chose to surrender. These proclamations had a significant impact, drawing numerous rebels who sought a peaceful resolution, allowing them to reunite with their families and friends.

Thanks to the proclamations, many rebels emerged from their jungle hideouts and willingly turned themselves in. Those who surrendered were granted clemency, and their confiscated properties were returned to them. When the brothers and the sole son of Surendra Sai, Mitrabhanu, decided to surrender, Major Impey treated them with respect and dignity, permitting them to return to their village of Khinda.

A notable moment occurred on the night of May 16, 1862, when Surendra Sai met Major Impey deep within the dense forest and formally surrendered himself. In recognition of this act, Major Impey allowed Surendra Sai to return to his village, marking a significant chapter in the resolution of the Sambalpur rebellion. This series of conciliatory measures played a crucial role in facilitating the reintegration of the rebels into society and restoring peace to the region.

In late 1861, Mr. RN Shore, the Commissioner of Cuttack,



arrived in Sambalpur following explicit instructions from the Government to conduct an inquiry into matters related to the rebellion. He observed that Major Impey had managed to instill a significant degree of trust among the local populace, and his conciliatory approach had garnered substantial appreciation. Furthermore, the Government of Bengal reaffirmed the terms outlined in the proclamations, specifically those pertaining to the restoration of property to the rebels.

Notably, the Zamindar of Kolabira, a staunch supporter of Surendra Sai, received exceptionally generous treatment following his surrender. Major Impey's conciliatory gestures served to convince the rebels of the British Government's genuine commitment to restoring peace and order in the historically troubled district. Negotiations with the rebels persisted, and ultimately, Major Impey's policy proved to be successful.

Mitrabhanu, the sole son of Surendra Sai, emerged as the first member of the Sai family to surrender to Major Impey on January 7, 1862. Two days later, Dhruva Sai and Udyant Sai followed suit in announcing their surrender. This marked a significant turning point in the resolution of the Sambalpur rebellion, with the conciliatory efforts of Major Impey playing a pivotal role in achieving success and bringing about a sense of peace and reconciliation in the region.

Early in May, 1862 Surendra Sai started negotiation with the British authorities. He again asked for recognition of his claim to the throne of Sambalpur. But that claim was rejected by British authority. Major Impey assured him that he would be given liberal pension for that. Surendra Sai then demanded some money to pay the arrears to his soldiers. Major Impey sanctioned five hundred rupees to him. Thereafter, he surrendered to Major Impey on 16th May, 1862. He was granted a pension of Rs. 1200/- per annum. Liberal pensions (Rs. 4,400) were also granted to other members of his family. Almost all other rebel leaders except Kunjal Singh and Kamal Singh surrendered to Major Impey. The critical observation on Sambalpur rebellion seems certainly incomplete without bringing Madho Singh and his daunting sons into the context. It was they who were deeply comparatively more involved in the rebellion and afterwards took it forward.

### **Revolt of Madho Singh**

Madho Singh, in stark contrast to other Zamindars of his time, vehemently opposed the British, not out of personal interest. Despite having the means to live a luxurious life filled with wine and concubines by paying a mere 356 rupees in annual taxes, there was not a trace of such extravagant tendencies in his character.

As the pioneers of the Sambalpur Revolution, Surendra Sai and his uncle Balaram Sai were imprisoned at Hajaribagh jail. After enduring a lengthy 17-year confinement, in 1857, Surendra, along with his brother Udanta and their followers, successfully escaped from the jail. Their return to Sambalpur infused a sense of hope and enthusiasm among the common people. Disregarding the warnings of R.T. Leigh, the administrator of Sambalpur, Madho Singh sent his sons to Sambalpur to welcome Surendra and discuss their future battle plans, displaying a nonchalant and fearless attitude.

Madho Singh's anger towards the imperial power ran deep, leading him to take an unwavering oath to offer the heads of

the British before his village goddess Patameswari. Other Gauntias and Zamindars also joined forces with Surendra and Madho.

On October 7, 1857, after performing the necessary rituals at the Barampura temple in Sambalpur, Surendra, Hatte, Kunjal, and others devised a cleverly crafted war strategy. To send a clear message to the British, they paraded through the town, showcasing their anger and courage. During the parade, an elephant suddenly went wild in the middle of the town, striking fear into everyone. However, it was the mighty strength of Kunjal Singh that eventually tamed the elephant after a strenuous struggle. In their jubilation, Surendra named that place Kunjel Para.

Madho Singh, fully aware of the consequences of rejecting the proposal for an annual tax of 356 rupees, took proactive measures. He gathered a substantial number of indigenous youths and provided them with comprehensive training in various combat skills. The ancient banyan tree at Ghens, near the Budharaja temple, still stands witness to the rigorous physical and psychological training endured by these youths.

On December 29, 1857, Captain Wood, leading a sizable armed force, crossed the Singhoda Ghaty and came face to face with Madho and his troops. This encounter escalated into a fierce battle between the two parties. Somehow, Captain Wood managed to escape. However, the following day proved to be a tragic one for Madho and his compatriots. Captain Wood, joined by Captain Leigh, amassed a formidable force comprising 75 soldiers from Nagpur, 150 from Madras, and 50 from the Ramgarh battalion. They launched an attack on Kudopali and fatally shot Chhabila Sai, Surendra Sai's brother, likely with the intention of further infuriating the rebels.

With the battles at Singhoda becoming increasingly formidable, Captain Shakespear led a well-trained military force in an invasion from the Raipur side. At that time, Hatte, the eldest brother, served as the chieftain and single-handedly took down many British soldiers. However, during the conflict, Hatte was struck by a sharp rock, leading to his immediate transfer to a concealed cave for medical attention. Hatte's fierce combat alarmed the administration, prompting them to offer a reward to anyone who could capture Hatte, dead or alive. A man named Kenkeni presented a severed head, falsely claiming it to be Hatte's, and was rewarded with ownership of five villages near Sohela. When the truth emerged, Kenkeni was ousted, and Bairi Singh eventually killed him, hanging his body from a tree. This place came to be known as Kenmudi.

The Singhoda glen remained a constant thorn for the British authority. On February 12, 1858, it faced another joint assault, this time by Captain Woodbridge and Captain Wood. Upon receiving intelligence from their secret spy, Madho and the rebels intercepted them near Paharsrigida. There, they engaged and defeated most of the British soldiers, with Madho himself beheading Woodbridge.

The constant defeats suffered by the British administration in their encounters with Madho Singh and his rebel forces intensified their frustration and led to Madho Singh becoming the focal point of their attention. The turning point in their favor came when Major Forster, a military officer with a notorious reputation for his ruthless methods, was transferred to Sambalpur with enhanced authority. Major Forster had previously gained notoriety for effectively quelling the Porhat rebellion in Bihar, and his

arrival in Sambalpur signalled a more aggressive approach by the British.

Compared to the previous officers, Major Forster's methods were seen as even more disgraceful and ruthless. Seizing an opportunity when the brothers were engaged elsewhere in battle, Major Forster launched a surprise attack on Ghes with a substantial army. What ensued was a horrifying and brutal battle between Major Forster's forces and Madho Singh along with the local residents. Eventually, Ghes was set ablaze, and Madho Singh, who had already succumbed to old age, was captured.

On the 31st of December 1858, Madho Singh met his tragic fate when he was hanged in Sambalpur. His life had been dedicated to fighting for the welfare and protection of his people and the land they cherished for over three decades. This man of indomitable spirit and iron muscles had valiantly defended his homeland against the British incursion.

Madho Singh's sacrifice and unwavering commitment to the cause did not go unnoticed. The government of the state of Odisha has been commemorating this day as "Veerata Diwas" (Bravery Day) since 1997. It serves as a solemn reminder of the valour and resilience displayed by Madho Singh and his comrades in their struggle against colonial oppression, inspiring generations to remember and honour their legacy of courage and determination in the face of adversity. Madho Singh's ultimate sacrifice continues to serve as a symbol of the indomitable spirit of resistance against injustice and tyranny.

By the end of 1857, the British had nearly crushed the revolutionary movements in various regions, shifting their primary focus to the Sambalpur Rebellion. During this time, common people endured brutal lashings and mass slaughter, leading to a deep and intense emotional response from figures like Surendra and other rebels. The liberal policy proposed by Impey sparked a strong mental reaction among them.

Continuing their battles had become increasingly challenging as innocent people had suffered prolonged torment and agony without any personal involvement in the conflict. The rebels, with compassionate hearts, could no longer bear witness to the cries and suffering of countless widows and innocent victims.

Therefore, after extensive deliberation in 1862, with the exception of Kunjal and Kamal, Surendra, Hatte, Bairi, and others opted to accept Impey's peace treaty. Consequently, Hatte, Bairi, and the remaining rebels returned to their respective villages, seeking a peaceful resolution to the ongoing turmoil.

However, Kunjal Singh, along with some of his supporters, chose to persist the rebellion despite the others' decision to embrace the treaty of peace. However, after much of a ceaseless and laborious effort on January, 1865, they arrested Kunjal and his companion Salegram Bariha.

## Conclusion

Thus the contribution of Surendra Sai and Madho Singh to the arena of the First War of Independence is certainly distinctive and remarkable. By their valor and strong commitment they proved themselves to be men of stature and leaders of people who could sacrifice everything in possession just to make the motherland free from the foreign clutch.

The continual re-evaluation of history represents an ongoing

intellectual endeavour because history, by its nature, is far more than a static repository of names and dates. Therefore, thorough scholarly investigations into the lives of these remarkable martyrs are certain to afford them the rightful recognition they deserve. Moreover, such research endeavours promise to unveil fresh perspectives and insights into the illustrious narrative of the Indian freedom struggle.

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