

Resistance, Revolt, and Freedom: The Contributions of Veer Surendra Sai

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Abstract

Veer Surendra Sai (23 January 1809–28 February 1884) was one of the earliest and most remarkable freedom fighters in Indian history. A descendant of the Chauhan dynasty of Sambalpur in present-day Odisha, he led a prolonged and determined resistance against British colonial rule for nearly four decades. Although his struggle began as a dispute over the succession to the throne of Sambalpur, it gradually transformed into a broad-based movement against British imperialism that united zamindars, tribal communities, peasants, and local chiefs under his leadership.

For many decades, Veer Surendra Sai's contribution remained relatively overlooked in mainstream narratives of Indian nationalism. However, contemporary historical research has restored his rightful place as one of the earliest and most resolute champions of resistance against British colonialism. His life and sacrifices continue to inspire generations as symbols of courage, perseverance, and patriotism.

The legacy of Veer Surendra Sai extends beyond the history of Odisha. It forms an integral part of India's larger freedom struggle, illustrating that the quest for independence was sustained not only by nationally celebrated leaders but also by regional heroes whose sacrifices laid the foundations of India's eventual liberation. His enduring example reaffirms the values of justice, resilience, and the unwavering pursuit of freedom, ensuring that his name remains permanently etched in the annals of Indian history.

The 19th century heralded a new era of evolution of resistance movement in different parts of the country against the British rule. The spirit of defiance of the people culminated the emergence of a number of freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives for the sake of their motherland. These martyrs of India have occupied a significant and honourable place in the history. Their sacrifice, determination and spirit of patriotism will keep them alive forever.

Veer Surendra Sai (23 January 1809–28 February 1884) was one of the earliest and most remarkable freedom fighters in Indian history. A descendant of the Chauhan dynasty of Sambalpur in present-day Odisha, he led a prolonged and determined resistance against British colonial rule for nearly four decades. Although his struggle began as a dispute over the succession to the throne of Sambalpur, it gradually transformed into a broad-based movement against British imperialism that united zamindars, tribal communities, peasants, and local chiefs under his leadership.

The Great Revolution of 1857 was of profound significance as it gave a new turn to the history of the British rule in India. It generated a sense of harmony and cohesion among the people leading to the spirit of nationalism for which people offered strong resistance against

the British administration in different parts of India. The resistance movement of Veer Surendra Sai in Sambalpur was an integral part of the all-India Revolution of 1857-58, the objective of which was to achieve freedom from the British rule. It was different from the earlier revolutions of Odisha as it was not a mere resistance movement. He pooled the military resources of the tribal people such as the *Gonds*, *Binjhals*, *Savaras* and others who inhabited the hilly tracts of Western Odisha and Eastern Madhya Pradesh. In fact, his rebellion against the Alien rule was a tribal rebellion and under his strong leadership the flame of patriotism did not collapse by the end of 1858, but it continued to light the others. He fought single handed against the mighty British power. His role in shaping the course of the Revolution of 1857-58 in the hilly tracts of Western Odisha was highly inspiring, and continued to be more vigorous after the suppression of the revolution in other parts of India. He surrendered with full faith and trusted in the honesty and integrity of the British, but subsequently became victim of ignoble treachery. He was arrested and put in the prison cell of Asurgarh fort, where he died.

First Phase of the Revolution:

The early phase of the revolution of Surendra Sai started after 1827 when the Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur, Maharaja Sai died without any issue. It created a problem of succession to the *Gadi* and provided ample opportunity for the British to interfere directly in the affairs of Sambalpur kingdom. So, to serve their interest, they installed the widow queen Rani Mahan Kumari on the Gadee and set aside the right of the real claimants. The installation of a lady on the throne of Sambalpur was repugnant to many people as it was against the law and custom of the land. No doubt, in the early 19th century, Rani Ratan Kumari had taken up the administration of Sambalpur when her husband and son were imprisoned by the Marathas of Nagpur. She was a lady of courage and determination. Reality was that the British supported her to strengthen their power and to defeat the design of the Marathas on Sambalpur. So, the recognition of the queen on the *Gadi* of Sambalpur by the British was more formal than real. But, compared to her, Rani Mohan Kumari lacked that qualities and her administration marked by corruption and despotism.

The tribal Zamindaris, Gauntias and the common people were exploited by the queen which created greater dissatisfaction which led to the uprising of the tribal Zamindars and the people. The installation of Mohan Kumari clearly pointed out the deliberate intention of ignoring the rights of several important claimants to the *Gadi* of Sambalpur. One of the claimant, Govind Singh of Jharsuguda, son of Ranjit Singh descendant of Chhatra Sai, the seventh Raja could not remain quiet and led his revolt against the British.

In 1927, Surendra Sai started his rebellion against the installation of Mohan Kumari on the *Gadi* of Sambalpur. The injustice of the British provoked him who was the legal heir to the Gadee of Sambalpur. He was supported by large number of discontented *Gonds* and the *Binjhal* Zamindar who found their privileges threatened and their land encroached upon by the influential upper class people who were the favourites of the Rani.

Surendra Sai with his brother Udanta Sai with a band of faithful followers revolted against the British. His uncle Balaram Sai who was acting as the *Dewan* of Mohan Kumari relinquished his office and joined in the rebellion of his nephew Surendra Sai.

On the other hand, another claimant Govind Singh of Jharsuguda, descendant of Chhatra Sai, the seventh Raja of Sambalpur was also the rightful heir to the *Gadi* of Sambalpur.⁷ He was the son of Ranjit Singh, who was enjoying great favour and privileges by Maharaja Sai. But, surprisingly after the demise of Maharaja Sai, the British authorities did not consider the claim of Ranjit Singh for which he was disappointed and dejected. So, to satisfy him, Rani Mohan Kumari created the new Zamindari of Jharsuguda consisting of thirteen villages and appointed Ranjit Singh as the chieftain of the new estate. But, it did not satisfy his son Govind Singh who earnestly expected the Rajgi of Sambalpur. When Surendra Sai started the rebellion against the British and tried to recruit the support of the people at the neighbourhood of Jharsuguda, Govind Singh wanted to capture him and handover to the British in order to get their favour. Govind Singh was very much jealous of popular support that Surendra Sai was getting in his own estate Jharsuguda and considered him as his rival to the *Gadi* of Sambalpur. When he met Surendra Sai with his armed men in the jungle close to Jharsuguda, Surendra Sai convinced him that he was not after the *Gadi* of Sambalpur, but to drive the foreigners out of the motherland. If Govind Singh fought against the British to secure the *Gadi* of Sambalpur he himself was ready to help him in his mission being one of his followers. Govind Singh was so inspired by Surendra Sai that in 1832 with the help of his uncle Bhagban Babu started the rebellion from Chandrapur with the determination to fight against the British. He was also supported by Ajit Singh, the Zamindar of Bargarh and the revolution got momentum with the support of large number of discontented people.

The rebellion of Surendra Sai and Govind Singh ran parallel. The purpose of both of them was to depose the Rani Mohan Kumari and to remove the British from Sambalpur. Surendra Sai organised the tribals against the Rani and the British. All his six brothers – Udanta Sai, Dhruva Sai, Ujjala Sai, Chhabila Sai, Jajalla Sai and Medini Sai joined Surendra Sai and their uncle Balaram Sai. Lt. Higgins who was incharge of the detachment of Ramgarh Battalion of Sambalpur failed to control the situation and was unable to cope with the strength of the two rebels camps. He was soon joined by Captain Wilkinson with a force from Hazaribagh to put down the rebellions. Govind Singh was defeated and taken prisoner Ajit Singh was deposed and his estate Bargarh was confiscated and became a part of Raigrah State. But, the revolution of Surendra Sai could not be put down. Captain Wilkinson tried ruthlessly to suppress the rebels. He hanged many of the insurgents and put a large number in prison. The Rajas of Patna and Sonapur rendered valuable service to the government and captured many tribal leaders. But inspite of it, the situation did not improve. Captain Wilkinson carefully studied the situation and came to the conclusion that the rebellion could not be controlled as long as Mohan Kumari was on the *Gadi* of Sambalpur and she must be replaced. Therefore, he suggested the deposition of the Rani. His recommendation was accepted and the Rani was deposed in 1833. She was granted a pension of Rs. 600 per month and sent to Cuttack with Mukta Dei. In her place, Narayan Singh, a scion of the Chauhan family of Barpali was selected and installed on the Gadee of Sambalpur on 11th October 1833.

The accession of the old and imbecile Raja Narayan Singh did not solve the problem, rather it worsened the situation. Narayan Singh patronized the Brahmin ministers who had no love for the tribal people and exploited them. The tribal Zamindars and Gauntias apprehended loss of their privileges and properties. Therefore, they intensified their revolutionary

activities rallied round Surendra Sai whom they wanted to be the Raja of Sambalpur in place of Narayan Singh. Govind Singh, the another rebel leader was released from prison and the *Muafi* grant was restored to his father. Being persuaded by his father, Govind Singh now refrained from rebellious activities. On the other hand, Surendra Sai did not accept the reconciliation and continued his struggle against the injustice. He worked hard and became the most popular leader. The *Gond* and *Binjhal* Zamindars supported the cause of Surendra Sai who formed an integral part of the Administration.

Balabhadra Deo, the *Gond* Zamindar of Lakhanpur was the most faithful and powerful supporter of Surendra Sai. The Barapahar hills with the Debrigarh hill fort were close to Lakhanpur estate which was a powerful stronghold of the rebels and they used it to hold their regular meetings and discussions. In 1837, Raja Narayan Singh secretly despatched a force asserted by the British sepoy to attack Debrigarh when Surendra Sai and Balabhadra Deo were taking rest. In this Skirmish Balabhadra Deo was killed but Surendra Sai although severely injured managed to escape with some of his followers.

The Rajput Zamindar of Rampur Dariar Singh alies Durjay Singh was a great supporter of Raja Narayan Singh who actively engaged to weaken the cause of the revolution and employed men and money to collect information about Surendra Sai. Dariar Singh was regarded as one of the traitors of the country by Surendra Sai and he did not want to forgive him. In 1938, Surendra Sai with his brother Udanta Sai and Uncle Balaram Sai marched against Rampur. They killed some of the family members and burnt his house to ashes. Durjay Singh fled to Himgiri to save his life. This incident created great fear in the minds of the supporters of Narayan Singh and himself.

In 1840, Lt. Col. Ousely, Agent to the Governor-General, south-west frontier visited Sambalpur. The British who were keeping close watch on the activities of Surendra Sai could know about the gravity of his movement. When Surendra Sai along with his brother and uncle were proceeding to Patna, they were arrested at Deheripali near Sambalpur. Lt. Col. Ousley tried the Rampur murder case and sentenced Surendra Sai and Udanta Sai to imprisonment for five years and seven years respectively, while his uncle Balaram Sai was sentenced to life imprisonment. On the request of Raja Narayan Singh they were sent to Ranchi under the custody of Sheikh Panchkauri who accompanied Lt. Col. Ousley in command of the escort and put in Hazaribag jail. Shortly after that, Balaram Sai died of exertion. After expiry of five years, the terms of imprisonment for Surendra Sai and Udanta Sai were extended to seven and nine years. But, subsequently the terms were further revised for life imprisonment for both of them. The sentences appear to have been based more on political than judicial consideration. The confinement of Surendra Sai and other in the Hazaribag jail was mainly due to Raja Narayan Singh who wanted to weed the thorn out of his way for his own safety. The tribal movement after the imprisonment of Surendra Sai got confused without proper guidance and leadership.

The Sepoy Mutiny broke out in 1857 and Surendra Sai with his brother Udanta Sai escaped from Hazaribag jail. A.R. Young, Secretary to Government of Bengal asked Captain Leigh, the Senior Assistant Commissioner, Sambalpur regarding the offence committed by Surendra Sai and his brother for which the Sai brothers had been imprisoned. Captain Leigh could not find any records and informed the Government that as the Sambalpur office was established in 1850,

there was no records with reference to the cases of Surendra Sai and his brother Udanta Sai. However, Captain Leigh enclosed his reply along with the statement of contemporary persons like Surendra Sai, the convict, Rai Rupsingh, the Native Assistant, Sheikh Panch Kauri, Subedar Light Infantry Batallion and R.N. Shore, Commissioner of Cuttack Division.

According to the statement of Surendra Sai which was recorded by Captain Leigh, Raja Narayan Singh on obtaining the Gadee of Sambalpur, called upon Surendra Sai to show his allegiance to him. But Surendra Sai refused and asserted that his claim to the *Gadi* of Samblapur was much stronger than him. He also refused to dine with Narayan Singh as he was the illegitimate scion of the Chauhan family. Raja Narayan Singh got offended at this and ordered the Zamindar of Rampur to plunder and loot the village of Khinda. In retaliation, Surendra Das looted the village of Rampur Zamindar and some of the members of the family were killed. Shortly after that Lt. Col. Ousley came to Sambalpur and on hearing the case from Raja Narayan Singh tried their cases and sentenced Surendra Sai and Udanta Sai to imprisonment for five years and seven years while their Uncle Balaram Sai to life imprisonment. After expiry of the terms of the imprisonment, the Sai brother petitioned for their release. But Raja Narayan Singh who considered Surendra Sai to be his chief enemy, put the weight of his personal influence on the British officers for life imprisonment of the Sai brothers.

Rai Rup Singh, another contemporary person gave a different version. He came to Sambalpur as a boy attendant of Mukhyapana Devi, the princess of Saraikela at the time of her marriage with Raja Narayan Singh. At first, he was appointed as a clerk by the British Government and was later on made the *Dewan* of Raja Narayan Singh. After the death of Narayan Singh, when Samblapur, was constituted as a part of the north-west frontier agency, he was appointed as the Native Attendant of the Sambalpur district. He greatly helped the British during the revolution of Surendra Sai and played a significant role in suppressing the revolt. As a reward of this, he got the Zamindari of Kharial, Kurkuta, Bhedan, Patkulunda and Rampur. But in 1862, these Zamindaris were taken away and in place of that he was given the Zamindaris of Chandrapur and Padmapur. Because of this loyal service to the British Government, he obtained the title of "*Rai Bahadur*". He was a staunch enemy of Surendra Sai for which his statement was not believable and impartial.

According to Rai Rup Singh, in 1833-34 when Raja Narayan Singh was returning from Singhbhum, Surendra Sai and his followers fell upon him at a place, five Kos from Sambalpur which was repulsed by the solders of the Raja. After that Raja Narayan Singh sent *Parwanas* to them to appear before him to explain their conduct. But, Surendra Sai not only disregarded the order but killed the messenger. Thereupon Raja Narayan Singh sent his Burkundazas to capture and arrest them. But the Sai brothers affected their escape. So, Raja Narayan Singh issued orders to all the Zamindars of Sambalpur to capture Surendra Sai and his followers. But the Sai brothers committed another atrocities, attacked the house of the Zamindar of Rampur and killed several members of the family. Colonial Ousley who visited Sambalpur in 1840, sentenced Surendra Sai, Udanta Sai and Balaram Sai to imprisonment for life. However, Rai Rup Singh admitted that he heard the above statement from Raja Narayan Singh himself. He further corrected himself by stating that Balaram Sai was not a party to the murder of the family of the Rampur Zamindar.

Sheikh Panchkauri came to Sambalpur in 1840 in command of an escort of Lt. Col. Ousley, Agent to the Governor-General, south-west frontier. He said that Surendra Sai, Udanta Sai and Balaram Sai were handed over to him as prisoners at the order of Col. Ousley and were put in the jail of Ranchi. He heard that Surendra Sai was imprisoned for five years and Udanta Sai for seven years whereas Balaram Sai was for life imprisonment who died in the prison. After the expiry of five years imprisonment again he heard that the terms of imprisonment had been extended to seven and nine years and subsequently revised for life imprisonment. Further, he heard that the Sai brothers were imprisoned as they plundered some villages and killed some persons in retaliation for some injury, inflicted on them by Raja Narayan Singh. The report of Captain Leigh was not agreeable to the Government of Bengal. A.R. Young, Secretary to Government of Bengal surprisingly asserted that there was sufficient justification for the sentence of life imprisonment for Surendra Sai and Udanta Sai which appears very strange and there is no doubt that it was not based on facts or supported by valid records.

In 1862, R.N. Shore, Commissioner of Cuttack Division reviewed the entire case. In a letter to the Government of Bengal, he commented that the punishment of life imprisonment given to Surendra Sai, his brother Udanta Sai and uncle Balaram Sai was not only arbitrary, but also illegal and it went against the feelings of the country. Again he observed that Surendra Sai was generally considered to be the true heir to the *Gadi* of Sambalpur.

The above analysis and the records show that the confinement of Surendra Sai and other in Hazaribag jail was mainly due to Raja Narayan Singh who wanted to weed the thorn out of his way. The early phase of the revolution of Surendra Sai was infact a resistance movement against the unwarranted interference of the Britishers in the administration of Sambalpur.

After the imprisonment of Surendra Sai, without proper guidance and leadership, the rebellion got confused. It was converted to plundering and robbery. A number of *Gond* Zamindars separately organized tribal people and plundered and looted the villages. This phase of the rebellion is called as "*Gond-Marui*" or the tyranny of the Gonds. The *Gond* Zamindar of Paharsirgida was the notorious leader of this rising. The British Government was unable to give protection to the common people. Balki Das, the Brahmin Gauntia of Katapali, who was a staunch enemy of the Gonds was beheaded by the *Gond* rebels in the village. Tora, near Bargarh in 1843. Due to his loyalty to Raja Narayan Singh after his death his two sons Krishna Das and Narayan Das were rewarded with the grant of the village Bargarh of Raja Narayan Singh of Sambalpur.

On 10th September 1849, Raja Narayan Singh died without any male issue to succeed him. His chief queen Mukhyapana Devi assumed the charge of administration and Sambalpur was annexed to the British Empire in pursuance of the '*Doctrine of Lapse*' of Lord Dalhousie. In December 1849, Mr. J.H. Crawford, Agent to the Governor-General was sent to Sambalpur with a regiment of Ramgarh Battalion to take over the administration. He was accompanied by Dr. J. Cadenhead who was left incharge of the district as Principal Assistant. The chief queen Mukhyapana Devi was sent off to Cuttack with a pension of Rs. 100 per month.²⁰ Dr Cadenhead prepared an inventory of the properties of the late Raja Narayan Singh. Now the tribal Zamindar and Gauntias brought under control, but the British Government did not show any sympathy to them. The revenue paid by them was raised

without considering their paying capabilities. The free-hold grants were resumed and the rent free villages were assessed at half rates. The intension of the British Government was to collect much revenue. Prior to 1849, the amount paid by the state as annual tribute was Rs. 8,800/- whereas now Rs. 74,000/- was collected as direct revenue. The people dissatisfied with the mal administration of the British Government. But, now being disunited and disorganized they could not rise against the exploitation of the Britishers till 1857.

Unexpectedly, the 8th Bengal Native Infantry known as Chhot-Burdwan-Ka-paltan revolted against the British on 30th July 1857. To suppress them, the British military authorities of Ranchi sent the Ramgarh Battalion under Lt. Graham, but they joined the insurgents on 31st July. The rebels broke open the jails and set all the prisoners free including Surendra Sai and his brother Udanta Sai.

After the release from the prison, Surendra Sai and Udanta Sai proceeded towards their native land Sambalpur to reorganize the tribal people and Zamindars. Through the dense and unfrequented forest of Chhotnagpur, Singhbhum and Gangpur, the Sai brothers reached Sambalpur. Immediately, the news of the arrival of Surendra Sai spread everywhere. The British administration apprehended serious danger from him. Captain Dalton, the officiating Commissioner of Chhotnagpur immediately intimated Capt. Leigh the Senior Assistant Commissioner of Sambalpur that two companies of the 8th Ramgarh Battalion had set Surendra Sai and his brother Udanta Sai free from the jail and that those mutinous sepoys were escorting the two pretenders to Sambalpur to regain the Sambalpur Raj. Capt. Leigh after receiving the news got alarmed and sent urgent messages to the Commissioner, Cuttack G.F. Cuckburn to send troops to Sambalpur. He also despatched orders to all the Rajas and Zamindars to be on alert and to send armed retainers to Sambalpur. Capt. Leigh was getting impatience and took all the possible precaution to face the situation. Fortunately, the Ramgarh Battalion remained loyal to the British Government. Capt. Leigh declared a reward to Rs. 250/- for apprehension of the pretenders Surendra Sai and Udanta Sai. Under pressing request of Capt. Leigh on 26th August, the Commissioner of Cuttack Capt. Cuckburn sent two companies of the 40th Madras Native Infantry to Sambalpur under Capt. Hawkins who was accompanied by Lt. Hart and Ensign. Napier. In spite of it, the unhealthy weather of Sambalpur which created much problem for Capt. Leigh. He felt more insecure as a large number of sepoys and officers became sick and many of them were not completely reliable. So, he repeatedly requested for sending troops to Sambalpur for encountering the trouble after the arrival of Surendra Sai.

In the middle of September 1857, Surendra Sai and his brother Udanta Sai reached Sambalpur by travelling through forest track facing great hazards and unhealthy situations. The news of his coming had spread like wild-fire. The people heartily welcomed him and the tribal Zamindars and the Gauntias who were being exploited by the Britishers, now promised to fight against the Government under his leadership. On the other hand, although Surendra Sai was tired and sick because of the long journey in the forest, he got courage and inspiration from the people and assured them his leadership.

In order to ascertain the strength of Surendra Sai, Capt. Leigh sent two Sepoys of Ramgarh Light Infantry with a Parwanah for Surendra Sai as he had information about the campaign of large number of followers in the jungles near Sason village, 6 miles off Sambalpur town to

welcome the Sai brothers. He instructed the sepoys to make a calculation of the number of followers. They reported about “two thousand men of whom about one thousand were match-lock men”. However, one of the spies reported about seven to eight hundred men of whom about fifty of them were match lack men. Capt. Leigh was totally confused and decided not to apply force against Surendra Sai as he had no adequate troops. So, he sent a second parwanas to Surendra Sai to appear before him.

On 7th October 1857 with his friends and followers Surendra Sai entered Sambalpur and met Cap. Leigh. He explained him that they had no intention to create any disturbances. He made a representation that the sentences on him and his brother should be remitted at once and he should be recognized as the Raja of Sambalpur. Cap. Leigh who became nervous at the growing popularity and increasing followers of Surendra Sai insisted him to disperse his force and should stay at Sambalpur and to wait for orders of the Government on their petitions. On 17th October, Capt. Leigh recommended the two petitions to Captain Dalton, Commissioner, of Chhotnagpur, who recommended the case to the Government of Bengal on 30th October stating that the sentences on the Sai brothers would be remitted on condition that they must reside either at Ranchi or at Cuttack, but claim to the *Gadi* of Sambalpur merited no consideration whatsoever. Though the force of Surendra Sai had been dispersed Capt. Leigh feared that the popular feeling in favour of Surendra Sai would lead to violent disturbances and the tribal Zamindars of the region were ready to assemble their adherents when the need would come.

Capt. Leigh asked Surendra Sai to remain in Samalpur till Government orders on his petition are received. In Sambalpur he was treated as a political prisoner. His residence was closely guarded and strict watch was kept on his movements which gave rise to suspicion in his mind regarding the motive of Capt. Leigh. In the meanwhile, three companies of the 40th Madras Native Infantry arrived from Cuttack. Also, fifty men of the Orissan Paik Company, two mountain Howitzers and the local detachment of the Ramgarh Battalion stationed at Sambalpur. Cockburn, the Commissioner of Cuttack was satisfied with the military arrangement of Sambalpur and believed that Capt. Leigh, the Senior Assistant Commissioner would able “to overcome all opposition to order and good government”. He insisted that early and decisive measures should be taken so that the spirit at disaffection would not spread.

Surendra Sai was very much disappointed at the hostile attitude of the Britishers and surprised at the concentration of the military powers at Sambalpur. He saw grave danger and was genuinely suspicious at the ways and behaviour of Capt. Leigh. Now, he affected his escape from Sambalpur in the night of 31st October. Accompanied by a large band of trusted followers, he went straight to Khinda where his brother, Udanta Sai was waiting for him rising an armed force of more than one thousand. This flight of Surendra Sai from Sambalpur to Khinda heralded the beginning of the revolution. The two brothers now saw that the only option open to them was to fight out their case. They appealed to the people to join them and large number of people from all parts of the district flocked in under his banner to liberate their motherland from the yoke of the British.

The rebellion of 1857 under the leadership of Surendra Sai was mainly a tribal rebellion. The tribal Zamindars and Gauntias being exploited by the British joined in the revolt of Surendra

Sai and they played the significant role in it. They gave up their comforts, happiness and resorted to jungle life for the sake of their region. Their Zamindaris were confiscated, some of them were killed in the battles, some were arrested and hanged and many of them imprisoned. The sacrifices and suffering of all these people were great in the history of the region. In fact, the power and strength of all these tribal leaders and patriots encouraged Surendra Sai to challenge the mighty British Government.

Capt. Leigh was stunned to hear the news of the flight of Surendra Sai. Cockburn, the Commissioner of Cuttack also fully disillusioned and remarked that it was most unfortunate that Surendra Sai and Udanta Sai could not be captured and executed soon after their surrender. Now the British took strong measures to capture the Sai brothers and their followers.

A Company of the 40th Regiment of the Madras Infantry with light mountain howitzer under the command of Lt. Hadow arrived on 4th November at Sambalpur. The force was sent against Khinda and Kolabira under the command of Captain J.B. Knocker accompanied by Lt. Hadow and Native Assistant Rai Rup Singh Bahadur. They were opposed by a band of rebels at Jharghaty, a mountainous pass about 12 miles from Sambalpur near Rengali. The British fired upon the rebels where one sepoy was killed and another was injured. However, the rebels fled away from there leaving behind and destroying rice and atta. The military party stayed there for taking lunch and marched upto Katurbagha where they halted for the night. In the next day, when they reached Kolabira, they found the village completely deserted. They destroyed the houses and returned to Katurbagha to spend the night. The next day, the party marched to Khinda and Kolabira and found it also deserted. The troops had to retreat after destroying the house of Surendra Sai. After his coming back to Sambalpur Capt. Knocker reported Capt. Leigh that he had dispersed all the rebels and many of them were killed. Once again Capt. Leigh was disillusioned.

Surendra Sai learned a great lesson with the campaign of Kolabira and Khinda by the British. It is not easy to fight against the far superior British troops. So, it would be wise to avoid wars with the British in the plain land as far as possible and to take resort to guerilla wars in the hills and jungles. He decided to extent the activities of the rebellion to a wider horizon with the support of the tribal Zamindars and Gauntias who became loyal to the Chauhan Rajas from the time of Maharaja Sai.

With all the Zamindars, Gauntias and Village Headmen, Surendra Sai decided to widen the rebellion. He divided his people into a number of groups and stationed them at places of Strategic importance with the view of isolating the British in Sambalpur. In order to cut off all the lines of communication on the road, he planned five strategic posts – two on the road from Sambalpur to Nagpur, two on the roads from Ranchi to Hazaribagh and one on Sambalpur-Cuttack road. On the Sambalpur-Ranchi-Hazaribagh road, the important spot was the Jharghaty pass, 12 miles north of Sambapur and the other was through the pass of Maula-bhanja range located near Khinda. This pass was guarded by Udanta Sai to cut off the connection of Sambalpur with Hazaribagh and Ranchi. On the Sambalpur-Nagpur road, the Singhora Ghaty located beyond Sohela was guarded by the Zamindar of Ghens Madho Singh, Kunjal Singh, Hathi Singh and Bairi Singh to check the inroads of the Marathas from Nagpur. Another pass in this road was the Paharsirgida pass about 30 kilometers from Sambalpur which was guarded by Janardan Singh, the Zamindar of Paharsirgida. The

Sambalpur-Cuttack road was the most important one and the strategic pass was located in the Mundher-Loisinga range called as Badpati or Gadghaty pass in charge of Chandra Gartia, the Zamindar of Loisinga. The central hill fort of the rebels was at Debrigarh, the highest point in the Barapahar hill range near Lakhanpur. After the death of Balabhadra Deo, the Zamindar of Lakhanpur, his son Kamal Singh and grandson Khageswar Singh were in charge of the Debrigarh fort. From the Debrigarh fort, Surendra Sai was able to visit the Singhora pass in the west, Jharghaty pass in the north and Badpati in the south-east in the same night. Personally, he supervised all the strategic spots. His strong leadership, superior war-tactic, powerful organisation and management skill with vigilance power baffled the British who became alert to handle the situation with their modern military skill and strategy.

The climate of Sambalpur was not suitable for the British military officers and they were frequently subjected to illness owing to their operation in jungle areas. On the request of Capt. Leigh, the Commissioner of Cuttack G.F. Cockburn sent two European medical officers, Dr. Moore and Dr. Hanson with a corpse of Sebundies from the Ganjam hill region to Sambalpur. On reaching Rampur, the headquarter of Rairakhol, the Raja alerted them for their journey to Sambalpur as the road was not safe and they should not travel without proper military escort. So, Dr. Moore wrote to Capt. Leigh to provide them some military men. But due to the delay in sending the military escort, the party resumed their journey to Sambalpur on 25 November with twenty bearers provided by the Raja of Rairakhol. On the way near Jujumura, they were attacked by the rebels led by Madhu Gauntia of Loisinga who killed Dr. Moore.²⁶ Dr. Hanson managed to escape by hiding himself in the jungle. Capt. Leigh on hearing the news was very much perturbed and proceeded personally to Jujumura with fifty men of Ramgarh Battalion and a company of 40th Madras Native Infantry. He was overwhelmed with grief at the death of Dr. Moore. On his return journey, he was attacked by the rebels at the Badpati ghat and back to Sambalpur with great disappointment. This incident gave a great blow on the power and prestige of the British.

The death of Dr. Moore encouraged the rebels. The whole territory around the town of Sambalpur was in the hands of the insurgents. Everyday they used to fire on police and military pickets and adopted various devices to terrorise and demoralize the British force. The road communication was cut off for which commerce came to a stand still. Capt. Leigh himself suffered from mental disability. However, Cockburn the Commissioner of Cuttack determined to meet the challenge and took some stern measures to curb down the insurrection. He gave strict warning to the Rajas and Zamindars not to extend any sympathy or support for the rebels. Raja Brajasundaradeva of Bamra informed Cockburn on 21st November 1857 that one of his subordinate Zamindar Sri Krishna Behera joined the rebels and escaped before he was arrested. Cockburn suspected the involvement of the Raj that he was secretly helping the rebel Behera. He, therefore issued warning to the Raja "calling to his recollection the fate of the Raja of Unghool, his neighbour who was imprisoned and whose estate was confiscated for rebellious conduct towards the Government."

In order to strengthen the defence of Sambalpur, Cockburn decided to send more and more reinforcement. So, on 3rd December 1857, Capt. Woodbridge and Lt. Vallance reached Sambalpur with their forces. Capt. Sweeny of the 32nd Madras Native Infantry who was

enroute to join the regiment of Kampter was directed for duty at Sambalpur. Lt. Blunt, Officer Commanding Paik Company at Cuttack also proceeded towards Sambalpur,³⁰ but could not move from Sohanpur or Sonepur owing to the disturb condition of that place. On 15th December Cockburn sent two companies of the 5th Madras Native Infantry to Sambalpur. On 7th December, Major Bates, Officer Commanding, Cuttack himself proceeded to Sambalpur with the remaining two companies of the 40th Madras Native Infantry, and all the Howitzer guns leaving four “old and useless one” for the defence of Cuttack and no artillery men were then in Cuttack to use those guns. A Medical Officer named Dr. Cox also accompanied Major Bates. On 29th December Capt. E.G. Wood arrived at Sambalpur from Nagpur with a troop of Cavalry Lt. Macneil, the Agent of Orissan Hill tracts sent Capt. Dyer with 581 Ghumsar men who were “peculiarly suited for jungle warfare” to serve at Sambalpur.

In the meanwhile, Sambalpur was temporarily transferred from the Commissionership of Chotnagpur to that of Cuttack and Cockburn took charge of the district on 19th December 1857. After assuming the charge, Cockburn wanted to direct operations personally against the rebels and left for Sambalpur with a wing of the Madras Native Infantry under Major Wyndham and a detachment of Madras Artillery under Captai Ellwyn. The party were attacked by the rebels at the Badpati pass on the way. But, they managed to reach at Sambalpur on 29th January 1858.

The close of the year 1857 witnessed in the history of Sambalpur as the terrible period because of the fighting of severe and important battles between the rebels and the Britishers. Both the parties face revenge, retaliation and cruelty. The rebels were expert in guirella warfare in the hilly regions whereas the Britishers were powerful in open fields and plain lands. Both were equally strong and determined to defeat the opposite.

There was a severe and important battle fought between the rebels and the British troops on 30th December 1857 at Kudopali situated at the foot of Papanga hill. Capt. Wood who came from Nagpur marched to Kudopali accompanied by Capt. Leigh along with a detachment of seventy five men of the Nagpur irregular cavalry, hundred fifty men of the 40th Madras Native Infantry and fifty men of the Ramgarh Battalion. When they reached there, Capt. Wood climbed up the Papanga hill with soldiers. The rebels were surprised to see the enemy. The Government troops pretended a retreat and the rebels not being able to understand the trick and policy of the British chased them to the plain where Capt. Wood charged them with this cavalry troop. Fifty-three of the rebels fell dead on the spot, eleven were taken as prisoners and many were wounded. The causality of the British troop is not known. Perhaps their loss was not as great as that of the rebels. The great loss of the rebels was the death of their leader Chhabila Sai, the fifth brother of Surendra Sai, who was severely wounded and while running away to catch his horse, he was shot dead on the back in the open street of Kudopali.

The battle of Kudopali was a great victory over the rebels by the British and it enhanced their prestige and confidence. Major Bates arrived at Sambalpur on 7th January 1858 and decided to attack the rebels at the Jharghaty pass to clear off the mail communication. Udanta Sai was incharged of Jharghaty pass. Major Bates destroyed the stone wall of the ghaty with heavy

firing.

The rebels were killed in large number and Udanta Sai escaped. Then Major Bates marched towards Kolabira, the important stronghold of the rebels. All the people of Kolabira supported their leader Surendra Sai under their Zamindar Karuna Gauntia. The entire village was burnt by the British. Karuna Gauntia along with fifteen rebel chiefs surrendered. The Zamindari of Karuna Gauntia was confiscated and he was hanged on 11th February 1858. The campaigns of Major Bates against Jharghaty and Kolabira were considered to be a great success. But shortly after that Major Bates died at Sambalpur due to exertion and was succeeded by Major Wyndham.

On 14th January 1858, Capt. Leigh attacked Debrigarh with 100 men of the 40th Madras Native Infantry and 30 of the Ramgarh Battalion. The rebels under the command of Surendra Sai were fully prepared there. The rebels made a severe attack on him and he was repulsed and a number of his soldiers were killed.

In February 1858, Captain Shakespeare marched from Raipur with a cavalry troop to clear off the Singhora pass for the safe mail communication between Samalpur and Nagpur. The pass was guarded by Madho Singh. Capt. Shakespeare was unable to maintain his hold there and had to retreat. So, on 12th February 1858, Capt. Woodbridge and Capt. Wood were sent to reoccupy the pass. On their way they attacked the Paharsirgida pass which had been strongly fortified by the rebels under the leadership of Janardan Singh, Zamindar of Paharsirgida. In the battle, Capt. Woodbridge was killed along with a number of sepoys and the surviving sepoys seized with panic fled away to convey it.

On 14th February, Ensign Warlow attacked Paharsirgida with a powerful army who sent two flanking parties to the right and left of the pass while the third party advanced upto gorge to attack on the front. The rebels fled away into the jungle and Warlow recovered the dead body of Capt. Woodbridge.

The British forces achieved some success in the later half of February and in March. But the achievement led some heavy losses. Under Capt. Nicolas command the 15th Madras Native Infantry attacked the inaccessible Barapahar range and cleared off the rebels. Major Wyndham by defeating the rebels opened the mail communication to Midnapur through Bamanda. Capt. Dyre destroyed a number of villages near Sambalpur suspecting those villages to be the shelter of the rebels. Capt. Cockburn confiscated the estates of the Zamindars and Gauntias who gave their help and support to the rebels. These estates were Ghens, Kolabira, Lakhanpur, Bheden, Kharsal, Patkulundi, Loisingha, Kodabaga and Kurkut. Cockburn made important military reforms in Sambalpur to suppress the revolution effectively. In spite of his short stay, he weakened the strength of the revolution by military operation and administrative measures.

In the later part of March, Cockburn accompanied by Major Wyndham left Sambalpur to Cuttack and Lt. Taylor was incharge of the 40th Madras Native Infantry. On 29th 1858, Colonel Forster arrived at Sambalpur with a wing of the Sakhawati Battalion and took charge of the office from Captain Leigh who was relieved of his duty. Colonel Forster was invested with civil and military authority of the rank of a commissioner. As he had brought a powerful army with him, the subundee force from Ghumsur and Paik Company were

withdrawn.

The Second Phase of Veer Surendra Sai's Resistance Movement (1857–1864): Gist

The second phase of Veer Surendra Sai's resistance movement began with the outbreak of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Imprisoned at Hazaribagh since 1840, Surendra Sai was released by rebel sepoys in July 1857. He returned to Sambalpur and quickly reorganized his followers, including his brothers, local zamindars, tribal communities, and peasants, to renew the struggle against British rule.

The movement evolved from a dynastic dispute into a widespread anti-colonial resistance. Surendra Sai adopted guerrilla warfare, using the forests and hills of western Odisha, particularly the Barapahad and Debrigarh ranges, as strategic bases. His forces repeatedly attacked British military posts, disrupted communications, and challenged colonial authority across Sambalpur and adjoining regions.

Despite repeated military expeditions, the British found it difficult to suppress the movement because of Surendra Sai's military skills, intimate knowledge of the terrain, and the strong support he enjoyed among the local population. To weaken the resistance, the colonial administration combined military operations with conciliatory measures, including amnesties, negotiations, and rewards for information leading to the capture of rebel leaders.

Although many of his followers surrendered after the general amnesty of 1862, Surendra Sai remained distrustful of British assurances. In January 1864, he was arrested through deception during negotiations and imprisoned along with several members of his family and associates. He was subsequently confined in Asirgarh Fort, where he remained until his death in 1884.

The second phase of the movement demonstrated Surendra Sai's transformation into one of India's earliest anti-colonial leaders. His prolonged resistance significantly challenged British authority in western Odisha and remains an enduring symbol of courage, patriotism, and the struggle for freedom.

Conclusion:

The resistance movement led by Veer Surendra Sai occupies a significant place in the history of India's anti-colonial struggle. What began as a contest over the rightful succession to the throne of Sambalpur gradually evolved into a sustained and organized movement against British imperial rule. Under Surendra Sai's leadership, the movement united zamindars, tribal communities, peasants, and local chiefs, reflecting a broad-based resistance that transcended dynastic interests and represented the collective aspirations of the people of western Odisha.

The movement unfolded in two distinct phases. The first phase (1827–1840) was characterized by armed resistance against British interference in the internal affairs of Sambalpur and the denial of Surendra Sai's legitimate claim to the throne. Although this phase ended with his imprisonment, it laid the foundation for a larger political struggle. The second phase (1857–1864), coinciding with the Indian Rebellion of 1857, transformed the movement into a determined anti-colonial campaign. Through effective guerrilla warfare, strategic use of the forested terrain, and the unwavering support of local communities, Surendra Sai posed a formidable challenge to British authority for several years.

Despite his eventual arrest through deception in 1864 and lifelong imprisonment at Asirgarh Fort, the ideals for which Veer Surendra Sai fought could not be extinguished. His resistance exposed the limitations of colonial power in frontier regions and demonstrated the determination of local populations to defend their political autonomy, traditional rights, and dignity. His struggle also highlighted the crucial role of indigenous communities and regional leaders in shaping India's freedom movement.

For many decades, Veer Surendra Sai's contribution remained relatively overlooked in mainstream

narratives of Indian nationalism. However, contemporary historical research has restored his rightful place as one of the earliest and most resolute champions of resistance against British colonialism. His life and sacrifices continue to inspire generations as symbols of courage, perseverance, and patriotism.

The legacy of Veer Surendra Sai extends beyond the history of Odisha. It forms an integral part of India's larger freedom struggle, illustrating that the quest for independence was sustained not only by nationally celebrated leaders but also by regional heroes whose sacrifices laid the foundations of India's eventual liberation. His enduring example reaffirms the values of justice, resilience, and the unwavering pursuit of freedom, ensuring that his name remains permanently etched in the annals of Indian history.

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