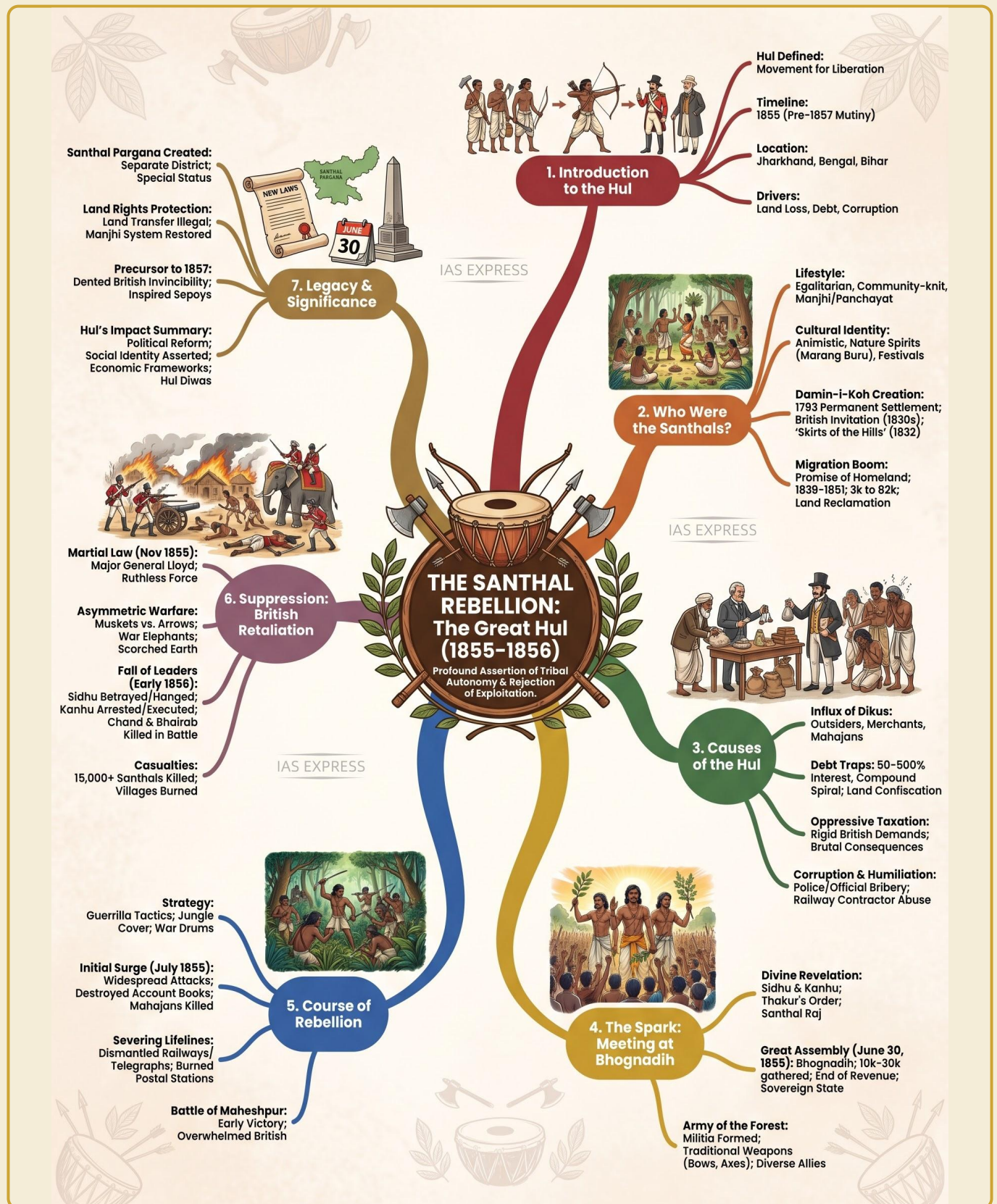


THE SANTHAL REBELLION

The Great Hul of 1855 – 1856

Holistic Structural Overview



"The Santhal Rebellion was not a mere local uprising; it was a profound assertion of tribal autonomy and a fierce rejection of colonial and economic exploitation."

Introduction to the Hul

The Santhal Rebellion, widely known as the **Santhal Hul** (where 'Hul' translates to a movement for liberation or rebellion in the Santali language), was a massive uprising in eastern India against the oppressive British East India Company and the deeply exploitative *Zamindari* system.

Occurring in 1855, precisely two years before the famous Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the Santhal rebellion stands as one of the most organized, ferocious, and significant tribal revolts in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It was localized primarily in the present-day state of Jharkhand, extending into parts of West Bengal and Bihar.

Driven by the relentless loss of their ancestral lands, crippling debt enforced by moneylenders, and the systemic corruption of colonial officials, the peaceful Santhal agriculturists transformed into fierce warriors. Armed largely with traditional weapons—bows, arrows, and axes—they mounted a formidable challenge against the musket-bearing troops of the British Empire.

QUICK FACTS OVERVIEW

Timeline: June 1855 – Early 1856

Region: Damin-i-Koh (Rajmahal Hills)

Key Leaders: Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairab Murmu

Adversaries: British EIC, Zamindars, Mahajans (Moneylenders)

Who Were the Santhals?

To understand the magnitude of the rebellion, one must understand the socio-economic and cultural background of the Santhal people. The Santhals were an indigenous, tribal community known for their deep connection to the forest and the land. They were historically hunter-gatherers who transitioned into settled agriculturists.

Traditional Lifestyle

The Santhals lived a largely egalitarian life, characterized by a strong sense of community. Their social structure was tightly knit, governed by a village headman known as the *Manjhi*, and an assembly of elders called the *Panchayat*.

Cultural Identity

Their identity was rooted in animistic religious beliefs. They worshipped nature spirits, particularly *Marang Buru* (the Great Mountain). The rhythm of their lives was dictated by agricultural seasons and celebrated through communal festivals.

The Creation of Damin-i-Koh

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the expanding British East India Company enacted the Permanent Settlement of 1793. This policy drastically altered land ownership, handing massive tracts of land to Zamindars (landlords) to secure steady revenue.

Displaced from their ancestral lands, the Santhals were pushed eastward. By the 1830s, the British recognized the Santhals' exceptional skills in land reclamation. Seeking to increase revenue, the British invited them to settle in the Rajmahal Hills.

THE "SKIRTS OF THE HILLS"

The British demarcated a specific territory in 1832 known as **Damin-i-Koh** (a Persian term meaning "skirts of the hills"). The Santhals were promised that if they cleared the forests, the land would belong to them permanently.

Between 1838 and 1851, the Santhal population in this region exploded from 3,000 to over 82,000. They transformed the rocky terrain into highly productive agricultural land.



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The Gathering Storm: Causes of the Hul

The prosperity of the Santhals in Damin-i-Koh was short-lived. The very land they had painstakingly cultivated soon attracted a swarm of outsiders, collectively termed "**Dikus**" by the Santhals.

1. The Influx of the Dikus (Outsiders)

Bengali and North Indian merchants, moneylenders (Mahajans), and traders flooded into the Santhal territories, setting up shops and lending money on credit to the trusting Santhal farmers.

2. Exorbitant Interest Rates and Debt Traps

The moneylenders employed deeply deceitful practices, charging astronomical interest rates ranging from **50% to 500%**. If a Santhal borrowed a small amount, compound interest quickly spiraled out of control. When they could not pay, their land was confiscated.

THE CYCLE OF SANTHAL EXPLOITATION

1. Economic Ruin

Mahajans gave loans at 500% interest, trapping generations in debt.

2. Land Theft

Corrupt courts ruled in favor of Dikus, legalizing the theft of land.

3. Forced Labor

Landless Santhals were forced into bonded labor on their own lands.

3. Oppressive British Taxation & Corruption

The British East India Company continuously increased the land revenue demand. When the Santhals sought justice, they found the system rigged against them. Local police were bribed by wealthy Mahajans, and European officials dismissed their complaints.

4. Cultural Humiliation

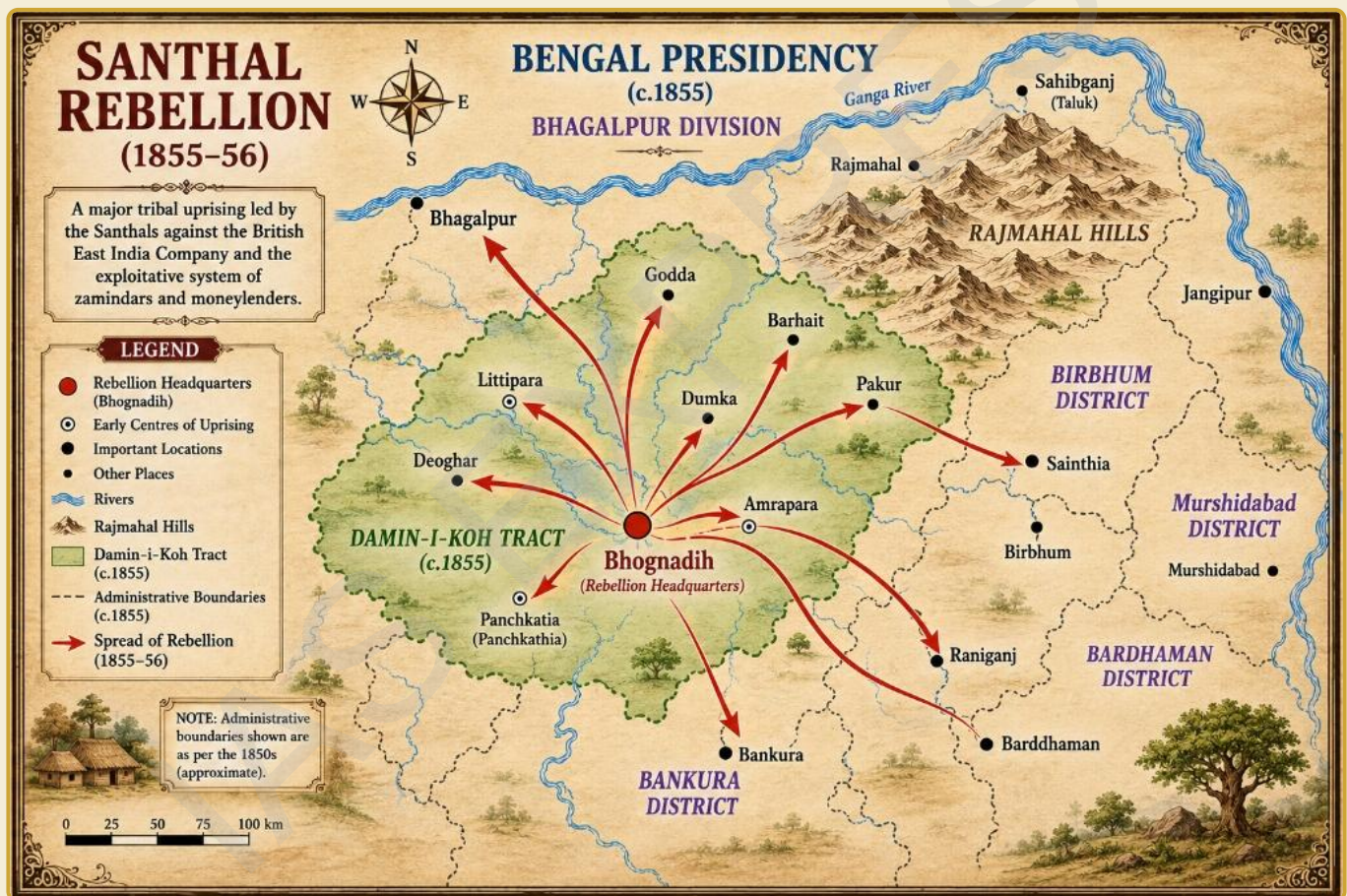
European railway contractors expanding train lines through the region forcibly abducted Santhal women and mistreated the men. This attack on their honor was the final catalyst.

The Spark and the Course of the Rebellion

June 30, 1855 – The Great Assembly at Bhognadih

By 1855, the Santhals reached their breaking point. The leadership fell to four brothers from Bhognadih: **Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairab Murmu**. Sidhu and Kanhu declared they had received a divine revelation from Thakur (God) to take up arms.

On June 30, 1855, an estimated **10,000 to 30,000 Santhals** gathered at Bhognadih, declaring an end to revenue payments and announcing a sovereign Santhal state.



Spread of the Santhal Rebellion (c. 1855) from Bhognadih across the Damin-i-Koh tract.

The Course of Conflict

July 1855: The Initial Surge

Santhal bands systematically attacked the houses of Mahajans and Zamindars, destroying the hated account books containing fraudulent debt records.

Severing the Lifelines

They dismantled railway lines, cut telegraph wires, and burned postal stations, successfully severing communication between Calcutta and the northern provinces.

The Battle of Maheshpur

A large confrontation where the sheer numbers and bravery of the Santhals temporarily overwhelmed British forces, forcing them to retreat.

Operating in dense forests, the Santhals utilized guerrilla tactics, armed with bows, poisoned arrows, and battle-axes. Over 60,000 tribal warriors were mobilized, bringing the colonial administration to a standstill.

Suppression and Legacy

The initial loss of control alarmed the British, who responded with overwhelming military force. In November 1855, **Martial Law** was declared under Major General Lloyd.

The British Retaliation

- ❖ **Asymmetric Warfare:** British deployed regiments armed with modern Enfield muskets and artillery against bows and arrows.
- ❖ **Use of War Elephants:** Elephants were used to smash barricades and destroy jungle hideouts.
- ❖ **Scorched Earth Policy:** Troops burned down entire Santhal villages, destroyed crops, and starved rebels into submission. Over 15,000 Santhals were killed.

By early 1856, the movement was crushed. Sidhu was betrayed and hanged. Kanhu was arrested and executed. Chand and Bhairab were killed in battle.

Historical Significance

Though militarily defeated, the rebellion forced massive policy shifts:

Creation of Santhal Pargana

The British carved out a separate administrative district—the Santhal Parganas—granting it special protective status.

Protection of Land Rights

New laws made the transfer of Santhal land to non-Santhals strictly illegal, restoring the traditional Manjhi system.

Crucially, occurring just two years before the 1857 Mutiny, the Hul shattered the myth of British invincibility and inspired future revolts across the subcontinent. Today, June 30th is commemorated annually as *Hul Diwas*.