

War strategy of Veer Surendra Sai

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Surendra Sai was the glory of Orissa. He occupies a unique position among those great men of action that has crowded the columns of history in golden letters. The sacrifice of his family for the cause of the motherland was a rare example of history. Much before 1857, the year of first war of independence he had sparked the fire of revolution on the soil of Sambalpur. The war strategy that he followed in it against the English draws special attention.

Surendra Sai who was born on 23rd January, 1809 was the son of Dharma Singh the decendant of fourth Chauhan King of Sambalpur Raj Aniruddha Sai. In 1827, after the death of eleventh Chauhan King of Sambalpur Raj Maharaja Sai, who was issueless, Surendra placed his legitimate claim on the throne of Sambalpur. As the scion of direct line his claim was justified. However, the English ignored the established royal convention and that of Surendra's claim for the throne. They enthroned the widow queen of the deceased king Maharaja Sai, "Mohan Kumari". It displeased the Zamindars of Sambalpur Raj. Thus, the English in 1833 enthroned the "grand old" Zamindar of Barpali Narayan Singh on the throne of Sambalpur. "His accession to the throne was a part of British plot to annex Sambalpur Raj with British empire soon after his death." ¹ It disappointed to those claiming their rights on the throne and became rebellious. Among them the most outstanding was Surendra Sai. He began his struggle against the British Raj, backed by the Gond Zamindars of Sambalpur Kingdom. However, during the course of struggle in 1840, for the murder of Rajput Zamindar of Rampur Durjaya Singh, Surendra his uncle Balaram Singh with his brothers were arrested after a small battle at Deheripali near Budharaja. They were sentenced to life imprisonment in the Hazaribag Jail. ²

In 1857, the revolutionaries of the great Revolt broke down the prison and released all the prisoners. Surendra and his brothers being freed marched towards Sambalpur to begin his struggle freshly in a consolidated way.

In the mean time in 1849 after the death of Narayan Singh, 'Doctrine of Lapse' was applied to Sambalpur. It is said that, after the death

of the king for few days Sambalpur was ruled by widow queen Mukhyapana Devi. ⁴ But ultimately it became a district of the British Raj. The administrative system changed accordingly. Its land revenue in between 1849 to 1854, raised to five times in two settlements. As per record it was enhanced from Rs.8,800/- to Rs.74,000/- per annum. ⁵ The Zamindars and Gauntias were got alarmed at it. They thought their land will be usurped. No attempt was made by any one to sympathise their grievances. The infuriated Zamindars had nothing to do as there was no one to lead them. The arrival of Surendra Sai gave a new life to their rebellious attitude. Surendra Sai organised them. At Sambalpur on dt.31.10.1857 he declared his "Ulgulan" i.e. armed rebellion began before a large public gathering. ⁶

As a part of his war strategy he chalked out the techniques. He had confidence on the strength of the masses. He wanted to get their support, for the reason he along with other royal members visited village to village, met influential personalities, Zamindars and Gauntias.⁷

In his struggle against the British Raj Surendra Sai received the selfless and dedicated help of the Zamindars of Lakhanpur, Balabhadra Singh Deo with his three sons Kamal Singh Deo, Nilambar Singh Deo and Khageswar Singh Deo and that of Ghenss, Madho Singh with his three sons Hatte Singh, Kunjal Singh and Bairi Singh. Beside the Zamindars of Kolabira – Karunakar Naik, Kudaboga – Abhari Singh, Bheden – Manohar Singh, Kharsal – Dial Sardar, Mundo Mahul – Ananta Singh, Pahar Srigida – Janardan Singh, Patkulunda – Pitambar Singh, Loisingha – Chandra Gartia, Machida – Dhana Singh, Kharmunda – Markanda Bariha and the Gauntias of Rampella – Loknath Panda, Arda – Mrutyunjaya Panigrahi supported and fought with him from the core of their strength. ⁸ Moreover the indirect help and co-operation given to him by the Gauntias and subject of many other villages had shaped the Ulgulan to a greater extent. The names of Krushna Chandra Singh, Raja of Khariar and Uma Rao Sai, Raja of Bendra Nuagarh deserve mention in this regard. This indirect and secret co-operation was a noble tactics of Surendra Sai



to take shelter, to get “rasad” and to collect information about the English army and administration to prepare plan, policy and structure of his armed rebellion.

Under the leadership of Surendra Sai the revolutionaries had adopted guerilla warfare against the British Raj. Of course in many times open battles were fought. It is a war tactics of its own class to strike with lightening speed where the defeat of enemy seems impossible even with mighty power. However, many factors worked behind such tactics.

First, the then Sambalpur was filled up with dense forest, hill locks, mountain peaks, ravines and upland. All these were obstruction in their own ways to good communication. Moreover absent of large (battle fields) plain land due to hilly and upland nature open battle of traditional line was not always possible.

Secondly, both party had no large army. Because the English considering it a local uprising had deputed a few battalion of soldiers. Of course it was sufficient for the revolutionaries. On the other hand inspite of peoples’ support Surendra was lacking in economy and opportunity to build up a vast and sophisticatedly trained army. Since the rebels being poorly equipped were no match for English in open encounter, resorted to a war of hide and sick i.e. Guerrilla warfare.

Thirdly, the revolutionaries were fighting with traditional weapons like bow, arrow, spear, sword, axe and also guns. But the English soldiers were fighting with developed armaments like gun and barrel. They were well equipped with training in different techniques to fight in different situations. Moreover the faith of invincibility and fortune of rising star had made them one of the best army in the world of that time. Availability of guns, weapons and other requirements were not a matter of problem. Thus, a face-to-face war between the remote and traditional method of warfare of the revolutionaries and sophisticated English army was not only unthinkable but practically impossible. Such war environment resorted them to follow Guerrilla tactics against the British Raj.

Finally, the supporters of Surendra were mostly adivasi class of tribal nature. That is why it is said that the Ulgulan of Surendra Sai was a tribal rebellion. The tribal people were perfect in primitive war tactics. Guerrilla warfare was a part of it. It means, the Chauhan scion Surendra Sai

had followed the same war tactics that the Maratha hero Sivaji had followed against the mighty Mughals with the help of Mawali tribe. He brought awakening among the people of Sambalpur Raj as great hero Sivaji did among the Marathas. ⁹ It is needless to say that the geography of Sambalpur was added by ill equipped remote method of warfare of the revolutionaries largely contributed to influence the war tactics of Veer Surendra Sai. Because the territory of Sambalpur filled up with dense forest, peaks and ravines favoured them most. The English failed to search them. Moreover, the hardy mountaineer inhabitants of the region were able to take shelter in the rock caves, dense forest and adapt themselves accordingly which was a dream for the English army. Thus, to ruin the English army and administration Surendra Sai decided to follow Guerrilla war tactics.

The armed rebellion of Surendra was controlled from different centers. All of them were either hill caves or dense impregnable ravines and forts. The most outstanding among them were Barapahada, Debrigarh, Singoda Ghati, Barpatti, Papanga Pahad etc. They were lacking of good communication to step the soldiers for their fires. Dense forest had converted the guns and barrels to a handicapped weapon. The soldiers were not expert and acquainted in climbing the hills and peaks. Even many of them did not know how to climb mountains. On the other hand the revolutionaries had tied large pieces of stone in “Shiali Lata” – a plant rope. When the soldiers were attempting to reach them the tiding plants were cut by them. As a result large stones were pelted at their bodies resulting many to death. ¹⁰

With any objective to suppress the revolutionary activities, the English soldiers in different times were invading their hidden centers. But instead of getting success they suffered incalculable damage. Because when and where few English soldiers were looked upon, the revolutionaries were assembling in rapid action through secret information to attack them.

An important aspect of Surendra’s war diplomacy was the burning down of post offices and police stations with damage caused to road and communication. The Zamindars and Gauntias favouring the English were terrified with a show of force. The intention was to discourage



them to give help to the British authority.

The revolutionaries had control over Sambalpur with a radius of five kilometers. The capital town itself was under direct attack. ¹¹ The revolutionaries were divided into different divisions to keep watch on English soldiers coming to the forest and ravines under their control. On dt.04.11.1857 with a battalion of soldiers J.B. Nucker reached Jharghatti to capture Surendra, Udanta and Karuna Naik the Gauntia of Kolabira. They were surrounded by hill range from three sides i.e. from the front, left and right. Taking advantage of it Surendra and his followers who were hiding there attacked them suddenly. It resulted in the death and injury of one each. However, when the soldiers pervaded the attack Surendra fled away leaving huge amount of rice, wheat etc. ¹²

Surendra wanted to destroy the moral strength of the British army. It is quite clear from the murder of Dr. Moor at Jujomura on dt.18.11.1857. He and his company Dr. Henson were deputed by Ganjam Collector to treat the (unhealthy) ill soldiers at Sambalpur. ¹³ Dr. Henson who fortunately escaped for life also witnessed the fatal end of many soldiers going to protect him in their return journey to Sambalpur. It shocked and humiliated the company administration. The obstruction made in the transport and postal communication of Cuttack – Sambalpur added fuel to the fire. ¹⁴ Even it was a dream for Capt. Leigh to get reinforcement from any sides since all road communication were cut off. ¹⁵ It made Leigh mentally so weak that he requested his higher authority Capt. Dalton in a personal letter to give him a low salary job with less responsibility. It was followed by another one just two days later describing the critical situation of Sambalpur. He mentioned there about the burning of post offices, obstruction made in postal communication from Bombay to Calcutta, illness of sipoyes with their fear and unwillingness to perform duties. ¹⁶

To establish law and order Sambalpur was shifted to Cuttack division on dt.05.12.1857 because it was difficult to administer Sambalpur from far-away Chhot Nagpur division. Moreover, Chhot Nagpur commissioner was always engaged and busy otherwise for which he failed to give time for Sambalpur.

Surendra's struggle was mainly regulated by non-brahmin tribal gond and binjhal Zamindars. Of course few Brahmin gauntias were sided with him. These Zamindars were exploited because of Brahmin patronization of royal power. Even their Zamindaris were confiscated and given to Brahmins and royal servants as rent free land.

Forts played a prominent role in the armed struggle of Surendra Sai. Debrigarh in Barapahad was the center of all. Situated in the impregnable ravines with twelve towers at the top it was 2267 ft. in height. In the past it was the hiding place of many kings at the time of danger. The "Khandjore" ¹⁷ stream passing near the fort was working as a defence and supplied water to the revolutionaries. The stone wall surrounding the fort and its secret exit way was its strategic defence for protection. From the top of the peak they were able to remain vigilant towards the movement of the enemies and follow accordingly. Since it was centrally located, Surendra himself made it as his important strong hold. From here he was going to different other centers and returning back in one night to regulate the affairs of the rebellion. The Barabakhra hill caves was situated at the feet of this mountain. As many as 400 people can take shelter here with water facility through out the year.

Paharsrigida was another place of strategic defence. At its entrance point there was a stone wall of 7 ft. in height and 30ft. in width. Another wall was there in the left side of its half-way. The front jungle was reclaimed to have a clear vision of the movement of the enemies and to gun down them easily. ¹⁸

The Barpatti, Jharghatti and Singoda Ghattis were also surrounded either by stone or earthen walls. Barpatti was the combination of a number of hills. It is situated in the Mundeilosingha of Sambalpur sub-division. Its highest peak situated near Budhapali was 2331 ft. in height. "Maula Bhanja" was situated near Rengali station while Jharghatti was situated 60 kms. away from Sambalpur. The Sambalpur-Ranchi road passes through it. It was the stronghold of Udanta Sai who had constructed a chest-height earthen wall around it.

Singoda Ghati was another important place of defence. It was situated on the way from Sambalpur to Raipur. Besides the forts of Manikgarh and Junagarh at different times were used by the revolutionaries. At Manikgarh they had constructed two walls for their defence. About



Junagarh Ghati Major Foster writes – “it is an escaping way of dangerous ravines and hill ranges flanking to different direction. Guarding on it is practically impossible.”¹⁹

All these forts were impregnable. However the revolutionaries were acquainted with them while the English knew nothing. It caused heavy damage to English garrison attempting to attack there.

The houses of Zamindars and Gauntias were also center of arm invasion. Well laid tactful plan for fighting battles were made inside it. The walls of the houses were made with holes in such a way that the revolutionaries were able to see the outside and to check the advance of the enemies. It also helped them to estimate the situation and escaping from the back door if necessary.

In such a situation the British soldiers were completely helpless. The attack of Capt. Leigh on dt.17.12.1857 to a ghatti four miles away from Sambalpur indicates it. The stone ghatti surrounded with dense forest forced him to retreat. How the natural self-defending feature of the ghattis helped in carrying out the armed struggle is important to remember here.²⁰

The last but not the least tactics of Surendra Sai was the blockade of Sambalpur. “Like a seasoned diplomat and military leader he decided to guard the passages to cut down reinforcement and fight the British forces here and there with uncanny guerilla speed and precision.”²¹ To check the external help and coming of English soldiers from outsides to Sambalpur he blocked all roads communication to the town. Nagpur-Sambalpur road was blocked at Singoda Ghatti under Ghenss Zamindar Madho Singh and his three sons. Its second road was checked by Kharsal Zamindar Dial Sardar. Pahar Srigida road was blocked by its local Zamindar Janardan Singh. Udanta Sai checked the Sambalpur-Hazaribag road at Jharghatti. A group of revolutionaries remained at “Maula Bhanja” hill near Rengali to resist any help coming from Ranchi. The people of Loisingha stayed at Barpatti to resist any reinforcement from Cuttack. It was also under the direct command of Surendra Sai. Papanga hill was under another group of revolutionaries while Barapahad was under the Zamindar brothers of Lakhanpur. In this way Sambalpur was completely isolated from the outside world. Of course later on

all these ghattis were made free by the English, which largely contributed to their success in suppressing the “Ulgulan”

In addition to it in many times face to face battles were fought. One example was Surendra’s fighting with the English in 1840 near Budharaja hill. Another example was his fighting with Capt. Wood at a place near Kudopali in December, 1857. In the battle 53 rebels along with the brother of Surendra, Chhabila Sai fell dead. Another example is his fighting in 1860 at Manikgarh near Khariar.

These were the various war tactics followed by Surendra Sai against the English. By his Guerilla war, self defending techniques and blockade of roads he was able to continue his armed rebellion for forty years i.e. from 1827 to 1863. Without doubt his war tactics were epoch making not only in Sambalpur but also on the soil of Orissa and India as well.

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