‘The Wisdom of the Barbarian’: Rebellion, Incarceration, and the Santal Body Politic

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Introduction

The Santals are the third largest adivasi (tribal) community in India, living in what are now the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Tripura. One of the most important events in their nineteenth-century history was the insurrection or hool of 1855, which is now understood as a significant precursor to the 1857 uprisings. Ranajit Guha’s classic history of peasant insurgency in colonial India argues that the hool exposed the fragility of the changing relationships between landholders, peasants, and itinerant cultivators like the adivasi Santals and, as such, that it spilled over into and became a significant element of the later mutiny-rebellion.

The hool took place in the Chota Nagpur district of the Bengal Presidency, a region that now traverses the states of Bihar and West Bengal. The Santals felt acutely the incursions of logging agents into their forests, and the deforestation implied by the expansion of the railways. And so, during the insurrection, the Santals attacked railway engineers, as well as the usual targets of rebellion: zamindars (landlords), mahajans (moneylenders), policemen, officials, and planters. Yet attacks on railway bungalows and works were not provoked...
only by Santal displacement, for the coming of the steam train had provided relatively lucrative employment for some. It could have been seen as a partial means of escape from the triple burden of what Guha describes as the ‘landlessness, low wages and bonded labour’ produced by British policies that favoured zamindars and mahajans over poor workers. According to Guha, the *hool* was also an act of revenge for the sexual violence perpetrated by railway officials against Santal women. However, colonial magistrates represented this ‘collective bid for social justice’ not as rebellion but as crime—so transforming Santals from victims of oppressive money-lending practices into violent *dacoits* (gang robbers).

The aim of this article however is neither to rehearse the trajectory of the 1855 *hool* once more, nor to examine its place in the run-up to the more widespread socio-economic unrest of 1857–8. Readers need look no further than Guha’s magnificent *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* in these respects, or for a critical reading of the rebellion in relation to Santal notions of time, the work of Prathama Banerjee. Rather, I want to look at the aftermath of the Santal rebellion, and focus on what happened to the many Santals who came before the courts on charges of treason, rebellion, plunder, and robbery. Large numbers of Santals were killed in combat, and the British executed dozens more. Hundreds of others were sentenced to imprisonment in jails like Bhagalpur and Beerbhum (the latter in the town of Siuri) or to transportation to the East India Company’s penal settlement at the Burmese port of Akyab (Arakan). This article will elucidate two related processes in the history of Santal incarceration. First, it is clear that Santals suffered appalling death rates in jail. Even Inspector-General of Prisons F.J. Mouat, himself a physician, described the ‘fearful mortality’ that afflicted them. Second, both imprisonment and transportation afforded British officials a unique opportunity to examine closely Santal society, and this led to the consolidation of extant discourses of the ‘wild tribes’. Yet these discourses were complex and in many ways contradictory, for as we will see colonial notions of ‘tribal wildness’ on occasion produced simultaneously the Santals as ‘model’ prisoners.

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3 Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, pp.142–3.
4 Ibid., pp.97–8.
5 Prathama Banerjee, ‘Historic Acts? Santal Rebellion and the Temporality of Practice’, in *Studies in History*, Vol.15, no.2 (1999), pp.209–46.
6 Akyab is now Sittwe in Rakhine State.
7 Fred. J. Mouat, *Report on the Jails of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1855-6* (Calcutta: John Gray, *Calcutta Gazette* Office, 1856), p.14., Br. Lib., IOR V/24/2062.
First, though, a point of definition: as Banerjee illustrates, the hool was neither a singular nor an exclusively Santal event, for a large number of non-Santals also participated. Neighbouring tribal communities in Chota Nagpur like the Ho, Munda, Oraon, Bhumij, and Paharia all became involved. Later on the Kols in the region took the lead in district uprisings during 1857–8. Yet, in their dealings with arrested hool rebels the prison authorities always referred to their charges as ‘Santals’. I will follow them in this respect, but readers should note that the descriptor ‘Santal’ was often part of colonial shorthand for the many and often diverse adivasi communities who populated particular regions of Bengal.

**Imprisonment, Mortality, and the Model Prisoner**

In August 1855, with the imprisonment of dozens of Santals arrested during the hool, Bhagulpur jail was so full that cholera broke out. During the epidemic, 52 prisoners died in a single week. By the beginning of 1856, the number of Santals in the prison had doubled and it had become so overcrowded that a large number of prisoners were sleeping outside. With 300 Santals camped in a large grove on the site of the jail, Mouat warned at the start of February that death rates were rising. The civil surgeon of the jail, A.J. Sheridan, reported at about the same time that the daily ratio of sick Santal prisoners was almost seven percent, as compared to almost four percent of other prisoners.

There were immense pressures on Beerbhum Jail too. In 1855 it had been converted into a fortress, magazine, and granary to house and to supply troops engaged in anti-hool operations nearby. By the end of the year, the jail was overcrowded, manufacture had more or less ground to a halt, and the prisoners were no longer engaged in their usual productive labour. As death rates began to rise, the Bengal government asked the civil surgeon of the prison to send in

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8 Banerjee, ‘Historic Acts?, p.211.
9 Kaushik Ghosh, ‘A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India’, in Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (eds), *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.13.
10 Gautam Bhadra, ‘Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven’, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.256–63.
11 W. Grey, Secretary to Government Bengal, to W. Bell, Session Judge Bhagalpur, 21 Aug. 1855, Bengal Judicial Consultations (henceforth Ben JC) 6 Sept. 1855, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.17.
12 Inspector-General of Prisons F.J. Mouat’s memo on Bhagalpur Jail, 9 Feb. 1856, Ben JC, 28 Feb. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.33.
13 ‘Weekly sanitary report on the state of the prisoners in Beerbhum Jail, week ending 10 Feb. 1856’, Ben JC, 20 March 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.35.
14 Inspector-General of Prisons F.J. Mouat’s memo on Beerbhum Jail, 18 Dec. 1855, Ben JC, 17 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.30.
weekly sanitary returns. Though these returns did not enumerate Santals separately, the accompanying notes leave no doubt that they constituted the largest proportion of sick inmates. Sheridan made it clear that the Santal prisoners were in a ‘very low state of health’, adding that they had a tendency to ‘sink very rapidly’. He also noted that the prison population included six small children, one of whom had been born in the jail. The youngsters were ill and Sheridan feared they would die if not released: ‘it is painful to behold the condition of these poor children’. The government did in fact release 16 Santal women and children, though not before many had succumbed to dysentery and dropsy.15 Sheridan’s report was the first of many representations on behalf of aged, infirm, and sick Santal prisoners.16 By March 1856, 25 Santals had died while still awaiting trial.17

After the hool, Mouat sought advice on how to avoid high death rates among the Santals, but he was never optimistic about his ability to prevent them altogether. He made enquiries amongst railway overseers used to employing Santals, as well as of Rivers Thompson, the magistrate of Beerbhum, about how to ensure their good health. Thompson in turn interviewed the Santals in his prison, and reported back to Mouat on their desired provisions and clothing. Mouat also consulted the medical official Dr. Cheek, who worked in Bankura Jail. He made a series of suggestions that subsequently Mouat passed on to government, namely that prison officials should issue the Santal prisoners with a supply of vegetables and meat twice a week; that they should not give the Santals too much food, for they were not accustomed to unlimited supplies; that they should limit the use of fetters in order to avoid the production of sores; that all the Santals should be imprisoned in their home region; and that local officers should employ them on the roads in preference to making them do indoor labour. Cheek supported these recommendation by recalling the terrible mortality that had befallen the Kol rebels imprisoned after the insurrection of 1831–2—a case illustrative, he thought, of ‘the known depression which causes all such savages to sink and die when incarcerated, “like old birds when caught and confined in cages”’.18 His was the first of many allusions to imprisoned Santals as wild creatures, a theme to which we will return in a moment. Significantly, too, Cheek labelled the Santals ‘hill tribes’. This was typical of

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15 ‘Weekly sanitary report of Civil Surgeon A.J. Sheridan on the state of health of the prisoners in the Beerbhum Jail for the week ending 10 Nov. 1855’, Ben JC, 20 Dec. 1855, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.26. See also Guha, Elementary Aspects, pp.131–2.
16 For instance, ‘Weekly sanitary report on the state of the prisoners in Beerbhum Jail, week ending 22 Dec. 1855’, 2 Feb. 1856, Ben JC, 3 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.33.
17 ‘Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 18 Mar. 1856’, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
18 Mouat to Grey, 29 Dec. 1855, Ben JC, 24 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.31.
colonial discourses of the period, in which the terms dhangars, junglis (of the jungle), boonahs (wild men) and Kols were used to refer to adivasi communities in Chota Nagpur.  

At the time of the Santal rebellion, therefore, British officials were aware that the imprisonment of ‘hill tribes’ was likely to result in high death rates. Of course prison mortality rates in general were very variable. In 1837, the Committee on Convict Labour reported that they ranged from less than one to more than 20 percent per annum. The main causes of death amongst prisoners were cholera, malaria, dysentery, and diarrhoea. However, the statistical record was clear: tribal communities suffered out of all proportion to other prisoners. A good example was the aftermath of the Ghumsur Wars, which the British fought against the Konds of central Orissa in 1835. Of the 180 Konds put on trial, 43 were executed, 47 sentenced to life imprisonment or transportation overseas, and 48 to shorter terms of incarceration, mostly with hard labour on road-gangs in chains. The government shipped at least three to the penal settlement in Moulmein. Judicial procedure in the Kond areas was administered through the Madras Presidency, and the British thus transferred most of the remainder to jails in South India: Bellary; Trichinopoly; Chingleput; and Ganjam. Ten died before their terms had even started. As David Arnold puts it, the real end for communities like the Konds came not with military defeat and judicial sentence, but with a miserable death in prison. Later, in 1860, Inspector-General Mouat even suggested that because a sentence of imprisonment was a virtual death sentence for adivasis, ‘Hill Tribes and jungly races’ generally should be sent to the new penal settlement at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands in lieu of incarceration in mainland jails.

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19 Ghosh, ‘A Market’, p.17.  
20 ‘Second and Concluding Report of the Committee of Convict Labour, 28 Jan. 1837’, Ben JC, 14 Mar. 1837, Br. Lib., IOR P.141.9.  
21 David Arnold, Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp.103–4.  
22 For a fascinating account of the campaign, see Felix Padel, The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 2.  
23 H.G.A. Taylor, Commander Northern Division, to H. Chamier, Secretary to government, Madras, 26 Jan. 1836, TNSA Madras Judicial Proceedings (MJP), Vol.304B.  
24 Padel, The Sacrifice, pp.51, 60–1, 334 (n.52).  
25 Ibid., p.334 (n.52).  
26 David Arnold, ‘The Colonial Prison: Power, Knowledge, and Penology in 19th-Century India’, in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds), Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.168.  
27 Mouat to Rivers Thompson, Junior Secretary to government, Bengal, 26 Dec. 1860, Bengal Judicial Proceedings (henceforth Ben JP) (Jails), March 1861, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.38.
The colonial authorities therefore faced a seemingly insurmountable problem with regard to the treatment of adivasi rebels. If they were to be punished effectively, how could penal administrators avoid excessive mortality rates? Mouat reported that he believed that no severity of punishment or discipline could be too stringent for the serious crimes of which they had been convicted, mostly rebellion or dacoity (gang robbery). He wrote of the need to punish the Santals so that they would ‘profit by the experience of the past, without encouraging other savages to repeat the same experiment’. Yet he did not want them to die. In a bid to ameliorate Santal sickness, at the end of 1855 Mouat ordered that they be transferred to Hazaribag Jail, which had a cool ‘healthy’ climate, or failing that, put to work outdoors on the roads. He was also prepared to offer incentives. Those Santals who worked well should get a daily dram of rum. 28 He even floated the idea of the forced resettlement of ‘the misguided and starving’ Santals at Arakan. 29 At the time there were just 43 convicts there, 30 for in 1854 the government had begun transferring its life convicts to Singapore. Labour was in great demand. 31 Mauritian planters, too, desirous of indenturing ‘hill tribes’ to work in the island’s expanding sugar industry, suggested that migration might be a preferable option for the emiserated Santals. 32

The Bengal government rejected the Arakan and Mauritius options. But it made some limited concessions to the Santal prisoners. At the end of 1855 it released the four remaining women in Beerbhum Jail, though this was mainly to protect their children from almost certain death. 33 And after an outbreak of mumps in March 1856 the local authorities issued the Santals in Bhagalpur with a tobacco ration. Though tobacco had been banned in most Bengal Presidency jails in 1853, prisoners were usually able to get a supply through their guards or while working at outdoor labour, which explains why its sudden withdrawal from the jails had had no ill effects generally. Yet the Santals’ relative social isolation as a prison community made it harder for them to

28 Mouat’s memo on Beerbhum Jail, 18 Dec. 1855, Ben JC, 17 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.30.
29 Mouat to Grey, 19 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 18 Sept. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.47.
30 Fred. J. Mouat, Reports on Jails Visited and Inspected in Bengal, Behar, and Arracan (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1856), p.172. For the original manuscript, see Mouat’s memo on Akyab Jail, 26 Mar. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
31 Cecil Beadon, Secretary to government, Bengal, to G. Powden, Officiating Secretary to Government of India, 19 July 1853, Ben JC, 21 July 1853, Br. Lib., IOR P.144.43.
32 Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, ‘Tribal and Indentured Migrants in Colonial India: Modes of Recruitment and Forms of Incorporation’, in Peter Robb (ed.), Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.167.
33 Grey to Thompson, 29 Dec. 1855, Ben JC, 3 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.35.
access these channels. Many, as a result, began to suffer from sore mouths and throats. Despite this, when Mouat learnt of the concession he withdrew it, pointing to the need to balance the issues of punishment and privilege with the prevention of crime and the protection of society. Another reason may have been that the issue of tobacco to the Santals was reportedly a source of resentment among other prisoners.

The tension between the punishment and medical treatment of prisoners inevitably led to disputes between jail officials and doctors. As noted above, the civil surgeon of Beerbhum Jail had been among the first to call for the release of sick Santal prisoners. And he continued to bring unsatisfactory jail conditions to the attention of his superiors, writing in one weekly sanitary report in January 1856: ‘Many of the santhals possess no warm clothing whatever and sleep almost naked on the bare earthen floor . . . at this inclement season’. Officiating Magistrate Thompson did not take kindly to this criticism. To his credit, Sheridan refused to let the matter rest, and complained repeatedly about the jail administrators’ failure to supply the Santals with warm clothing, and the shortage and poor quality of blankets. Nevertheless little changed. Magistrate Wigram gave way on the issue of blankets, allotting two to each Santal, but he remained convinced that their sickness was to a large degree avoidable being at least partly caused by the overindulgence of a community unused to good food:

I cannot help having an idea that a good deal more illness among them has been occasioned by pampering and overfeeding than the reverse. Nothing can exceed Dr Sheridan’s attention to the prisoners, but he is continually trying to procure some luxury or indulgence for them; in my opinion injudiciously, and this over pampering combined with the sense of confinement and

34 Mouat to C.J. Buckland, Junior Secretary to government, Bengal, 25 Apr. 1856, enclosing district reports on the withdrawal of tobacco (Beerbhum Jail), Ben JC, 15 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.39.
35 ‘Sanitary report, week ending 8 March 1856’, A.W. Russell, Under-Secretary to government, Bengal, to R.J. Wigram, Officiating Magistrate, Beerbhum, 25 Mar. 1856, Ben JC, 20 Mar. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.35.
36 Mouat to Buckland, 28 Apr. 1856, Ben JC 12 June 1856; Mouat to Buckland, 25 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
37 Wigram to Mouat, 18 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 12 June 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
38 ‘Weekly sanitary report of the Civil Surgeon on the state of the prisoners in the Beerbhum Jail for the week ending 12 Jan. 1856’, Ben JC, 24 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.31.
39 Note of Officiating Magistrate Rivers Thompson, n.d., Ben JC, 24 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.31.
40 For instance ‘Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 16 Feb. 1856’, Ben JC, 20 Mar. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.35.
41 Wigram to Russell, 22 Feb. 1856, Ben JC, 20 Mar. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.35.
comparative want of exercise is I believe the cause of a good deal of the illness that has prevailed.\textsuperscript{42}

Other factors in Wigram’s view were the thin clothes the Santals habitually wore and the jail administrators’ refusal to allow them to light warming fires in prison. At the time of this letter, March 1856, over ten percent of the Santals were sick in the jail hospital.\textsuperscript{43}

Wigram’s opinions on the matter were strongly at variance with the Santals’ own perspectives on their punishment. Subaltern views on imprisonment are notoriously difficult to ascertain. Yet with respect to the Santals, there are some clues. When Mouat visited Beerbhum Jail in December 1855 he was greeted with more requests for the removal of fetters and increases in rations than he had received during his whole presidency-wide tour of inspection the year before, when he had seen over 4000 prisoners. The Santals ‘generally entertain a very erroneous notion of the objects of imprisonment, and evidently consider themselves the victims of society’, he wrote.\textsuperscript{44} Moreover, while no substantive mention of imprisonment and/or transportation occurs in surviving Santal accounts or songs of the hool, except that it took place,\textsuperscript{45} by reading against the grain of colonial correspondence one can gain a sense of the agency of the Santal prisoners. Since neither the guards nor the other prisoners could speak Santali, jail officials were denied a vital source of information: the prisoner informer. In March 1856, for instance, 250 Santals escaped from Dumka Jail, apparently having planned to do so within earshot of the entire prison establishment.\textsuperscript{46} No doubt the prison officials’ ignorance of Santali explains, at least in part, why they regarded Santal prisoners with a degree of ambivalence: on the one hand easily managed; on the other, according to administrators like Magistrate Wigram, ‘an uncertain set’.\textsuperscript{47}

Be that as it may, one is left pondering the huge possibilities for subversion this official incapacity opened up. Consider the case of the Santal convict who was

\textsuperscript{42} Wigram to Grey, 7 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Mouat’s memo on Beerbhum Jail, 18 Dec. 1855, Ben JC, 17 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.30.
\textsuperscript{45} See for instance in Mare Hapram Ko Reak Katha (The Traditions and Institutions of the Santals), which had been dictated to a missionary by Santal Kolean Haram in 1871. The only other written Santal account of the hool, Chotrae Desmanjhi’s, made no mention of it at all. See W.G. Archer, ‘The Santal Rebellion’, in Man in India, Vol.25, no.4 (1945), pp.223–39.
\textsuperscript{46} Wigram to Grey, 28 Mar. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37. The British later recaptured 75 of them.
\textsuperscript{47} Wigram to Grey, 28 Mar., 1 Apr. 1856; Wigram to Russell, 7 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
returned from the Andamans penal settlement to the Indian mainland as ‘insane’ almost three decades later. A surgeon at Alipur Jail in Calcutta examined him and remarked that it was quite possible that because the man was ‘uneducated and uncivilised’, his ‘clumsy, stupid and cunning’ nature had been misunderstood—adding frankly that because the convict could not speak Bengali very well, he had seemed to him initially stupid and ‘slow of understanding’.48

As operations against the rebels continued in the districts, more and more Santals arrived in jail. This added to the problems of overcrowding and sickness, and of course raised the spectre of further rebellion and resistance. Prison administrators thought it best, under the circumstances, to assert their authority vigorously. In March 1856 they marched 75 of the escaped Santal gang taken at Dumka back to Beerbhum, a two-day journey, without shelter, rest, food or blankets. On arrival, 68 were admitted to hospital. The remainder were chained together in pairs, and left to sleep as best they could on the bare earthen floor of the prison. Sheridan recorded their ‘extreme suffering’ as they literally gasped for air. Just three months earlier, Mouat had likened the overcrowding in Bengal’s jails to the Black Hole of Calcutta.49 Now there were nearly 500 prisoners in a jail designed to hold 375.50 The magistrate reported that the number of sick had doubled in just one month, and that a quarter of the Santal prisoners were in hospital.51 Similarly after the Dumka escape, the authorities ordered that 100 of the most ‘dangerous’ offenders be sent to Alipur, which had the most stringent discipline in the whole presidency.52 But this did not relieve the overcrowding at Beerbhum which was promptly supplied with yet more prisoners.53

Wigram responded to Sheridan’s criticisms about Beerbhum Jail by accusing him of exceeding his brief as a civil surgeon. ‘[I]f I am not responsible for the safe keeping of the prisoners’, he wrote, ‘I must be able to secure them as I think best and I trust Government will decide whether I, and all the other officers connected with these prisoners are to be attacked in the strong language and charged with gross inhumanity and unnecessary

48 Note of C.J.J. Jackson, Medical Officer, Alipur Jail, 3 Dec. 1884; note of G.D. Harris, Surgeon-Major and member of Transportation Committee, 5 Dec. 1884, NAI Home (Port Blair), A Proceedings, May 1885, pp.129–33.
49 Mouat’s circular, 26 Dec. 1855, Ben JC, 17 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.30.
50 ‘Weekly sanitary reports Beerbhum Jail, 29 Mar., 6 Apr. 1856’, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
51 ‘Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 6 Apr. 1856’, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
52 Grey to Wigram, 5 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
53 Wigram to Russell, 7 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
cruelty’.\(^{54}\) The government did indeed make a decision, but in favour of Sheridan. It ordered the implementation of the surgeon’s suggestions and reprimanded Wigram for his ‘want of proper care and attention’—which rebuke was copied to the civil surgeon and the inspector-general of jails.\(^{55}\) A third of the original gang of 75 Santals marched from Dumka were still in the jail hospital, but the remaining 50 were transferred to Alipur.\(^{56}\) Meanwhile Wigram agreed to stop interfering in matters of jail discipline.\(^{57}\)

As this controversy shows, at least part of the reason that the Santals suffered so greatly was their sudden arrival in big groups after periods of socio-economic deprivation, and the authorities’ concurrent failure to issue any or enough warm clothes, bedding, and blankets, or to allow the lighting of warming fires. This meant that they were prone to illnesses like dysentery. In some respects, as visiting Sessions Judge O.W. Malet remarked, such treatment was unavoidable. Jails like Beerbhum were unprepared for the reception of large numbers of rebels, and space, blankets, and provisions were all in short supply. Moreover, European officials were keen to avoid prisoner escapes, especially by those convicted as rebels, and so subjected prisoners to harsh discipline. Their Indian guards were no doubt complicit in this, for if prisoners escaped they faced the wrath of their superiors.\(^{58}\)

And yet despite the recognition by some prison doctors like Sheridan that the incidence of sickness among the Santals was the direct result of their incarceration, more usually officials represented it as caused by the intrinsic nature of the Santal body itself. They saw ‘tribals’ as people used to living in the open air, and argued that prison life was so foreign to them that it caused ‘mental depression’.\(^{59}\) Did not migrant *dhangars* suffer high death rates at sea in conditions that bore a strong resemblance to those in colonial prisons?\(^{60}\) Officials also called up, by way of explanation, the language of contagion described so eloquently by Guha in relation to peasant insurrection more generally. They represented the Santals as both physically and morally infectious. Mouat wrote that as with the Kols ‘and all similar tribes of savages’, ‘pestilence and contagion [flourished in] all [the] places in which they

\(^{54}\) ‘Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 6 Apr. 1856—Wigram’s remarks’, n.d., Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.

\(^{55}\) Buckland to Wigram, Mouat and Sheridan, 18 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.

\(^{56}\) ‘Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 20 Apr. 1856’, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.

\(^{57}\) Wigram to Buckland, 23 Apr. 1856; and Mouat to Buckland, 30 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.

\(^{58}\) Remarks by Sessions Judge O.W. Malet, 13 June 1856, Ben JC, 4 Sept. 1856, Br. Lib. IOR P.145.46.

\(^{59}\) Memo on Bhagalpur Jail, 27 Jan. 1857, Ben JC, 9 July 1857, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.66.

\(^{60}\) Ghosh, ‘A Market’, pp.20–1.
are confined’, due in part to the Santals’ appetite for ‘the flesh of what most
nations regard as vermin’—snakes—and their fondness for alcohol.

Note Mouat’s conflation here of *adivasi* communities and ‘wild beasts’. There
was no question in his mind as to the relative development of India’s *adivasis.*
In another report he compared the Santals directly with the ‘monkey tribes’
who, he claimed, always died once they were imprisoned. 61 For Mouat, many
of the physical symptoms of illness displayed by ‘wild animals’ and ‘wild tribes’
were uncannily similar. 62 Within the medical discourses of colonial Indian jails,
notions of primitivism, wildness, and sickness became inextricably intertwined.
Other prison administrators compared the Santals with supposedly uncivilised
communities. The civil surgeon of Akyab, for instance, wrote of their similarity
with the ‘half-tamed’ Mughs under his charge. 63

But as unrest in the districts and the threat of prison-based resistance receded,
these discourses underwent a further development. To some degree, this was a
product of Sheridan’s sympathetic eye with regard to high prison death rates. It
was also related to the ‘natural state’ of the Santals, described as one of
‘barbaric ignorance and superstition’. 64 Thirdly, Santal prisoners were found
easy to manage, and this also fed into a descriptive transformation which
suggested that they might be capable of redemption.

Colonial categories of rule were of course inherently contingent and unstable.
We can see this from a close reading of official documents about the
transportation of convicts to the Burmese penal settlements during the 1830s
and 1840s—which are filled with narratives about the model transformation of
hardened criminals into ‘orderly’ prisoners. 65 The Santals too came to embody
such a transformation. By March 1856 there were 44 Santals in Alipur Jail, and
Superintendent Fergusson was effusive in his praise for their exemplary
behaviour. They had, he said, submitted to being washed and having their
heads shaved, and after being put to work had become expert gunny weavers
and the best rope spinners in the prison. In fact, their work had been selected
for display at the forthcoming exhibition of jail manufacture that Mouat was

61 Mouat’s memo on Beerbhum Jail, 18 Dec. 1855, Ben JC, 17 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.30; and Mouat
to Grey, 29 Dec. 1855, Ben JC, 24 Jan. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.31.
62 Mouat to Wigram, 5 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 12 June 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
63 J.W. Mountjoy, Civil Asst. Surgeon, Akyab, to C. Mackinnon, Superintending Surgeon, Barrackpur, 27
Sept. 1856, Ben JC, 11 Dec 1856, Br. Lib. IOR P.145.52.
64 Buckland to Wigram, 23 Apr. 1856, Ben JC, 8 May 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.37.
65 Clare Anderson, *Legible Bodies: Race, Criminality and Colonialism in South Asia* (Oxford: Berg, 2004),
pp.28–30.
organising in Calcutta. The Santals, he concluded, were not savages, but primitives touchingly attached to their homes and families.\textsuperscript{66}

Part of the reason Fergusson was so effusive in his praise with respect to the management of the Santal prisoners was no doubt that they were immune from the conflicts over status and privileges that plagued north Indian jails in the lead-up to the mutiny-rebellion of 1857–8.\textsuperscript{67} Santals could be put to any type of labour, and did not object to performing menial polluting tasks avoided by caste Hindus—even the disposal of human waste.\textsuperscript{68} At any rate, the Bengal authorities decided that the Santals should not be transported, and would be allowed to remain in Alipur Jail where they appeared to be easily manageable and where they enjoyed good health.\textsuperscript{69} As a further concession, they were given news of their families back home.\textsuperscript{70}

It seems that what made the Santals attractive to the British as prisoners was to a large degree what, earlier, had made them attractive to the colonial state as railway workers, and later as indentured labourers. They were used to seasonal migration; and unrestrained by caste taboos, well fitted for menial labour. Kaushik Ghosh has argued that such de-casteing was another way of putting adivasis outside the pale of civilisation.\textsuperscript{71} And yet, as a group, the Santals present a clear contrast with other socially-marginal caste-Hindu communities who invariably tried to harness their experience in jail as a means of launching claims for social mobility.\textsuperscript{72} They came to be so well regarded as labourers that

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{66} A. Fergusson, Magistrate, 24-Parganas, to Russell, 17 Mar. 1856, Ben JC, 5 June 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.44. On the Santals' work chosen for the exhibition, see also Mouat to Buckland, 21 Mar. 1857, Ben JC, 30 Apr. 1857, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.61.
\textsuperscript{67} Clare Anderson, \textit{The Indian Uprising of 1857–8: Prisons, Prisoners and Resistance} (London: Anthem, 2007), Chs. 2 & 3.
\textsuperscript{68} Mouat to Buckland, 24 Mar. 1857, Ben JC, 2 July 1857, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.65.
\textsuperscript{69} Buckland to Fergusson, 29 May 1856, Ben JC, 5 June 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.44.
\textsuperscript{70} ‘Statement containing the particulars respecting the families of the Santal Prisoners confined in Alipur Jail, 4 Apr. 1856’, Ben JC, 5 June 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.44. An interesting aside in relation to the Santals’ supposed attachment to their families was the preference for tribal migrants among Mauritian sugar planters, on the grounds that they had fewer concerns about migrating in family groups and thus were more likely to form a population of permanent settlers. It has been estimated that about 17 percent of the total migration to Mauritius (by far the largest recipient of indentured labour in the British Empire) during the period 1842–70 were dhangars, the colonial term for adivasi migrants. The history of indentured immigration also shows that the devastating mortality suffered by the Santals in prison was not unique. Death rates amongst tribal migrants were ten times that of others signing contracts of indenture. In the Mauritian case, this eventually led to the favouring of non-tribal groups in indentured recruitment, notably those from South India. See Marina Carter, \textit{Sirdars, Servants and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–1874} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.104–5.
\textsuperscript{71} Ghosh, ‘A Market’, pp.21–2.
\textsuperscript{72} Anderson, \textit{The Indian Uprising}, Ch. 2.
\end{footnotesize}
district magistrates started to request them specifically for road projects;\(^{73}\) and they also acquired a reputation for prison manufacture.\(^{74}\) Magistrate Wigram, who had once regarded the Santal prisoners under his charge as an ‘uncertain set’ now opposed their employment as labourers on the roads because he believed they would be more valuable as craftsmen.\(^{75}\) In the event the 168 Santals still in Alipur Jail were given a conditional pardon in February 1857 on condition that they went to the Sunderbans to work on land clearing projects.\(^{76}\) Possibly this ticket-of-leave scheme might have been extended to other areas where there were labour shortages,\(^{77}\) but in May 1857 a series of military mutinies erupted in north India, which rapidly ignited the flames of civil revolt in the countryside. With British control teetering, the government was not willing to risk liberating scores of convicted rebels who might decide to throw in their lot with the rebels and mutinous sepoys.\(^{78}\)

**The Mutiny-Rebellion and its Aftermath**

When mutineers and rebels broke open Hazaribag and Maunbhum Jails during the 1857–8 revolt, they released hundreds of Santals. Their liberation caused huge concern to the colonial administration, for they soon became involved in what the officiating commissioner of Chota Nagpur described as ‘widespread plundering’ in the district.\(^{79}\) In one attack 600–700 Santals marched on a village in Rampur. As during the hool, they were accompanied by a drum, a flag, and music.\(^{80}\) A few of them were later convicted of various offences including rebellion, dacoity, and plunder, and imprisoned or shipped as transportation convicts to Port Blair in the Andaman Islands—though we know almost nothing of their experiences there.

\(^{73}\) W.H. Henderson, Magistrate, Chittagong, to Mouat, 2 June 1856, Ben JC, 18 Sept. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.47.

\(^{74}\) Fergusson to Buckland, 21 June 1856, Ben JC, 18 Sept. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.47.

\(^{75}\) Wigram to Buckland, 5 July 1856, Ben JC, 18 Sept. 1856, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.47.

\(^{76}\) In April, cholera broke out amongst the transferred men and 21 of them died. With the exception of three men who were too ill to move, the remainder asked to be re-admitted to jail rather than face certain death in the jungles.

\(^{77}\) Fergusson to E.H. Lushington, in charge of the office of the Secretary to government, Bengal, 14 Apr. 1857, Ben JC, 30 July 1857, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.68.

\(^{78}\) G.U. Yule, Commissioner Santal Parganas, to Lushington, 16 June 1857, Ben JC, 30 July 1857, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.68.

\(^{79}\) E.T. Dalton, Officiating Commissioner, Chota Nagpur, to A.R. Young, Secretary to government, Bengal, 14 Sept. 1857, Ben JC, 1 Oct. 1857, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.75.

\(^{80}\) Dalton to H. Bell, Under-Secretary to government, Bengal, 19 Aug. 1861, Ben JP (Jails) Oct. 1861, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.44.
The crisis passed. The British gradually reoccupied and secured the area—including Hazaribag and Maunbhum Jails. But now a new set of problems arose: what to do with hundreds of newly-convicted prisoners, many in poor health? It was not long before the jails became overcrowded. Alipur, for instance, was almost 50 percent over capacity by 1858. In the wake of this overcrowding came another episode of ‘formidable sickness’, with outbreaks of cholera and gangrene; 440 prisoners died during the year. Mouat wrote that he hoped that so ‘disastrous a history’ would never be repeated.

In August 1857 the government decided to transfer all male life prisoners who were fit enough to work, including Santals, to the penal settlement in Akyab where there was an acute labour shortage. The jail authorities took the opportunity to dispose of every prisoner they could. Only 16 were younger than 50 years, and their average age was 58. And many were in a terrible state of health. Of the first batch of 80 convicts just eight were judged fit on arrival. Not surprisingly the death rate soon exceeded that at Alipur. During the first year it reached a phenomenal 80 percent.

On arrival in Akyab the prisoners were split into two gangs, one put to work at the civil station, and the other set to clearing jungle in the Noakhally saltwater marshes. Most of the convicts referred to by Civil Assistant Surgeon J.W. Mountjoy as ‘Hindu’ and ‘Bengali’ went on hunger-strike. It was not long before cholera, bowel disorders and fever broke out in both gangs; 100 convicts died, including a man who committed suicide. Mountjoy claimed that this dismal outcome was the inevitable result of ‘moral causes acting on the

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81 Fred. J. Mouat, Report on the Jails of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1858–9 (Calcutta: John Gray, General Printing Department—Report and Appendices; Special Reports of Jails, Alipur Jail Press, 1859) (henceforth Mouat’s Report, 1858–9), p.31, Br. Lib., IOR V/24/2063. Alipur was designed to hold a maximum of 1307 prisoners, but at this time its daily average rose to 1895. Mouat’s Report, 1858–9, p.34. As these were controlled by the Bengal Presidency, strictly speaking the prisoners were subject to prison transfer, not transportation. This avoided any potential difficulties in changing the terms of their original sentence.

82 Mouat’s Report, 1858–9: App. I, ‘Special Reports of the Jails in the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for the Year 1858–59’, p.74.

83 Mouat’s Report, 1858–9, p.34.

84 This was a common feature of local policy in relation to transportation. For the case of Mauritius, see Clare Anderson, Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815–53 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp.23–5.

85 Mouat’s Report, 1858–9, p.28.

86 Mountjoy to R. Shepherd, Second Principal Assistant Commissioner, Arakan, 11 Sept. 1857, Mouat’s Report, 1857–8, App. I.
physical frame’ after the British had quashed the 1857 revolt. Convicts, he alleged, had resorted to ‘voluntary starvation’, and refused medicine.  

At the end of 1859 the government of Bengal instructed Mouat to conduct an enquiry into the devastating death rates at Akyab. By the time he got there, most of the remaining Indian convicts had died. Even so Mouat was moved to disagree with Mountjoy’s assessment. He concluded that the high mortality was due to the convicts’ work in the salt marshes, to the fact that their camp had been ill-chosen, to an absence of proper sanitary measures, and to the unusually hot and wet weather. Mountjoy, however, remained adamant: the convicts had died because of widespread hunger-striking. ‘The remedy’, he claimed, ‘is in the hands of the convicts . . . . There is no reason, but their own whining obstinacy, why they should die.’ Who was right? While it is impossible to give an exact answer, it seems likely that Mountjoy’s assessment is closer to the truth. The prisoners dropped like flies because of a combination of factors: the poor condition in which most of them arrived; the enervating climate; the harsh working conditions; the poor sanitary provisions; and their refusal of medical treatment and food.

Yet it was the latter hypothesis that resonated with observers in the context of the mutiny-rebellion. The perception that widespread violations of caste in colonial jails was going on, assisted by such innovations as the enforcement of common messing, was already well-established among the public—and some officials, like Mountjoy, did not try to veil the truth. Mountjoy compared the ‘pampered’ prisoner with the ‘petted’ army. He wrote that even if convicts were given purple silks (to indicate their nobility) they would remain dissatisfied. Caste objections to the cultural conditions of imprisonment and transportation, notably with regard to rations, were evidence of the ‘gross ignorance and prejudice’ through which they ‘whined, cried, sulked with their food, became skeletons . . . and died’. Typically, the voices of the convicts themselves are absent from this account and so it is not clear whether the hunger-strike had broader political motives or aims. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that

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87 Ibid.
88 Fred. J. Mouat, *Report on the Jails of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1859–60* (Calcutta: Saville and Cranenburgh Printers, Bengal Printing Co. Ltd., 1860) (henceforth Mouat’s Report, 1859–60), App. I (Special Reports), p.38, Br. Lib., IOR V/24/2063.
89 Thompson to Mouat, 29 Dec. 1859; and Mouat’s memo, 30 Apr. 1860, Ben JP, June 1860, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.28.
90 Mouat’s Report, 1859–60, App. I, p.118.
91 Anderson, *The Indian Uprising*, ch. 2.
92 Mouat’s Report, 1859–60, App. I, p.119.
when the British transported mutineer-rebel convicts to the Andaman Islands after 1858 they suffered appalling death rates for similar reasons.\textsuperscript{93}

The Santal convicts alone escaped this devastating mortality, which moved Mountjoy to describe them as ‘very robust and splendid fellows’\textsuperscript{94}. Why? For one thing it seems that they complied with the Akyab convict regime with respect to rationing. Mountjoy reported that Santal convicts ate well, and so remained ‘sleek, laughing and in good condition’. It was a pity, he lamented, that other Indians did not possess ‘the wisdom of the barbarian’.\textsuperscript{95} Moreover the Santals took advantage of their employment outdoors to collect herbs, leaves, and other local foodstuffs, a practice which Mountjoy urged other convicts to follow.\textsuperscript{96} For another thing, the Santals came to be seen, as remarked above, as model prisoners. This led to some of them being promoted to serve as \textit{burkundauzes}, or overseers, which jobs carried perks and a reduced workload.\textsuperscript{97} These improvements, naturally, lifted the odds on their survival.

At the end of 1859 the Indian authorities extended a general pardon to Santal prisoners still in jail for rebellion or plunder committed during the \textit{hool}—in large part because of the good reputation they had acquired. In respect of the 19 Santals still remaining at Alipur, Fergusson’s successor wrote that their conduct had been excellent.\textsuperscript{98} Another official rated them the best prisoners in jail: ‘They are always willing to work and are never found malingering, are patient, contented and never grumble, and it has never been found necessary to punish any of them’.\textsuperscript{99} Nevertheless the government made their pardon conditional on a moral bargain: freedom in exchange for pledges of future loyalty and good conduct.\textsuperscript{100} After 1861, only Santals convicted of murder or other violent crimes were kept in British jails.\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid.}, App. I, p.114.

\textsuperscript{94} Mountjoy’s annual report of Akyab jail hospital, 1858, Mouat’s Report, 1857–8, App. I, pp.111–13.

\textsuperscript{95} Mountjoy to Shepherd, 11 Sept. 1857, Annual report Akyab jail hospital, Mouat’s Report, 1858–9 (n.p.g.).

\textsuperscript{96} Mouat’s Report, 1859–60, App. I, p.119.

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Ibid.}, p.115.

\textsuperscript{98} ‘Statement of the nineteen sontal [Santal] prisoners who were in confinement in the Alipore [Alipur] Jail on the 23rd November 1859’, Ben JP (Jails), Aug. 1860, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.30.

\textsuperscript{99} ‘Statement of Santal prisoners confined in the jails of the Lower Provinces except Alipur’, 9 Aug. 1861, Ben JP (Jails), Oct. 1861, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.44.

\textsuperscript{100} Thompson to Commissioner, Santal Parganas, 19 Oct. 1859, Ben JP, 20 Oct. 1859, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.21.

\textsuperscript{101} J. Munro, Officiating Under-Secretary to government, Bengal, to W. Le F. Robinson, Officiating Commissioner Santal Parganas (Bhagulpur Division), 9 Oct. 1861, Ben JP (Jails), Oct. 1861, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.44.
Conclusion

Evidence of the post-<i>hool</i> experiences of the Santals is at best fragmentary. We would like to know, for instance, what happened to those Santals who managed to evade the clutches of the colonial courts during 1855–6. Did they continue their tradition of seasonal migration, or perhaps sign contracts of indenture to overseas sugar colonies like Mauritius as was suggested at the time? Similarly, it would be interesting to know how many, and to what extent, the Santal rebels of 1855 were involved in the tribal rebellion that griped the district of Chota Nagpur two years’ later?\(^{102}\) Reports at the time suggest that mutineer-rebels liberated Hazaribag and Maunbhum Jails in the middle of 1857 in order to release the <i>hool</i> Santals imprisoned there.\(^{103}\) And it is clear that the British later imprisoned or transported Santals for mutiny-rebellion offences. In 1861 over 100 were still in prison in mainland jails, most for the offences of plunder or riot.\(^{104}\) The colonial perspective was that they had taken advantage of widespread social anarchy for their own personal gain which made them criminal and not—the commissioner of Chota Nagpur assured his colonial superiors—‘political’ prisoners.\(^{105}\) His comments of course speak to the same narrow definition of tribal insurgency we encountered among officials writing of Santal prisoners in the aftermath of the <i>hool</i>.

To recap: Santals convicted of taking part in the 1855 revolt experienced appalling death rates in prison. We have suggested that there was a combination of reasons for this mortality, including their already poor state of health from being on the run and their admission to jail in large numbers, leading to overcrowding and shortages in clothing, bedding, and rations. And yet the colonial discourses provided at the time generally heaped the blame on the Santal body politic and its intrinsic savagery and/or embodied wildness. This reading co-exists oddly with the interpretation favoured by officials at the overseas penal settlement at Akyab, where exactly the same discourses were used to explain why Santal rebels were the healthiest convicts of all. At the same time, the Santals seemed uninterested in using their experience of incarceration or transportation for the purpose of social mobility and were apparently willing to take on tasks usually performed by low or outcaste

\(^{102}\) On the Kols, see Bhadra, ‘Four Rebels’, pp.256–63. See also K.S. Singh, ‘The “Tribals” and the 1857 Uprising’, in <i>Social Scientist</i>, Vol.296–9 (1998), pp.76–85.

\(^{103}\) S. Grey, Assistant Magistrate, Govindpur, to Young, 8 Aug. 1857, Ben JC, 10 Sept. 1857, Br. Lib., IOR P.145.72; and Dalton to Young, 25 Oct. 1857, Ben JC, 12 Nov. 1857, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.3.

\(^{104}\) Statement of Santal prisoners confined in the jails of the Lower Provinces except Alipur’, 9 Aug. 1861, Ben JP (Jails), Oct. 1861, Br. Lib., IOR P.146.44.

\(^{105}\) Dalton to H. Bell, Under-Secretary to government, Bengal, 19 Aug. 1861, ibid.
communities, and to learn a variety of penal trades. Discourses of wildness thus became intertwined with corresponding understandings about ‘the model prisoner’. This led to some remarkable social inversions, including the appointment of Santal convict *majhis* (chiefs) as convict overseers in Akyab. Thus the Santal as ‘rebel’, ‘barbarian’, ‘victim’, ‘sage’, and ‘model prisoner’ existed in discursive parallel—with some unintended outcomes.