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## **Gandhi, Rumors, and Resistance: Tracing Anticolonial National Struggle of Subaltern From Madarihat to Malda (1920-1935)**

**Arun Krishna Ghosh<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar

Department of History

University of North Bengal

Darjeelin, West Benal,India

Email:histarun442428@gmail.com

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**Abstract:***From 1920 to 1946, Gandhi was the leader of leaders in Indian national movement. But Gandhiji often became a supernatural figure throughout the freedom struggle in subaltern consciousness. Thousands of rumours about him encouraged the illiterate and uneducated rural tribals. It gave them the confidence to stand up to the bullets of the British police. There are many instances all over India where stories of miraculous unreal events spread in Gandhi's name. Several examples of such rumors are also found in the northern districts of Bengal i.e. Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Dinajpur, and Malda, where Gandhi was worshipped not as a leader but as a Divine. Gandhi became larger than life. Gandhian philosophy, his ideology dimmed in front of rumors. His non-violence faded away due to his so-called divine powers. The tribals sacrificed their lives in ambush. The blind faith in Gandhi, and the overwhelming faith in his divine powers, gave strength to the marginal folk in the anti-colonial National movement. Rumors made Gandhi incarnate. Rumors without being true gave rise to true events in the national struggle. This article attempts to reveal the incidents in North Bengal where the subaltern's faith in Gandhi paved the way for anti-British nationalism during 1920-1935. At the same time, an attempt has also been made to find out the truth of how these rumors mobilized the subalterns and inspired them in the national movement.*

**Keywords:** *Adina, Gandhi cap, Gandhiraj, Madarihat, Malda, propaganda, Santal, etc.*

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### **Introduction**

In the history of the nationalist freedom struggle of North Bengal, tribal peoples participated actively. Adivasis' historical traditions grasped their problems and they built resistance under their leadership. However, with the arrival of M.K. Gandhi at the national level political arena, they started an anti-British attitude in a new way, also centered on Gandhiji. On the

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one hand, the mainstream of such politics can be observed among the Santal tribals from Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Dinajpur to Malda. In many cases, the Indian National Congress or other political organizations tried to control these movements, but the tribal people asserted their own identity in terms of program and organization. As Gandhi entered Indian politics, a new consciousness about Gandhi was awakened in the tribal community which influenced their movement. By the second decade of the 20th century, the northern part of Bengal was between the northern Himalayan highlands and the Barind plains on the banks of the Ganges in the south, Gandhi became a fictional character to the tribals and became the center of a divine expression, not only North Bengal but more or less the whole of India. May the flesh and blood of Gandhi get the throne of God<sup>1</sup>

Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi went to South Africa as a legal advisor but returned to India as an undercover politician with a political weapon called 'Satyagraha'. With the invention of this political tactic, Gandhi emerged as a mass leader throughout the country in one decade<sup>2</sup>. After his success in Champaran, Kheda, and Ahmedabad satyagraha, he gradually made his position among the marginal people<sup>3</sup>. From 1920 to 1935, by fifteen years, the name 'Gandhi' became 'Gandhi Baba', and 'Gandhi Maharaj' to the marginalized people.

In this part of Bengal, Gandhi's image sparked nationalism in the remote areas, and the villagers, the tribes, and Hillmen, Rajbanshis were also inspired to participate in the anti-British movement under the umbrella of the Indian National Congress<sup>4</sup>. By 1920, Gandhi turned the elite congress into a mass political organization<sup>5</sup>. But it was interesting in the same areas of North Bengal both in the Regulation and non-regulation areas of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling Dinajpur, and Malda that the urban leaders led the Congress according to the organizational line but the subalterns led the movement according to the believability of Gandhi. The name 'Gandhi' became more powerful than the Gandhian philosophy or Gandhian polity. The man became almost the ruler of mainstream politics and became larger than life in his lifetime.

To consider above the concepts we can give some examples. Sahid Amim pointed out the fact in her article "Gandhi Jakhon mahatma" She made a number of examples where Gandhi became a prototype god. The villagers around the central province believed Gandhi Maharaj had a divine power. He can solve the unsolved problems<sup>6</sup>. Such type of stories of Gandhi's supernatural powers first appeared in newspapers in January 1921<sup>7</sup>. Sahid Amim in his article gave not less than forty-one (41) such examples where rumors distinguished Gandhi from other congress leaders. Stories of Gandhi's supernatural powers first appeared at the end of January 1921 in a local newspaper Gorakhpur called 'Swadesh' which published an article titled 'Mahatma Gandhi in Dreams: Escape of the Naked English Man'<sup>8</sup>. However, the story was first published in 'Aaj' from Venaras<sup>9</sup>. Many such stories about Gandhi were circulating in Gorakhpur and surrounding areas of U.P at that time. The stories are almost identical in terms of structure and continuity. Such stories have three main features- i) test of Gandhi's power ii) defiance of Gandhi iii) loss of boon as a result of miraculous actions and retrieval of things.

It was these rumors of Gandhi's supernatural powers that defined the difference between the elite Congress and the subaltern Congress. The same trend could be observed in

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the district of North Bengal during the non-cooperation movement (1920-1921). In the Dooars area, the worship of Gandhi was practiced<sup>10</sup>. Chandradeep and Kuldeep, two men coming from North India (U.P) introduced Gandhi puja in the villages like Volka, Raidak, and Paglahat of the Alipurduar subdivision of Jalpaiguri nowadays Alipurduar district<sup>11</sup>.

A typical incident took place in Madarihat of Jalpaiguri on February 12, 1922, after the Chowrichaura incident in Gorakhpur of Uttar Pradesh. In an incident of the Madarihat conflict, the Santals stood up to the British police in the belief that the bullets would not penetrate their chests if they had Gandhi caps on their head<sup>12</sup>. On 12<sup>th</sup> February 1922, a Marwari shopkeeper stall was attacked at Madarihat of Jalpaiguri district by the Santals<sup>13</sup>. This looting of a Marwari shop in Madarihat was not an isolated incident. Although the police report did not mention any Swadeshi connection to the incident, the aftermath seems to have been part of non-cooperation. And at that time there are multiple examples of such events. The same pattern of looting was seen in several cases in north Bihar also in the winter of 1921, where the looters came and first asked for the price of rice or clothes or vegetables or any such thing<sup>14</sup>. On hearing the price, they said that Gandhi had ordered the price to be this, mentioning a price one-fourth of the current price. The shopkeeper at that price if they refuse to sell things, are abused and beaten and their shops are looted. The available evidence suggests that there is a direct link between the looting and the noncooperation movement<sup>15</sup>. The case of Madarihat most probably was no exception. At least that's what the facts suggest.

After this incident, a sub-inspector of police arrested 4 Santals as suspects in this crime on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1922<sup>16</sup>. At that time a crowd wearing Gandhi caps demanded the release of the prisoners. They surrounded the force, the police opened fire. In this incident, three men were killed and four severely wounded while more or less eight or nine others were slightly wounded<sup>17</sup>.

Gandhi became an iconic hero among the tribes specifically in the Santals communities of some part of the Barind area of Malda and Dinajpur. Due to socio-economical oppression, the Santals along with the other marginal communities became extremely exhausted<sup>18</sup>. In this situation, the villagers of several mouzas were out to break agitation against the local administration<sup>19</sup>. This mob was led by Jitu and his companions Samu Santal, Agat Santal, and Arjun Santal<sup>20</sup>. They took the oath to Hinduism, started to perform Hindu rituals, and worshiped Kali<sup>21</sup>. They challenged this colonial government, and its administration, based on political consciousness and communal protestant beliefs against both the Zamindar Mahajan on the one hand and the British Raj as their protector on the other. The nationalist approach was amalgamated with their survival politics. They believed that the British power would wiped out and the Gandhi Raj would be established<sup>22</sup>. However, frequently used the term "Our Raj"<sup>23</sup>. Dr. Tanika Sarkar gave an argument in her writing that Jitu wanted to build an oppression-free society in the Barind region<sup>24</sup>. He wanted to fight against all kinds of inequalities and irrespective of communities. The tribals dreamt that they would be freed from Thana, the police, and Hakim. There will be no colonial administrative units like Zilla (District). Their land will be freed from a kind of feudal system there will be no zamindars so never be paid zamindar tax or land rent<sup>25</sup>.

In September 1928, under the leadership of Jitu, a large number of Santal sharecroppers and his followers were involved in several conflicts that hampered the rule and

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law situation in that region<sup>26</sup>. Police arrested Jitu and the other sixty followers and charged them. After release, from custody, Jitu now declared himself as a '*Senapati Gandhi*'<sup>27</sup>. Most of his followers or santals did not know who was Gandhi. What was his political ideology or principles? They had been forced to believe that Gandhi was a man with divine power. He became a symbol of struggle and a source of inspiration. From this point of prejudice, rumors spread rapidly.

Asim Kumar Sarkar, in his book "*Changing Profile of A Bengal District Malda(1932-1953)*", cited several examples from Lalbihari Majumder's '*Jibonsmriti*'. Rumors reinforced Gandhi's image. When Jitu and his team saw an airplane flying overhead, they would shout to their followers that these were all Gandhi's. They have come to rescue them from the British Raj<sup>28</sup>. A frenzy was created at that time. In June 1931 rumors spread that Gandhi had ordered the farmers to stop paying rent to the colonial administration<sup>29</sup>. As a result, the collection of land revenue was disrupted adversely in Barind areas. Even the other subaltern communities like Koch, and Rajbanshis also stopped payment<sup>30</sup>.

In October 1932, the Santals were involved in a conflict with the Zamindar of Kotwali Malda. The zamindar demanded two-thirds of the grain as tax<sup>31</sup>. But Jitu Sardar prevented the Santals from paying this tax and ordered Gandhiji to forbid paying the tax. Jitu is consciously using Gandhi's name again and again to spread rumors that he is dreaming of a better future for the Santals. So Gandhi's name has become bigger than Gandhi's.

The name Gandhi and based on this Samu Santal the companion of Jitu wearing the Gandhi cap and dressed like Gandhi<sup>32</sup> portrayed himself as '*Gandhi Maharaj*'. They were seeking Gandhiraj but had not accepted Gandhi's views on political ideology. Interestingly, they wanted to take over the Adina mosque and recapture the area as the Adinath temple<sup>33</sup>. For that, they adopted the militant line which completely ignored Gandhi. Now as a disciple or follower of Gandhi, it was very unusual and unnatural to them. Gandhi's religious tolerance, the political ideology of synthesis, and the overall nonviolence line of strategy were completely ignored by the Santals and other marginal communities in the Barind areas. Even Jitu Samu and other rebellions were shot dead in police firing during an intercept of police in Adina mosque in 1932<sup>34</sup>.

In these cases, from Malda to Madarihat the subaltern consciousness believed that Gandhi was a Saviour incarnate. However, despite the several instances of the subaltern character of the Indian national movement, the rumor surrounding Gandhi did what united the marginals of Madarihat of Jalpaiguri and Barind region of Malda Dinajpur districts. In these cases, Gandhi became not only Gandhi, but Gandhi became the embodiment of liberation. That Gandhi's devotion and respect resulted in a confrontation. The argument of integrity wants to raise all those conflicts in the name of Gandhi, however this Gandhi of theirs is not the real Gandhi. The resistance they used to resist was based on rumors and imaginations, they thought that the orders were coming from the Gandhi of their imaginations.

In the relationship between the dominant class and the subaltern the separateness of the two consciousnesses is true, and the dominance of the dominant class and the superiority of the subaltern is equally true, that is, the consciousness of the subaltern is subservient despite being separate. Most of the time the margins are seen to be passive timid recluse

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loyalists. Their distinct stream of individual consciousness emerges only in times of open political conflict or rebellion<sup>35</sup>.

In these cases, Gandhi-centric rumors revealed their adherence to the line of loyalty, but their consciousness reflected the traditional line of bow and arrow and struggle. Rumor thus became largely a medium for the expression of the latent state of the national consciousness of the lower classes. The incidents in North Bengal are no exception.

## Notes & References

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