

VOICES FROM THE MARGIN

HO SONGS WITH TRANSLATION AND NOTE



Songs and the Reconstruction of Adivasi History

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As Adivasi-Indigenous Studies consolidate itself with the intervention of scholars at the global level, what agitates the scholars is the methodology that can retrieve and expand their frontiers and emerge as an authentic representation of the lives of the Adivasis. Due to the absence of a story narrated from within, historians had to depend on the colonial and missionary records, which more often than not, presented the story of the persons in power, neglecting the story of the common people. This elite representation has mired the very purpose of history writing and lately encountered challenges and rejections from the people about whom the history is written. The engagement with sources that record the voices of the people at the margins, like the Adivasis, has become a recent trend of rewriting Adivasi history.

Before historians expanded the frontiers of Tribal or Adivasi Studies, scholars primarily focused on Adivasi militancy and authored research monographs on anti-British Adivasi struggles. Beginning with K.K. Datta, the doyen among Jharkhand historians, who published his monograph on the Santal Rebellion as early as 1940. A new phase of history writing began after Indian Independence, when tribal struggles were set within the broader pan-Indian canvas. Soon, regional studies on Adivasi anti-British militancy began in Jharkhand, largely by the students of K.K. Datta, like J.C. Jha and K.S. Singh, who produced groundbreaking works entitled the Kol Rebellion (Jha 1961) and the Dust Storm and Hanging Mist (Singh 1983).

Another student of K.K. Datta, a lawyer by profession but a researcher by passion, began his sole and pioneering study on the Tribal Struggle for Freedom: Singhbhum 1820-58,¹ which he completed in 1957 and presented before the Ho Cultural and Literary Society, Chaibasa on 16 August 1957. It was understandably the earliest researched monograph on

¹ Though finalised in 1958, the book was published fifty years later, vide, Sunil Kumar Sen, *Tribal Struggle for Freedom: Singhbhum 1820-58*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company, 2008.

Ho's struggle, which drew not only on the archival sources and other published works but also the 'beautiful patriotic songs' that he collected with the help of his friend Chandra Mohan Deogam. The hybrid sources added strength to his understanding and representation of the Ho struggle, which the community organised for the preservation of their political and cultural identity. Obviously, S.C. Roy's use of songs on Birsa Munda's *Ulgulan* (1895-1899) inspired him (Sen 2008: 52) in deploying folklore as a robust historical source.

I draw on the concluding section of the book (Sen 2008: 108-12) to inform readers about the significance of these 'patriotic songs' in the reconstruction not only of the history of their anti-British struggles, but also to signify how folklore forms the linguistic archaeology that records their sense of the past and their worldview.

The songs focus on two broad themes: Struggle to defend the Motherland and their notion of Territoriality.² While Sen's main work focuses on the events and circumstances leading to the Ho community's loss of freedom, first under the local chiefs and finally against the British and their heroic struggles launched on the battlegrounds of Mogra and the more famous Serengsia, first under their leaders, like Mata Ho and Poto Ho (Nath and Kumari 2019: 1-25), and later under the generic leadership of Arjun Singh, the Raja of Porahat, and the regional leader, Gono Pingua (Sen 2010: 15-27).

Archival sources, which provide the staple for reconstructing the history of the Ho uprisings (1820-58), are more or less silent about how the uprisings were socially organised. Guha's famous account dwells at length on the methodology of the struggle (Guha 1983). But the organisation had a vocal and verbal aspect that included, besides the creation of sounds through the beating of drums, singing songs (Songs I-II), which, as depicted, were not only recreative but, in the present case, also inspirational. Song II is particularly significant. It underscores the role of women in organising the popular resistance. This depicts that while the 'brothers took command of the battle-front, it was the sisters who took over the charge of the domestic front and provided the succour that they needed to fight the mighty British. The lingering problem of the Invisibility of women in historical accounts may somewhat be rectified if songs of these types are retrieved and historically interpreted.

Song III depicts the Ho community's vision of territory or landscape: First, landscape as a 'sacred homeland', and second, landscape that makes their village habitat. Their vision of territory answers the vital question: what legitimates their right to the homeland they inhabit. The answer is: This is Singbonga's gift to them, and the right is ensured by their communal labour in converting a geographical space into a cultural place³. These anchor their sense of Khuntkatti right over land, forest and the rivers that compose their homeland.⁴

The song also tells the story of the itinerant Munda groups adopting a settled village life and converting themselves into an agrarian community from their earliest dependence on shifting cultivation, foraging, and hunting.

² On the concept of Territoriality, one can look up (Guha 1983), and for different layers of its near equivalent landscape, see, (Sen 2018: chapter 4).

³ For more on this, see, (Sen 2018; Sen.2021).

⁴ For an extended discussion on the significance of Khuntkatti right, see, (Sen 2026).

We begin this new section with the songs that form the Appendix of S.K. Sen's book (Sen 2008: 113-16), which was published in 2008, to suggest that Adivasi historical reconstruction should amalgamate archival sources and folklore for authenticity and broaden the horizons of historical understanding.

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Ho Songs with Translation

[As given in the Appendix in Sunil Kumar Sen's book, *Tribal Struggle for Freedom 1820-1853*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2008, 113-116]



Figure 1: Cover page of Sunil Kumar Sen's book

Song I

Delayo Singh Disum Nodo Ko,
Delayo Birid Pe
Delayo Nabu Disum Munda Ko,
Delayo Payaren Pe

Sar Kapi Sabe Keh Te ga,
Delayo Birid Pe
Jonom Disum Lagid Te ga,
Delayo Payaren Pe

Disum Tabu Loh Tana ga,
Rayji Tabu Bale Tana
Nabu Disum Tala Te ga, Telenga⁵—Ko Bolo Tana
Telenga—Ko Har Gidi Ko Pe,
Jonom Disum Lagid—Te
Sar Kapi Sabe Keh Te ga,
Telenga—Ko Hare Ko—Pe

[English Translation]

Awake, awake and beware O you inhabitants of Singhbhum
Those who are still asleep—awake
Awake and advance people of the Ho land and
You, brethren Mundas, awake.
Take up arms Take bows and arrows and battle-axes
Awake and be armed
For the dear Motherland be armed and bravely march
The whole land is ablaze, the whole kingdom is on fire
The whole land is ablaze, the whole kingdom is on fire
The Telengas [raiders] have defiled the soil
They have entered the Ho land.
Turn, turn the alien away, far, far away
O brethren take up bows and arrows and battle-axes,
To drive the alien Telengas away,— Out of our sacred land

Song II

Misi Ko Durang (Song of the sisters)

Note Hasa Ning-Ge Nele, Pieti Kami Ning-Ge Sabe
Juno Baring Senow-me Larai Tandi Te
Disum do go Tane – Tana, Nutu Do Ko Nesere Tana

⁵ The meaning of the Ho word 'Telanga' is 'soldier' [or raider]. Source: John Deeney, *Ho-English Dictionary* (revised and enlarged edition), Xavier Publications, Ranchi, 2005, 376.

Voices from the Margin

Jonom Disum Lagid – Ete Jugo Senow-me

Kora Nonem Jonoma Kana
Jugo Bareng Senow-me Telenga Larai Te
Sar Kapi Sabe Keh Te
Jugo Bareng Senow-me Telenga Larai Te

Note Hasain Nele Geya, Paiti Kamin Sabe Geya
Jugo Bareng Senow-me Disum Larai Te

[English Translation]

The Sisters' Song

Leave the work of the fields and the gardens;
Entrust us with these duties domestic —
And you, brethren, haste and march to the
battlefield
Aliens are intruding upon our Motherland;
Foreigners are occupying our hamlets;
To save the land rush on, march onwards,
Born as males you must fight for Freedom.
March on, brothers on to fight the Telengas
So take bows and arrows and take the
Battle-axe.
March on undaunted and meet the
Telengas in battle.
Be sure, be confident, that we shall mind
All that has to be done in the fields and
at home;
Be sure and haste, Ye brothers march on—
To quell the foe—for the dear Motherland,
The cherished Ho-land.

Song III

Niral Disum (The Holy Land)

Sing-Suba-re Sing-Bonga Seba Ka-te Disum Keda
Sing Disum Nutum Te Ko Nutum-E-Tada
Bir-buru Tandi Ka-te Kula Buru Har Ka-te
Bir-Ko Tala-mala Re Ko Disum-E-Keda

Diri Daru Aming Ka-te, Gora Loyong Tandi Ko Re
Bera Nari Ko Bari Leda Disum Tala Re
Bir-buru te Biura-kan, Gara Nari-te Singara Kan
Nimin Bugin Disum-e-Tain Disum Baiya Kan

Hoyo Gama Bugin Geya, Joma Nuiya Lali Geya
Nimin Bugin Disum-e-ren Jonoma Kana
Anga-Bira Chari-Buru, Dalma-chutina Sings-so-te
Bakai Biura Kan

Sona Gara Samom-rakha, Bonga-ko-Gara Baitoroni
Karo-Kuili Marang-Gara-te Sajao Singara Kan.

[English Translation]

The Holy Land

Under the great tree we prayed and prayed to *Sing/Bonga*
And shaped the Motherland with His blessings,
and after the 'Sing' tree the land was named Sing-bhoom.
Many a rock had to be removed and many forests felled,
Tigers, bears and wild animals had to be driven away—
To make the land in the hills and dales habitable.

So was the Holy-Ho-Land carved out of the
dales and dense forests.

And through incessant and unceasing labour
The uplands, slopes and glades were cleared of
stones and jungles

and took the shape of low or sloping fields;
So fresh and full of verdure and autumn's rich harvest
Encircled with ranges of hills and in the
midst of sylvan solitude
where rivers and streams flow with crystal clearness,
This beautiful, this Holy land has been
converted into our abode.

Bracing is the breeze here and sufficient is the rain,
Peace and plenty have dwelt here in;
And fortunate are we to be born in this beautiful land
Anga-Bira, Chari-Buru and the lofty Dalma
and Singhasan hills;

The gleaming golden river Subarnarekha
and Baitarani, the river of *Bongas*
Karo, Koel and many a meandering stream
Flow through and adorn this beautiful land of ours,
This wonderful, this holy-Ho-land, the land of our birth

