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Hul Diwas: Remembering the Santhal Rebellion of 1855

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Hul Diwas: Remembering the Santhal Rebellion of 1855

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WHY IN NEWS

*June 30, 2026 is observed across Jharkhand and the tribal belt as , commemorating the anniversary of the **Santhal Hul (rebellion)** that erupted on June 30, 1855 against colonial exploitation.*

The word “**Hul**” means liberation, revolution, or uprising in the Santhali language. The Santhal Hul was one of the most significant tribal and peasant revolts of nineteenth-century India, predating the Revolt of 1857 by two years. It was a mass mobilisation of the Santhal community against the exploitative nexus (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/nexus/>) of **zamindars (landlords)**, **mahajans (moneylenders)** and the **East India Company’s** revenue administration.

BACKGROUND: THE SANTHALS AND DAMIN-I-KOH

The Santhals are one of India’s largest Adivasi (tribal) communities. In the early nineteenth century, the British had encouraged them to settle and clear forest land in a demarcated tract known as **Damin-i-Koh**, meaning “skirts of the hills”, around the Rajmahal Hills in the then Bengal Presidency (present-day Jharkhand). The Santhals turned the region into productive agricultural land.

Over time, however, they were subjected to systemic exploitation:

GRIEVANCE	NATURE OF EXPLOITATION
Mahajans (moneylenders)	Usurious interest rates, debt-bondage (the <i>kamioti</i> and <i>harwahi</i> systems)
Zamindars and revenue officials	Encroachment (https://ujyari.com/vocab/encroachment/) on cleared land, over-taxation, illegal exactions
East India Company	Rigid land-revenue policy, denial of legal recourse
Railway and construction contractors	Forced and underpaid labour

THE OUTBREAK OF THE HUL (JUNE 30, 1855)

On **June 30, 1855**, an assembly of about ten thousand Santhals gathered at **Bhognadih** village. The revolt was led by the four **Murmu brothers, Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav**, supported by their sisters **Phoolo and Jhano**, who also took part in the armed resistance. The leaders declared an end to the rule of outsiders (*dikus*) and proclaimed self-rule for the Santhals.

The rebellion spread rapidly across the Rajmahal region toward Pakur, Maheshpur and Bhagalpur, with the Santhal force swelling to nearly twenty thousand by mid-July 1855.

Suppression

The Company deployed regular troops with superior firepower against the bow-and-arrow-armed Santhals. Martial law was imposed. After several months of fighting, the revolt was crushed by early 1856. Thousands of Santhals lost their lives. Sidhu was captured and killed, and Kanhu was captured in late November 1855 and executed in February 1856.

AFTERMATH AND ADMINISTRATIVE LEGACY

The scale of the revolt forced a colonial rethink. The British carved out a separate administrative district, the **Santhal Parganas (1855-56)**, with special provisions to insulate tribal land and customs from outside exploitation, an early recognition of the need for protective tribal governance.

The Santhal Hul belongs to a broader arc of tribal and peasant uprisings against colonial and feudal exploitation:

UPRISING	REGION / LEADER	APPROX. PERIOD
Kol Rebellion	Chhotanagpur	1831-32
Santhal Hul	Damin-i-Koh, Sidhu-Kanhu	1855-56
Bhil revolts	Western India	early to mid 1800s
Munda Ulgulan	Birsa Munda, Chhotanagpur	1899-1900

ANALYSIS AND WAY FORWARD

The Santhal Hul is remembered not merely as an anti-British revolt but as a struggle against every layer of exploitation, colonial, feudal and commercial. Its modern constitutional legacy lies in the framework protecting tribal areas and communities.

The **Fifth Schedule** (<https://ujyari.com/terms/fifth-schedule/>) governs administration of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes in states other than the North East, while the **Sixth Schedule** (<https://ujyari.com/terms/sixth-schedule/>) provides for autonomous councils in tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The **Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA)** extended Panchayati Raj to Fifth Schedule areas with gram-sabha empowerment. The **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006** (<https://ujyari.com/legislation/forest-rights-act-2006/>) (**FRA**) recognised individual and community forest rights.

The way forward is faithful implementation of these protections, securing land and forest rights, curbing distress migration and debt-bondage, and honouring tribal icons in the national memory.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 1: Modern Indian history: tribal and peasant uprisings against British rule; the freedom struggle before 1857.

Prelims pointers:

- Hul Diwas: June 30; Santhal Hul began June 30, 1855.
- Leaders: Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, Bhairav Murmu; sisters Phoolo and Jhano.
- Region: Damin-i-Koh, Rajmahal Hills, present-day Jharkhand.
- Outcome: creation of Santhal Parganas district (1855-56).
- Fifth and Sixth Schedules, PESA 1996, FRA 2006 govern tribal areas today.

Mains question: “The Santhal Hul of 1855 was a rebellion against multiple layers of exploitation, not merely colonial rule. Discuss its causes and significance in the history of tribal resistance in India. (15 marks, 250 words)”

FACTS CORNER

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Hul Diwas: Observed on June 30 every year; marks the start of the Santhal Hul on June 30, 1855.

Meaning of Hul: Liberation or revolution in the Santhali language.

Leaders: Brothers Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav Murmu; sisters Phoolo and Jhano.

Region: Damin-i-Koh (“skirts of the hills”) around the Rajmahal Hills, then Bengal Presidency, now Jharkhand.

Targets: Zamindars, mahajans (moneylenders) and the East India Company’s revenue policy.

Timeline note: Predated the Revolt of 1857 by two years.

Administrative legacy: British created the separate Santhal Parganas district (1855-56).

Modern tribal safeguards: Fifth Schedule, Sixth Schedule, PESA 1996, and the Forest Rights Act 2006.

Sources: *Drishti IAS* (<https://www.drishtiiias.com/>), *InsightsonIndia* (<https://www.insightsonindia.com/>), *Britannica* (<https://www.britannica.com/>)

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