Revolt of 1857 and the Role of Surendra Sai

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • October 6, 2026 • 54 min read

When the great revolt of 1857 swept across northern and central India, the coastal districts of Odisha remained largely quiet. In the western uplands, however, in the former Chauhan kingdom of Sambalpur annexed by the British only eight years earlier, the revolt gave new life to a resistance that had begun three decades before. Its leader was Surendra Sai (1809–1884), a member of the Chauhan ruling family who claimed the throne of Sambalpur and who had fought the Company and its nominees since 1827. Imprisoned at Hazaribagh since 1840, he was freed when the sepoys there mutinied at the end of July 1857, returned to Sambalpur, and, after the failure of negotiations with the British authorities, led a guerrilla war in the forests and hills of the region that continued long after the revolt had been crushed elsewhere in India. Supported by zamindars, gauntias (village headmen) and tribal communities, among them the Binjhal zamindar Madho Singh of Ghess and his sons, the rebels fought a series of engagements against Company and Madras troops, killing several British officers and holding much of the countryside. The resistance was brought to an end not by military victory but by the conciliatory policy of Major H. B. Impey, who offered amnesty from 1861; Surendra Sai surrendered on 16 May 1862. Re-arrested on 23 January 1864 on suspicion of conspiracy and, though acquitted, detained without trial under Regulation III of 1818, he spent the last twenty years of his life in the fortress of Asirgarh, where he died, blind, on 28 February 1884.

This article reconstructs the revolt of 1857 in Odisha with particular reference to Surendra Sai and the Sambalpur rising. It examines the history of the Chauhan kingdom of Sambalpur and the succession dispute that set Surendra Sai against the British; his first rising of

1827–1840 and his imprisonment; the causes of the Sambalpur rising of 1857, rooted in the annexation of 1849, the disregard for local claims and the grievances of the zamindars, gauntias and tribal communities; its course from the release at Hazaribagh to the surrender of 1862; the leaders who fought alongside him and the price many of them paid; and the conciliation, re-arrest and long imprisonment that followed. It also considers the more limited impact of 1857 in the rest of Odisha, and the ways in which Odia historians and public memory have interpreted Surendra Sai as one of the most persistent opponents of British rule in India.

The argument of the article is that the Sambalpur rising was both a part of the all-India revolt of 1857 and a distinct regional movement with its own causes and chronology. It drew strength from the general upheaval of 1857, which released its leader from prison and stretched British military resources, but its roots lay in the specific history of Sambalpur: a dynastic grievance, a dispossessed landed class and tribal communities resentful of outside control. Its remarkable duration, outlasting the revolt elsewhere by four years and earning Sambalpur, in the words of a British official, the distinction of being “perhaps the very last district in India in which embers of disturbances of 1857 were finally stamped out”, reflects the depth of its local support and the skill of its leadership in guerrilla warfare.

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1. Introduction and background

1.1 The Chauhan kingdom of Sambalpur

The upper Mahanadi valley in western Odisha, the region of which Sambalpur is the centre, has a history distinct in many ways from that of the coastal plain. Its landscape of river valleys, plateaus, hills and dense forests, its diverse population and its distance from the coast gave it a political and cultural life of its own. For much of the medieval and early modern period it was not ruled from Cuttack or Puri but formed a cluster of hill kingdoms, often described as the *Athara Garh* or eighteen forts, among which the Chauhan dynasty rose to pre-eminence. According to tradition, the Chauhans, who claimed Rajput descent, established themselves first at Patnagarh in the fourteenth century and later founded a separate kingdom at Sambalpur, which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became the leading power of the region and exercised suzerainty over a group of surrounding chiefdoms. The Sambalpur rajas presided over a society of great diversity: Odia-speaking cultivators, weavers and artisans in the river valleys; a large tribal population in the hills and forests, among them Gonds, Binjhals, Kandhas and others; and a class of landholders, zamindars and village headmen known as *gauntias*, who held their lands and villages from the raja in return for revenue and service. Many of the zamindars were themselves tribal chiefs, and the bonds of loyalty, custom and mutual obligation between the raja, the zamindars, the gauntias and the tribal communities formed the foundation of the kingdom’s political order. It was this order that British intervention, and later British annexation, would disrupt.

1.2 From the Marathas to the British

In the late eighteenth century Sambalpur, like much of central India, fell under the influence of the Bhonsle Marathas of Nagpur, who extended their power eastward and occupied the kingdom in 1800, reducing its rulers to tributaries. During the Second Anglo-Maratha War the British occupied Sambalpur in 1804, but under the peace settlement they returned it to the Bhonsles in 1806. After the Third Anglo-Maratha War of 1817–18, which ended Maratha

power, the British restored the Chauhan family to the throne of Sambalpur under their own protection. From this point Sambalpur became, in effect, a dependent state supervised by British political officers. The Chauhan rajas retained their title, their palace and their authority over the internal affairs of the kingdom, but the succession to the throne, relations with neighbouring states and other important matters now required British approval. The old order of the kingdom, rooted in custom and in the relationship between the raja and his nobles and chiefs, became subject to the interests and the judgments of a foreign power with its own ideas of legitimacy and good government. The tension between these two sources of authority, custom and British paramountcy, would come to a head in the succession crisis of 1827.

1.3 The succession crisis of 1827 and the annexation of 1849

The crisis that shaped the life of Surendra Sai began in 1827, when Maharaja Sai, the ruler of Sambalpur, died without a male heir. The British, as the paramount power, installed his widow, **Rani Mohan Kumari**, as ruler. The decision was contested from the start. According to the traditions of the Chauhan family and the expectations of many of its nobles and subjects, the succession should have passed to a male member of the dynasty, and a woman ruling in her own right was contrary to the custom of the kingdom. Surendra Sai, a descendant of Raja Madhukar Sai through a collateral line, regarded himself as having the strongest claim among the male members of the family. The Rani’s rule proved unpopular and weak, and the region was disturbed by resistance led by Surendra Sai and other discontented nobles and zamindars. In 1833 Captain Wilkinson, the British political officer responsible for the region, deposed her and installed **Narayan Singh**, another member of the Chauhan family, in her place, passing over Surendra Sai’s claim for a second time. Narayan Singh’s reign was troubled by continuing unrest, for which Surendra Sai’s resistance was largely responsible, and he depended heavily on British support. When he died in 1849 without a male heir, the Governor-General, Lord Dalhousie, annexed Sambalpur to British India under the doctrine of lapse, rather than recognise any other member of the dynasty. The Chauhan kingdom, which had survived the Mughals and the Marathas, came to an end.

The annexation of 1849 completed the process by which the British had set aside the claims of Surendra Sai and his family, and it ended any prospect that the grievance of 1827 might be resolved within the framework of the old kingdom. It also transformed the relationship between the government and the zamindars, gauntias and tribal communities of the region. They now dealt not with a raja whose authority they recognised and with whom they shared ties of custom and loyalty, but with British officers and their subordinate officials, who applied new rules of revenue and administration with little regard for local practice. During the following years Sambalpur was attached, for administrative purposes, first to the South-West Frontier Agency of Bengal, and later, during and after the revolt, to the Orissa Division under the Commissioner at Cuttack, before being transferred to the newly created Central Provinces on 30 April 1862 (see British Administration in Odisha). These repeated changes of jurisdiction, themselves a sign of the region’s peripheral place in British priorities, did little to give its people confidence in the new order.

1.4 The revolt of 1857

The great revolt of 1857 began with the mutiny of the sepoys at Meerut on 10 May 1857 and spread rapidly across northern and central India. Its immediate occasion was the introduction of new cartridges believed to be greased with the fat of cows and pigs, which offended both Hindu and Muslim sepoys, but its causes ran much deeper, in the grievances of the sepoys, the annexations and the doctrine of lapse, the dispossession of landed elites and the disruption of rural society. Sepoys of the Bengal Army mutinied in station after station; Delhi was seized and the aged Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar proclaimed as their leader; and rulers, landholders and peasants in Awadh, Rohilkhand, Bundelkhand, Bihar and central India joined the rising, among them figures such as the Rani of Jhansi, Nana Sahib, Tantia Tope and Kunwar Singh. The revolt was suppressed in a series of hard-fought campaigns between 1857 and 1858, and by the end of 1858 the British had regained control of most of the affected areas, although resistance continued in some regions into 1859. In its aftermath, the East India Company was abolished and India was placed under the direct rule of the Crown.

Odisha was on the margins of the great revolt. Its coastal districts were garrisoned largely by troops of the Madras Army, whose sepoys, unlike those of the Bengal Army, remained loyal, and they were governed through an administration that had been established for half a century. They saw little disturbance. The revolt's main impact in Odisha was felt in the western uplands, and above all in Sambalpur, where recent annexation had created a class of dispossessed rulers and landholders and where a leader with a long record of resistance was waiting, in prison, for an opportunity. That opportunity came when the sepoys at Hazaribagh, in neighbouring Chota Nagpur, mutinied and broke open the jail in which Surendra Sai had been held since 1840. His release rekindled a resistance with deep local roots, and turned Sambalpur into one of the most persistent centres of the revolt in eastern India.

2. Sources and historiography

The sources for Surendra Sai and the Sambalpur rising present the same fundamental problem as those for the earlier risings in Odisha. The great majority of contemporary documents were written by the British officers and officials who fought against the rebels, administered the district and tried and punished its leaders, and they describe the rising in the language of insurgency and crime. The rebels' own voices survive mainly in the statements they made to their captors, often under interrogation; in the petitions they addressed to the government, written to secure clemency or redress; and in oral traditions recorded long after the events. The Sambalpur rising, however, has an additional complexity. Because the district was transferred between several administrations during the period, from the South-West Frontier Agency of Bengal to the Orissa Division and then to the Central Provinces, the relevant records are scattered among the archives of Bengal, Odisha, the Central Provinces (now preserved in Nagpur and Bhopal) and the Government of India in New Delhi, as well as in the India Office Records in London. Reconstructing the history of the rising therefore requires work in several archives and across several administrative traditions. Even so, many questions of detail, including some of the dates of key events and the identities of some of the participants, remain disputed, and the published accounts,

many of which depend on one another rather than on the original records, often repeat errors or contradict each other.

2.1 Official records

The official correspondence of the officers who dealt with the rising forms the backbone of the documentary record. It includes the reports of **Captain R. T. Leigh**, the Senior Assistant Commissioner at Sambalpur in 1857, who negotiated with Surendra Sai after his return from Hazaribagh, failed to reach an accommodation with him, and then had to confront the rising with very limited forces. It includes the reports of the military officers who commanded the troops sent against the rebels, among them officers of the 40th Madras Native Infantry such as Captain Knocker, Major Bates and Captain Bird, and Lieutenant Hadow of the Madras Artillery, which record the engagements fought, the casualties suffered and the difficulties of operating in the hills and forests of the region. It includes the correspondence of the Commissioner of the Orissa Division, **G. F. Cockburn**, under whose authority Sambalpur was placed for part of the period, and who had to balance the demands of the campaign against the needs of the rest of his division. And it includes, above all, the reports of **Major H. B. Impey**, Deputy Commissioner from April 1861, whose conciliatory policy brought about the surrender of the rebels and whose assessments of Surendra Sai are among the most revealing documents of the period. These records provide the chronology of the rising and much detail on its military operations. But they describe the rebels as insurgents and dacoits, present the British response in the most favourable light, and say little about the motives and organisation of the rising as its participants understood them.

2.2 Judicial records and the detention of 1864

The records of Surendra Sai’s re-arrest in January 1864, of his trial, of his acquittal by the Judicial Commissioner in August 1864 and of his continued detention under **Regulation III of 1818**, a law that permitted the government to detain persons indefinitely without trial for reasons of state, are among the most revealing documents of the period. They show the evidence on which the government based its suspicion of a new conspiracy, the reasoning of

the judge who found that evidence insufficient, and the decision of the executive to override the judicial verdict and keep him in prison. They show, in other words, how the colonial state dealt with a man it regarded as dangerous but could not convict in its own courts. They raise questions about the legality and justice of his long imprisonment that later historians have discussed at length, and they are central to the image of Surendra Sai as a victim of colonial injustice that dominates his memory in Odisha.

2.3 Gazetteers and later official accounts

The *Bengal District Gazetteer* for Sambalpur compiled by L. S. S. O’Malley (1909), prepared after the district’s transfer to the Orissa Division in 1905, and the earlier gazetteers and settlement reports of the Central Provinces, summarise the history of the rising from the official records. They are useful for their synthesis, for the chronology they provide and for the information they give on the social structure of the district, its land tenures, its castes and tribes and the organisation of its villages, which helps to explain the support the rising enjoyed. But they were compiled by officials from official sources, they reflect the perspective of the administration, and they tend to present the rising as a regrettable episode in the history of a district subsequently brought to order and prosperity under British rule.

2.4 Oral traditions and literature

The memory of Surendra Sai and his companions has been preserved in the oral traditions, songs and stories of western Odisha, many of them in the Sambalpuri language. These traditions celebrate the courage and skill of the rebels, recount the deeds of figures such as Madho Singh and his sons, describe the hiding places and battlefields of the rising in the hills and forests of the region, and preserve a powerful sense of the injustice of Surendra Sai’s long imprisonment and death in exile. They have been collected and published by local historians and writers, and they continue to be performed and retold. They are indispensable for understanding the place of the rising in the identity of western Odisha and the emotions it still arouses. But they must be used carefully as evidence for specific events, since they were transmitted orally over many generations and reflect the concerns of those

who preserved them as well as the memory of what happened.

2.5 Key documents examined

Document	Date	What it tells us	Limits
Reports of Captain Leigh	1857–1858	Surendra Sai's return, negotiations, the outbreak of the rising	Written by an officer who failed to prevent the rising
Military reports of the Madras officers	1857–1861	Engagements at Kudopali, Jujumura and elsewhere; British casualties	Military perspective; little on rebel aims
Reports of Major Impey	1861–1863	Amnesty proclamation; negotiations; surrenders	Written to justify a policy of conciliation
Records of the 1864 arrest and trial	1864	Charges, acquittal, detention under Regulation III of 1818	Official framing of a political detention
O'Malley, *Sambalpur District Gazetteer*	1909	Synthesis of the official history; social structure	Compiled from official sources
Sambalpuri oral traditions and songs	19th–20th century	Popular memory of Surendra Sai and his companions	Recorded later; details unverifiable

2.6 How the historiography developed

In the **official accounts** of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Sambalpur rising appears as a prolonged disturbance caused by a disappointed claimant to the throne and sustained by the turbulence of the zamindars and the hill tribes of the region. Its suppression is presented as a necessary restoration of order, and the long detention of its leader as a regrettable but justified precaution. Even these accounts, however, could not ignore the persistence of the rising, the extent of its local support or the difficulty the British had in ending it, and some of them, notably the reports of Impey, acknowledged the courage and capacity of its leader and the genuineness of at least some of the grievances that sustained it.

Odia historians of the twentieth century recovered the history of the rising and placed it within the story of resistance to British rule. Sivaprasad Das's Odia *Sambalpur Itihasa* and other regional histories reconstructed the history of the Chauhan kingdom and of the rising from official records and local traditions, giving western Odisha a history of its own distinct from that of the coastal plain. General historians of Odisha and of the freedom movement, including Harekrushna Mahtab, presented Surendra Sai as one of the earliest and most persistent fighters for Indian freedom, and his rising as Odisha's principal contribution to the revolt of 1857. Studies of the freedom movement in Sambalpur from 1827 to 1947 have gone further, tracing a continuous tradition of resistance in the region from Surendra Sai's first rising to independence, and presenting the region as one of the earliest centres of organised resistance to British authority in India.

In recent decades, and especially since independence, Surendra Sai has become one of the most honoured figures in the public history of Odisha. Biographies such as Deepak Kumar Panda's *Veer Surendra Sai: Saga of an Indomitable Freedom Fighter*, numerous articles in the publications of the Odisha government, commemorations on his birth anniversary, and the naming of major institutions after him, including Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology and the Veer Surendra Sai Institute of Medical Sciences and Research at Burla, reflect his status as a hero of the freedom struggle. In western Odisha in particular, he has become a symbol of regional identity and pride, and his memory has been invoked in modern movements concerned with the development and recognition of the region. This growing public importance has also encouraged a more celebratory style of writing about him, in which the complexities of his aims and the uncertainties of the evidence are sometimes passed over.

3. Surendra Sai: life, claim and early resistance

3.1 Birth and family

Surendra Sai was born on 23 January 1809, according to the accepted tradition at Khinda, a village some forty kilometres north of Sambalpur, although another tradition places his birth at Bargaon. His father was Dharma Singh, and the family belonged to the ruling Chauhan dynasty of Sambalpur, tracing its descent from Raja Madhukar Sai through a collateral line. He thus grew up as a member of the royal lineage, conscious of his descent and of the claims it might one day give him, but outside the immediate line of succession. He grew up, too, in a large family whose members would share his struggle and, in many cases, his fate: his brothers included Udanta Sai, Dhruba Sai, Chhabila Sai and Ujjal Sai, and his uncle Balaram Singh was his close associate in the early years of resistance. Several of them would die in battle, on the gallows or in prison. The family’s status as members of the royal lineage, and its close ties of kinship, marriage and friendship with the zamindars and tribal chiefs of the region, gave Surendra Sai a natural following among those who were dissatisfied with the British management of Sambalpur’s affairs, and made him, from an early age, a figure around whom opposition could gather.

3.2 The claim to the throne

When Maharaja Sai died without a male heir in 1827, Surendra Sai, then about eighteen years old, believed that the throne of Sambalpur should pass to him as the senior eligible male of the Chauhan family. The British, however, installed the late raja’s widow, Rani Mohan Kumari, and when she proved unable to govern effectively, replaced her in 1833 with Narayan Singh, another member of the family whose claim Surendra Sai and his supporters regarded as inferior to his own. On both occasions Surendra Sai’s claim was set aside without, as he saw it, any proper regard to the customs of the dynasty. To him and his supporters, these decisions represented not only a personal injustice but a violation of the traditions of the Chauhan kingdom and of the right of the people of Sambalpur to be ruled according to their own customs by their rightful king. They also demonstrated that the real power in Sambalpur now lay not with its rulers or its nobles but with the British political

officers who made and unmade its kings. Surendra Sai’s opposition to the British-backed rulers began almost immediately: he began protesting against the arrangements in 1827, at the age of eighteen, and over the following years his protest grew into armed rebellion against the rulers the British had installed and, increasingly, against the British themselves.

3.3 The first rising, 1827–1840

The first phase of Surendra Sai’s resistance lasted from 1827 to 1840. It was directed against the rulers installed by the British and against those zamindars who supported them, and it drew on the support of a section of the Chauhan nobility, of zamindars who resented the new order, and of tribal chiefs, among them the Gond zamindar of Lakhanpur, Balabhadra Deo. The resistance took the form of raids on the estates and forts of the raja’s supporters, attacks on his officials and the mobilisation of followers in the hills and forests, and it kept the kingdom in a state of chronic disturbance. The conflict was marked by violence on both sides. In one notable episode, Surendra Sai’s forces attacked the fort of **Rampur**, whose zamindar, Durjaya Singh, was a supporter of the British-backed raja; the fort was demolished and Durjaya Singh and his father were killed. In September 1837, at Debrigarh in the hills, the sepoys of Raja Narayan Singh attacked a gathering of the rebels, and Balabhadra Deo was killed, though Surendra Sai himself escaped. These years established Surendra Sai’s reputation as a leader and his mastery of the guerrilla tactics, based on the forests and hills of the region and on the support of its people, that he would use again in 1857.

The resistance was eventually broken by the combined efforts of the raja and the British. In **1840** Surendra Sai was captured together with his brother Udanta Sai and his uncle Balaram Singh. They were tried, convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for life, and sent to the jail at **Hazaribagh**, in Chota Nagpur, far from Sambalpur and from the people who might have attempted to rescue them. Balaram Singh died in prison. For seventeen years Surendra Sai remained a prisoner, cut off from his family and followers, while Narayan Singh ruled Sambalpur under British supervision and, after his death in 1849, the kingdom was annexed. To all appearances, his career was over. It was the great upheaval of 1857 that would give

him a second chance.

3.4 Character and leadership

The sources, British as well as Odia, agree in portraying Surendra Sai as a leader of exceptional determination and capacity. He commanded the loyalty of a wide range of followers, from members of the Chauhan nobility to zamindars, gauntias and tribal communities in the hills, and he held this diverse coalition together through years of hardship and defeat. He combined the authority of royal descent with personal courage, an intimate knowledge of the terrain and a mastery of guerrilla warfare that repeatedly frustrated the regular troops sent against him. Major Impey, the British officer who eventually negotiated his surrender, is reported to have acknowledged that Surendra Sai “was never defeated and would never be defeated” by force. His endurance was equally remarkable. Of the seventy-five years of his life, some thirty-seven were spent in prison, seventeen at Hazaribagh between 1840 and 1857 and twenty at Asirgarh between 1864 and 1884, a record of imprisonment that has often been described as unequalled among the leaders of resistance to British rule in India. He bore this long captivity, including the loss of his sight, without, so far as the sources reveal, abandoning his claims or his convictions.

4. Causes of the Sambalpur rising

The Sambalpur rising of 1857 was made possible by the all-India revolt, which released its leader from prison, stretched British military resources across the subcontinent and created an atmosphere in which the overthrow of British rule seemed possible. But its causes lay in the history of Sambalpur itself, and they had been accumulating for three decades before 1857. The rising drew on a dynastic grievance that went back to 1827; the resentment of a landed class whose position had been undermined by annexation and British administration; the hostility of tribal communities to outside control over their lands, forests and customs; and the general discontent produced by the annexation of 1849 and the administration that followed. These causes reinforced one another: the dynastic grievance gave the rising its leader and its central aim, the grievances of the zamindars and gauntias gave it its local

leaders and organisation, and the support of the tribal communities gave it its fighters and its ability to sustain a long guerrilla war. Together they explain why the rising attracted such wide support and lasted so long.

4.1 The dynastic grievance

The deepest cause of the rising was the dynastic grievance of Surendra Sai and his family. The British had twice set aside his claim to the throne, in 1827 and 1833, and had then annexed the kingdom in 1849 rather than allow any member of the Chauhan family to succeed. They had also imprisoned him for seventeen years for resisting these decisions. To Surendra Sai and his supporters, the British actions represented a violation of the rights of the dynasty and of the customs of Sambalpur, and his imprisonment a further injustice. His return in 1857 was accompanied by an attempt to negotiate recognition of his claim, which suggests that he would have preferred a settlement to a war; the failure of these negotiations with Captain Leigh was the immediate occasion of his open revolt. The restoration of the Chauhan kingdom under its rightful ruler was the central aim of the rising, and it gave the rising a legitimacy in the eyes of many of the people of Sambalpur that a mere revolt against the government would have lacked. In supporting Surendra Sai, they were not rebelling against legitimate authority but, as they saw it, restoring it.

4.2 The annexation of 1849 and the doctrine of lapse

The annexation of Sambalpur under the doctrine of lapse in 1849 was part of the policy of Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General from 1848 to 1856, under which dependent states whose rulers died without natural male heirs were annexed by the British rather than passing to adopted sons or collateral relatives. The same policy was applied to Satara in 1848, Jhansi in 1854, Nagpur in 1854 and other states, and resentment against it was one of the most important causes of the revolt of 1857 across India; the Rani of Jhansi, one of the revolt’s most celebrated leaders, had herself been deprived of her state under it. In Sambalpur, annexation removed the last vestige of the old political order. It replaced the raja’s government, however weak and dependent, with direct British administration, conducted by officers who knew little of the region, its languages and its people, and who applied rules of

revenue, justice and policing designed for very different conditions. It thus turned a dynastic dispute into a confrontation between the people of Sambalpur and the British government itself.

4.3 The grievances of the zamindars and gauntias

The zamindars and *gauntias* of Sambalpur were the backbone of the rural order. Under the Chauhan rajas they had held their lands and villages in return for revenue and service, with a degree of security rooted in custom and in their personal relationship with the raja. Under British administration, their position was undermined in several ways. Revenue assessments were raised and enforced more strictly, with less regard for bad seasons and local circumstances; zamindars who were regarded as disloyal, or who fell into arrears, could be dispossessed and their estates given to others; and the officials of the new administration interfered in matters, such as succession to estates and the settlement of disputes, that had previously been governed by local custom and the raja’s justice. Several zamindars who had supported Surendra Sai in his first rising had been punished, and others feared for their positions under a government they did not trust. It is no accident that zamindars and gauntias, among them Madho Singh of Ghess, Kunjal Singh, Kamal Singh and many others, formed the leadership of the rising alongside Surendra Sai, and that the rising was organised through the networks of local authority they controlled.

4.4 Tribal communities and the hills

The hills and forests of western Odisha were home to large tribal communities, among them Gonds, Binjhals and Kandhas, whose relationship with the state had traditionally been mediated by their own chiefs and by the raja, and who had enjoyed considerable autonomy in the management of their lands, forests and customs. British administration brought new forms of control over land and forests, new demands for revenue and labour, and the intrusion of officials, police and outsiders into areas that had previously been left largely to themselves. Many of the zamindars who joined the rising were themselves tribal chiefs, such as the Binjhal Madho Singh and the Gond Balabhadra Deo before him, and their communities followed them. The support of the tribal communities, who knew the hills and

forests intimately, who could supply food, shelter and intelligence to the rebels, and who could fight effectively in difficult terrain, was essential to the rebels' ability to wage a long guerrilla war, and it explains much of the rising's resilience.

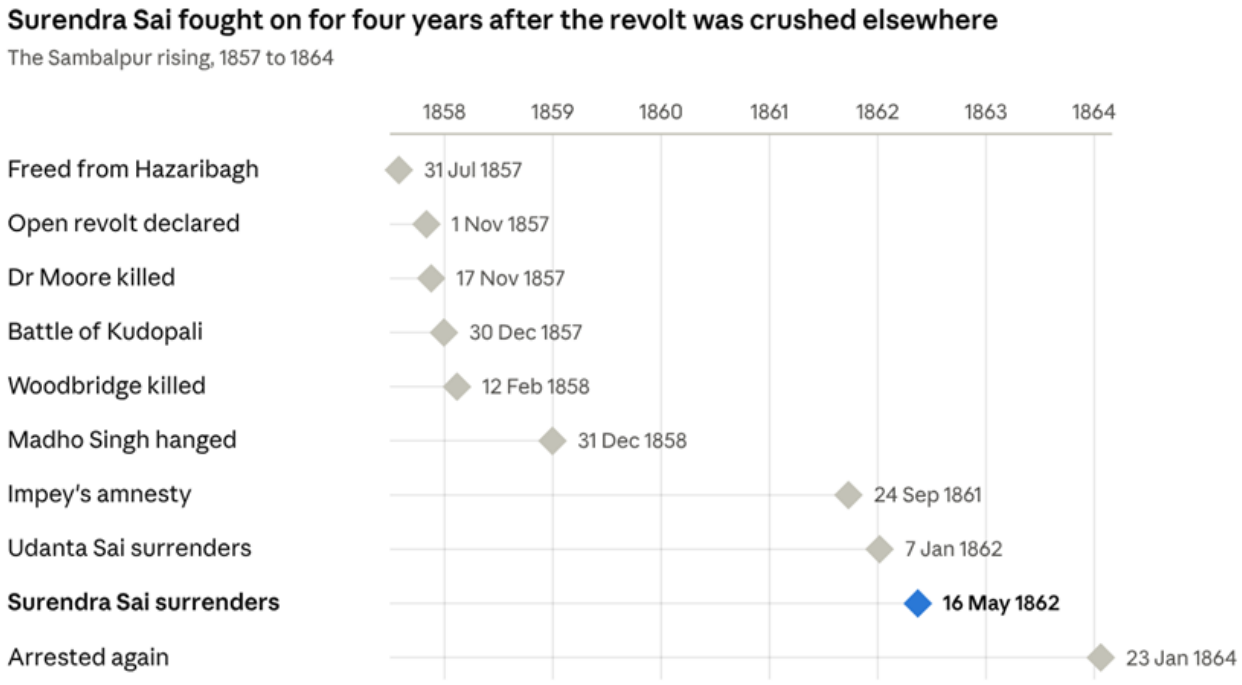
4.5 The opportunity of 1857

The general upheaval of 1857 provided the opportunity for these grievances to find expression. The mutiny of the sepoys at Hazaribagh freed Surendra Sai and his brother after seventeen years in prison. The revolt across northern and central India absorbed British military resources and made it difficult to reinforce isolated districts like Sambalpur, which had only small garrisons and were far from the main British bases. And the example of the revolt elsewhere, with its challenge to British authority on an unprecedented scale and its early successes, encouraged those who had long resented British rule to believe that it might at last be overthrown, or at least that the British might be compelled to make concessions. Without 1857, the grievances of Sambalpur might have continued to simmer, finding expression in sporadic resistance and petitions; with it, they boiled over into open and sustained rebellion.

Cause	Who was affected	How it fed the rising
Setting aside of Surendra Sai's claim (1827, 1833)	Surendra Sai, the Chauhan family and their supporters	Gave the rising its leader and its central aim
Annexation under the doctrine of lapse (1849)	The whole kingdom	Removed the old political order; resentment shared across India
Pressure on zamindars and gauntias	The landed and village elite	Provided the rising's local leaders and organisation
Control of tribal areas	Gonds, Binjhals, Kandhas and other communities	Provided fighters and the support needed for guerrilla war
The revolt of 1857	British military resources	Freed Surendra Sai and created the opportunity to rise

5. The course of the Sambalpur rising, 1857–1864

The Sambalpur rising passed through four phases, each with a distinct character. In the first, from Surendra Sai’s release in July 1857 to the end of that year, he returned to Sambalpur, rallied his former supporters, attempted to negotiate recognition of his claim with the British authorities, and, when negotiations failed, launched an open revolt that quickly inflicted serious losses on the British. In the second, from 1858 to 1860, the rising settled into a protracted guerrilla war, in which the rebels held much of the countryside and the British, despite reinforcements and the execution of several rebel leaders, were unable to crush them or bring them to decisive action. In the third, from 1861 to 1862, the conciliatory policy of Major Impey, based on amnesty and pensions, brought about the surrender of the principal rebels. In the fourth, from 1862 to 1864, Surendra Sai lived briefly in freedom, until his re-arrest on suspicion of conspiracy and his deportation to a distant fortress where he would spend the rest of his life. The drawing below sets out the main events of these phases.



The Sambalpur rising · ten events, July 1857 to January 1864

The decisive military events came in the first months of the rising, when the rebels killed British officers and defeated or evaded the forces sent against them. But the rebellion was ended by negotiation, not by force. The amnesty of September 1861 was followed by the surrender of Udanta Sai in January 1862 and of Surendra Sai himself in May, four years after the revolt had been crushed in northern India. The re-arrest of January 1864, which ended Surendra Sai's brief freedom, shows how fragile the settlement proved once the officer who had made it was gone.

5.1 Release and return, 1857

At the end of July 1857, as the revolt spread through Bihar and Chota Nagpur, the sepoys at Hazaribagh mutinied and broke open the jail, releasing the prisoners held there. Among them were Surendra Sai and his brother Udanta Sai, who had been imprisoned since 1840. The date of their release is variously given as 30 or 31 July, or in August 1857, reflecting the confusion of the time and the differences between the sources. The two brothers made their way back across the hills and forests to Sambalpur, a journey of several hundred kilometres, where they were received with enthusiasm by their former supporters and by many zamindars, gauntias and villagers who had not forgotten them in seventeen years. Surendra Sai's return transformed the situation in the district. The British authorities, with few troops at their disposal and the revolt raging in neighbouring regions, faced a leader of great prestige with a ready following, in a district whose population had little reason to support the government, and they had no immediate means of preventing him from mobilising that following.

Captain R. T. Leigh, the Senior Assistant Commissioner at Sambalpur, recognising the weakness of his position, at first attempted to negotiate with Surendra Sai, and for a time an accommodation seemed possible: Surendra Sai appears to have been willing to settle peacefully if his claims were recognised. But the negotiations foundered on his central demand, recognition as the rightful ruler of Sambalpur, which the British, having annexed the kingdom only eight years earlier and facing a revolt across India, were not prepared to concede. According to Mahanta's account, Surendra Sai declared open revolt against British

authority on **1 November 1857**. According to another account, he organised his followers into fortified posts along the main roads in the early months, controlling communications in the district, and established his base at Debrigarh in the hills, a place associated with his first rising and well suited to defence. Other accounts record that a large body of his followers occupied part of Sambalpur town in October 1857 before British reinforcements arrived.

5.2 The early engagements, 1857–1858

The first months of the revolt saw a series of engagements in which the rebels inflicted significant losses on the British and established their military reputation. Lieutenant Hadow's attempt to capture Surendra Sai at Khinda early in November failed, as the rebel leader, warned of his approach, withdrew into the forests. On **17 November 1857** (19 November in some accounts), Dr T. Moore, a British officer, was killed in an encounter near **Jujumura**, a blow that showed the rebels' willingness and ability to strike at British officers. On **30 December 1857**, at **Kudopali**, a British force under Captain Wood defeated a body of rebels in one of the hardest-fought actions of the rising; fifty-three rebels were killed, among them Surendra Sai's brother Chhabila Sai. But the rebels struck back. On **12 February 1858**, Captain Woodbridge was killed at **Paharsirgida**, an event that greatly raised the rebels' morale and spread alarm among the British; Odia accounts credit the deed to the rebel leader Janardan Singh. The rebels' ability to kill British officers and to defeat or evade the troops sent against them established their reputation, demonstrated that the British were not invincible, and drew more supporters to their cause.

5.3 The guerrilla war, 1858–1860

From 1858 the rising became a protracted guerrilla war. The rebels, operating from bases in the hills and forests and supported by the villagers, who supplied them with food, shelter and intelligence, avoided pitched battles in which the superior discipline and firepower of the British troops would have told against them. Instead they attacked isolated posts, convoys and small detachments, cut communications and harassed the British, withdrawing into the forests whenever they were pursued in strength. British reinforcements, including

troops of the 40th Madras Native Infantry, were brought in, but they found it impossible to bring the rebels to decisive action in country that favoured the defender, and they suffered from the climate, disease and the difficulty of supply. The British responded with severity, hanging captured leaders, burning villages suspected of supporting the rebels and offering rewards for information and captures, in the hope of breaking the rising by terror. These methods deepened the hostility of the population without ending the resistance.

The most famous of the rebel leaders executed in this period was **Madho Singh**, the Binjhal zamindar of **Ghess**, a close associate of Surendra Sai and one of the pillars of the rising. Having held mountain passes against British forces for months, he was captured at the age of about seventy-two and hanged at the Jail Chowk in Sambalpur on **31 December 1858**, his execution intended as a warning to others. His four sons all took part in the rising and paid for it: Airi Singh was killed in 1857 when British soldiers set fire to his hiding place and he was suffocated; Kunjal Singh was later hanged at Sambalpur; Bairi Singh was executed or died in prison; and Hati Singh was transported for life to the Andaman Islands. The destruction of an entire family of rebel chiefs became one of the most remembered episodes of the rising. Dayal Singh, the zamindar of Kharsal, was hanged on 4 March 1858, and other zamindars were killed in battle or executed. Despite these losses, the rising continued, and by 1860 the British authorities had come to accept that it could not be ended by force alone, and that a different approach was required.

5.4 Impey’s conciliation and the surrenders, 1861–1862

The turning point came with the appointment of **Major H. B. Impey** as Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur in April 1861. Impey concluded, after studying the situation, that military operations alone could not end the rising, and that the rebels’ resistance was sustained by fear of punishment as much as by hostility to the government. He adopted a policy of conciliation. Peace proposals were offered in June 1861, and on **24 September 1861** a proclamation released rebels held in the jails and offered pardon and pensions to those who surrendered, assuring them of their safety and their means of livelihood. The policy succeeded where four years of military operations had failed. On **7 January 1862**

Udanta Sai and Dhruba Sai surrendered. On **16 May 1862** Surendra Sai himself surrendered to Impey, together with Gajaraj Singh, Khageswar Dao, Fate Singh and Kunjal Singh, and was granted a pardon and a pension. Shortly before, on 30 April 1862, Sambalpur had been transferred from the jurisdiction of the Commissioner of Cuttack to the newly formed Central Provinces, which now inherited the task of governing the pacified district.

5.5 Re-arrest, detention and death, 1864–1884

Impey died in December 1863, and the policy of conciliation died with him. His successor, Major Cumberlege, came to suspect that Surendra Sai, now living freely in the district and still enjoying great prestige, was involved in a new conspiracy against British rule. On **23 January 1864**, his fifty-fifth birthday, Surendra Sai was arrested, together with members of his family and associates, betrayed according to tradition by an informer, Dayanidhi Meher, who is said to have been rewarded for his services. He was tried, but in August 1864 the Judicial Commissioner acquitted him for want of sufficient evidence. The government nevertheless refused to release him. He was detained without trial under **Regulation III of 1818** and sent to the fortress of **Asirgarh**, near Burhanpur in central India, hundreds of kilometres from Sambalpur, where he could have no contact with his followers. Kamal Singh, one of the last rebel leaders still at large, was captured later with the help of the raja of Sarangarh. Surendra Sai remained a prisoner at Asirgarh for twenty years, losing his sight in confinement. He died there on **28 February 1884**, at the age of seventy-five, far from the land for which he had fought.

6. The revolt of 1857 elsewhere in Odisha

Outside Sambalpur, the revolt of 1857 made relatively little impact in Odisha, and the reasons for this contrast are themselves historically significant, since they illuminate both the character of British rule in different parts of the province and the conditions that made revolt possible. Odia historians and contemporary observers have offered several explanations: the composition and loyalty of the garrison, the province’s geographical isolation from the main centres of the revolt, the absence of large towns with concentrations

of sepoys and dispossessed elites, the memory of the harsh suppression of the Paika rebellion of 1817, and the attitude of the princely and landed classes, whose interests were by now closely bound up with British protection. No single factor explains Odisha’s relative quiet, but together they account for the striking difference between the coast and the western uplands.

6.1 The coastal districts

The coastal districts of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore, which formed the Orissa Division of Bengal, remained quiet in 1857. Their garrisons were drawn largely from the Madras Army, whose sepoys, recruited from different regions and communities from those of the Bengal Army and with different grievances, did not mutiny in 1857, and the province had no major military station comparable to those of northern India, such as Meerut, Delhi, Lucknow or Kanpur, where the revolt began and gathered strength. The coastal districts had also experienced four decades of relatively settled administration since the Paika rebellion, and the reforms that followed 1817, including the long settlement of 1837, had removed some of the most acute grievances of the early period, even if the province remained poor and neglected. The memory of the severe suppression of 1817, with its martial law, executions and burned villages, may also have discouraged any repetition. Communications with the main centres of the revolt in northern India were poor, and news of events there arrived slowly, in fragments and often distorted, so that there was little opportunity for coordination with the rebels elsewhere. The famine that would devastate the coastal districts in 1866, and expose the neglect of the administration, still lay in the future.

6.2 Chakhi Khuntia and Odia participants elsewhere

If Odisha itself remained largely quiet, some Odias took part in the revolt elsewhere. The most celebrated is **Chakhi Khuntia**, also known as Chandan Hajuri, a priest (*panda*) of the Jagannatha temple at Puri. The *pandas* of Puri maintained extensive networks of clients among pilgrims from every part of India, and travelled widely, especially in northern India, to recruit and serve them; Chakhi Khuntia’s work as a *panda* gave him contacts in the regions where the revolt was strongest. According to Odia tradition, he was in northern India when

the revolt broke out, encouraged the sepoys in their resistance and was associated with the rebel leaders of central India; he was arrested by the British and later released, returning to Puri. Odisha government sources commemorate him as one of the state's participants in 1857. The details of his career rest largely on tradition and are difficult to verify, but his story shows how the networks created by the pilgrim traffic to Puri linked Odisha with the wider world of northern India, and how individual Odias could become involved in the revolt even where their home province remained quiet.

6.3 The Garhjat states and the hill tracts

The tributary states of the Garhjat were ruled by their own chiefs under British supervision, and most of them remained loyal to the British in 1857, as did the great majority of princely states across India. Their rulers depended on British protection for their thrones, against rival claimants, rebellious subjects and powerful neighbours, and the revolt offered them little but risk; a chief who joined it stood to lose his state, while one who supported the British could hope for favour and reward. Some actively assisted the British; the raja of Sarangarh, for instance, is reported to have helped in the capture of the Sambalpur rebel Kamal Singh. In the hill tracts, however, the history of resistance was older than 1857. The Kandhas of Ghumsur had resisted British penetration since the 1830s, and their leader Chakra Bisoi had defied the Meriah Agency for years, never being captured. Their resistance belonged to a different chronology and had different causes from the revolt of 1857, rooted in the defence of their autonomy and customs against British intervention, but it shows that the hill and forest regions of Odisha, like Sambalpur, were the places where British authority was most fragile and resistance most persistent throughout the nineteenth century.

6.4 The significance of Odisha's limited participation

The contrast between the quiet of the coastal districts and the long rising in Sambalpur has been interpreted in different ways. Some historians have seen it as evidence that the coastal districts, after the trauma of 1817 and the reforms that followed, had been reconciled to British rule, or at least deterred from resisting it. Others have emphasised structural factors: the loyalty of the Madras Army, the absence in the coastal districts of a

large class of recently dispossessed rulers and landholders with the means and the motive to lead a revolt, and the isolation of the province from the main theatres of the revolt. In Sambalpur, by contrast, the annexation of 1849 had created exactly such a class, the tribal communities of the hills were ready to support it, and the release of Surendra Sai provided it with a leader of unquestioned authority. The pattern of 1857 in Odisha thus confirms a general observation about the revolt across India: it was strongest where recent annexation had created a class of dispossessed rulers and landholders with local followings, as in Awadh, Jhansi and Sambalpur, and weakest where British rule was long established and the old elites had either been destroyed or reconciled.

7. Case studies

The five case studies below examine particular episodes and figures of the Sambalpur rising in closer detail: the succession crisis that began the conflict, the release that renewed it, the family whose sacrifice symbolises it, the policy that ended it, and the detention that followed. Each illuminates a broader feature of the rising and of the colonial order it challenged, and each has been interpreted differently by colonial and Odia historians.

Case study 1: The succession of 1827

When Maharaja Sai died without a male heir in 1827, the British installed his widow, Rani Mohan Kumari, passing over the male members of the Chauhan family, including Surendra Sai, who considered himself the rightful heir. Six years later, when the Rani’s rule had proved a failure, they replaced her with Narayan Singh, again passing over Surendra Sai. These decisions, taken by British officers on the basis of their own judgment of what would best serve stability and British interests, set in motion a conflict that would last, with interruptions, for more than three decades and would cost many lives.

Significance. The succession of 1827 shows how the exercise of British paramountcy over a dependent state could create enduring resistance. The British regarded the choice of ruler as a matter for their own discretion, to be exercised in the interests of stability and of their own influence, and they were willing to set aside custom when it seemed inconvenient. The

Chauhan family and its supporters regarded the succession as governed by dynastic custom, which no outside power had the right to override. By overriding that custom, the British turned a disappointed claimant into a rebel with a legitimate grievance in the eyes of many of his people, and gave him a cause around which opposition could gather. The same pattern, the setting aside of local claims in favour of British convenience, culminated in the annexation of 1849 and underlay the revolt of 1857 across much of India, where similar grievances over succession and annexation drove rulers such as the Rani of Jhansi and Nana Sahib into rebellion.

Case study 2: The release at Hazaribagh

At the end of July 1857, sepoys at Hazaribagh mutinied and broke open the jail, releasing Surendra Sai and his brother Udanta Sai after seventeen years of imprisonment. The two men made their way back to Sambalpur, where they found their former supporters still loyal and the grievances of 1840 sharpened by the annexation of 1849, and took up the struggle they had been forced to abandon.

Significance. The release at Hazaribagh links the Sambalpur rising directly to the all-India revolt of 1857. Without the mutiny of the Bengal Army, Surendra Sai might well have remained in prison for the rest of his life, and the grievances of Sambalpur might have found no leader capable of uniting them. The episode illustrates the way in which the great revolt created opportunities for local and regional resistance movements with their own histories and causes, by freeing prisoners, absorbing British forces and weakening British authority across a vast area. It also explains why historians treat the Sambalpur rising both as part of 1857 and as a distinct movement: the occasion was all-Indian, but the causes and the leadership were local, and the rising followed its own course long after the all-India revolt had ended.

Case study 3: Madho Singh of Ghess and his sons

Madho Singh, the Binjhal zamindar of Ghess, was one of Surendra Sai’s closest associates and one of the most important leaders of the rising. He and his four sons fought in the rising, holding the passes of the hill country against British forces. He was captured and hanged at

Sambalpur on 31 December 1858, at about the age of seventy-two, and every one of his sons was killed, executed or imprisoned: Airi Singh suffocated in his burning hiding place, Kunjal Singh and possibly Bairi Singh hanged, and Hati Singh transported for life to the Andamans.

Significance. The fate of Madho Singh's family illustrates both the depth of local support for the rising and the terrible price exacted for it. It shows the central role of tribal zamindars in the rebellion: Madho Singh was not a member of the Chauhan nobility but a Binjhal chief, whose community's loyalty to the old order and hostility to outside control made it one of the rising's mainstays. His participation, and that of his entire family, shows that the rising was not merely a dynastic dispute within the Chauhan family but a cause embraced by the tribal communities of the region. The severity of the British response, including the public execution of an elderly chief and the destruction of his family, reflects the determination of the colonial state to break the rising by terror. That determination failed in its immediate purpose, since the rising continued for years after his death, and the memory of Madho Singh and his sons has become one of the most powerful elements of the popular tradition of the rising in western Odisha, commemorated in songs, stories and monuments.

Case study 4: Major Impey's conciliation

Major H. B. Impey, appointed Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur in April 1861, concluded that the rising could not be ended by force and that the rebels were kept in the field partly by fear of punishment. He offered pardon and pensions, released rebels from the jails by the proclamation of 24 September 1861, and negotiated the surrenders of Udanta Sai in January 1862 and of Surendra Sai in May 1862. He is reported to have acknowledged, with evident respect, that Surendra Sai "was never defeated and would never be defeated" by military means.

Significance. Impey's policy shows that the colonial state was capable of recognising the limits of force and of ending a rebellion by negotiation and conciliation. It succeeded where four years of military operations, executions and the burning of villages had failed, because

it addressed, at least in part, the rebels' need for security, a means of livelihood and a dignified settlement, and because it was carried out by an officer who had earned the trust of the rebel leaders. Its abandonment after Impey's death in December 1863, and the re-arrest of Surendra Sai within weeks of it, shows how dependent such policies were on the judgment and personality of individual officers, how quickly suspicion of former rebels could reassert itself in the colonial administration, and how fragile the promises made to them could prove. For Odia historians, the contrast between Impey's conciliation and Cumberlege's suspicion has been a central element in the case that Surendra Sai was treated unjustly.

Case study 5: Detention under Regulation III of 1818

After his re-arrest in January 1864, Surendra Sai was tried on charges of conspiracy and, in August 1864, acquitted by the Judicial Commissioner, who found the evidence against him insufficient. The government nevertheless detained him without trial under Regulation III of 1818 and sent him to the fortress of Asirgarh, far from Sambalpur, where he remained, losing his sight, until his death in 1884.

Significance. Surendra Sai's detention illustrates the use by the colonial state of extraordinary powers to deal with political opponents whom it could not convict in its own courts. Regulation III of 1818 allowed the government to imprison individuals indefinitely without trial for reasons of state, without the need to prove any offence, and it was used throughout the colonial period against those regarded as threats to British rule, from deposed rulers to nationalist leaders of the twentieth century. Surendra Sai's case, in which a man acquitted by a British court spent twenty years in prison and died there blind and far from home, has become, in the memory of Odisha, a symbol of the injustice of colonial rule and of the sacrifice of those who resisted it. It also shows the limits of the rule of law under colonialism: the courts could acquit, but the executive could still imprison, and where the security of British rule was concerned, the executive's judgment prevailed.

8. Odia historians, memory and the main debates

Surendra Sai occupies a special place in the historical memory of Odisha, and especially of western Odisha, where he is regarded not only as a hero of the struggle against British rule but as a symbol of the identity, dignity and distinct history of the region. His history has been written and rewritten by historians, biographers, journalists and public writers, and the interpretation of his rising has been shaped by changing political concerns: by the nationalist movement of the early twentieth century, which sought heroes of resistance; by the post-independence state, which honoured him as a freedom fighter; and by the regional consciousness of western Odisha in recent decades, which has seen in him a symbol of a region whose history and needs have often been overlooked. Each of these contexts has emphasised different aspects of his life and struggle.

8.1 Regional historians and the history of Sambalpur

The first systematic histories of the rising were written by historians of Sambalpur itself. Sivaprasad Das's *Sambalpur Itihasa*, written in Odia, reconstructed the history of the Chauhan kingdom and of Surendra Sai's resistance from official records and local traditions, placing the rising within the long history of the region and giving western Odisha a history of its own, distinct from that of the coastal plain that dominated most histories of Odisha. Studies of the freedom movement in Sambalpur from 1827 to 1947 have gone further, presenting Surendra Sai's first rising of 1827 as the beginning of a continuous tradition of resistance in the region that extended through the nationalist movement of the twentieth century to independence. In this view Sambalpur was the first place in Odisha, and one of the first in India, where organised resistance to British authority began, and its contribution to the national struggle deserves far greater recognition than it has received.

8.2 The nationalist interpretation

Nationalist historians of Odisha, including Harekrushna Mahtab in his *History of Orissa* and the volumes on the history of the freedom movement in Orissa produced under his direction, presented Surendra Sai as one of the earliest and most persistent fighters for Indian

freedom. In this interpretation, his struggle was not merely a dynastic dispute over the throne of a small hill kingdom but a war against foreign domination, waged on behalf of his people and of India; his long imprisonment was the sacrifice of a patriot; and his rising was Odisha's principal contribution to the revolt of 1857, which nationalists increasingly described as India's first war of independence. This interpretation has been widely accepted in Odisha and has shaped the commemoration of Surendra Sai in public life, in school textbooks and in the naming of institutions. Later historians have noted that it sometimes passes over the dynastic dimension of his struggle, but its emphasis on the popular character of the rising and on the injustice of his treatment is supported by much of the evidence.

8.3 Biography and public memory

Biographies such as Deepak Kumar Panda's *Veer Surendra Sai: Saga of an Indomitable Freedom Fighter*, and a large body of articles in the *Orissa Review* and other publications of the Odisha government, have made Surendra Sai's life widely known to the general public. His memory is honoured in the names of major institutions, including Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology and the Veer Surendra Sai Institute of Medical Sciences and Research at Burla, near Sambalpur, and in commemorations on his birth anniversary, 23 January. A British official's remark that Sambalpur was "perhaps the very last district in India in which embers of disturbances of 1857 were finally stamped out" is frequently quoted as evidence of the exceptional persistence of the rising, and the length of his imprisonment, often described as the longest endured by any opponent of British rule, is a recurring theme of his commemoration. Brajabandhu Mahanta's article "Revolt of 1857 AD and the Role of Surendra Sai" on historyofodisha.in presents the history of the rising for students and general readers, and is the source of many of the dates used in this article.

8.4 Main debates

Debate	One view	The other view	Where the evidence stands
Dynastic claimant or freedom fighter?	Surendra Sai fought for his own claim to the throne (colonial view)	He fought against foreign rule on behalf of his people (nationalist view)	Both: his central demand was recognition as ruler, but his struggle drew on wide popular grievances and challenged British authority as such
Part of 1857 or a separate movement?	The Sambalpur rising was part of the all-India revolt	It was a regional movement with its own causes, beginning in 1827	It was both: rooted in local history, but made possible by 1857
Why did it last so long?	British weakness and difficult terrain	Wide popular support and skilled leadership	Terrain mattered, but the support of zamindars, gauntias and tribal communities was essential
Was the re-arrest of 1864 justified?	The British suspected a new conspiracy	The re-arrest was a breach of the 1862 settlement; he was acquitted	His acquittal and detention without trial under Regulation III of 1818 are documented
Why was the rest of Odisha quiet?	Loyalty or reconciliation after 1817	Structural factors: Madras troops, isolation, no dispossessed elite	Most historians stress structural factors
The role of tribal communities	Followers of their chiefs	Active participants with their own grievances	The role of Binjhal and Gond zamindars such as Madho Singh suggests active participation

8.5 Disputed details

Several details of Surendra Sai’s life and of the rising remain disputed in the sources, and readers should be aware of the variations they will encounter. They include his birthplace, given as Khinda or Bargaon; the date of his release from Hazaribagh, given as 30 or 31 July, or in August 1857; the date of Dr Moore’s death, given as 17 or 19 November 1857; the identity of the British officers at Kudopali and Paharsirgida, where Captain Wood and

Captain Woodbridge are sometimes confused in published accounts; the fates of some of his associates, such as Kunjal Singh, who is recorded both as surrendering in 1862 and as later hanged; and the exact number of years he spent in prison, variously calculated. Some publications also give the year of his death incorrectly; the accepted date is 28 February 1884. These variations reflect the scattered nature of the original records, the reliance of many published accounts on secondary sources and tradition rather than on the archives, and the tendency of errors, once made, to be repeated. They are a reminder that the history of the rising, for all the attention it has received, still requires careful research in the primary sources.

9. Assessment

The revolt of 1857 in Odisha was, outside Sambalpur, a limited affair. The coastal districts remained quiet, their garrisons loyal and their elites cautious; the tributary chiefs remained loyal to the British and some actively assisted them; and Odisha’s main contributions to the great revolt elsewhere were individual, such as that of Chakhi Khuntia, whose story rests largely on tradition. In Sambalpur, however, the revolt took a form and a duration that made it one of the most remarkable episodes of resistance to British rule anywhere in India, and gave western Odisha a central place in the history of 1857.

The Sambalpur rising was the product of a specific local history. Its roots lay in the British decision of 1827 to set aside Surendra Sai’s claim to the Chauhan throne and in the decision of 1833 to do so again; in his first rising of 1827–1840 and his long imprisonment; in the annexation of 1849 under the doctrine of lapse; and in the grievances of the zamindars, gauntias and tribal communities of the region under British administration. The all-India revolt of 1857 provided the opportunity: it freed Surendra Sai from Hazaribagh, stretched British military resources across the subcontinent and encouraged those who had long resented British rule to believe it could be overthrown. The rising was thus both a part of 1857 and the continuation of a regional struggle that had begun thirty years earlier, and it cannot be fully understood from either perspective alone.

Its most striking feature was its persistence. The rebels, led by Surendra Sai and supported by zamindars such as Madho Singh and by the tribal communities of the hills, waged a guerrilla war that outlasted the revolt in northern India by four years. They killed several British officers, held much of the countryside, survived the execution of many of their leaders and could not be defeated by military means. Their resilience rested on the depth of their local support, the skill of their leadership and their mastery of the difficult terrain of western Odisha. The rising was ended not by force but by negotiation, through the conciliatory policy of Major Impey, who recognised that Surendra Sai could not be beaten in the field and that only an offer of security and dignity would bring the rebels to lay down their arms. In this sense, the rising achieved something that few of the risings of 1857 achieved: it compelled the colonial state to negotiate.

The aftermath, however, revealed the harsher side of colonial rule. The execution of Madho Singh and other leaders, the destruction of their families, and above all the re-arrest of Surendra Sai in 1864, his detention without trial after his acquittal and his twenty years of imprisonment at Asirgarh, show how the colonial state dealt with those it regarded as dangerous, and how little the promises made to former rebels could be relied upon once the officer who made them was gone. Of his seventy-five years, Surendra Sai spent some thirty-seven in prison, and he died blind and in exile, far from the land for which he had fought.

The fairest verdict is that Surendra Sai was both a claimant to the Chauhan throne and a leader of popular resistance against British rule, and that the two roles cannot be separated: his personal and dynastic grievance was inseparable from the grievances of the people who followed him, and it was their support that turned a disappointed claimant into the leader of one of the longest risings of the colonial period. His long struggle, his endurance through decades of captivity and his death in exile made him, in the memory of Odisha, a symbol of resistance and sacrifice, and the Sambalpur rising, the last embers of 1857 to be stamped out, stands as western Odisha’s great contribution to the history of the struggle against colonial rule and one of the foundations of the region’s modern identity.

10. Glossary

Term	Meaning
Binjhal	A tribal community of western Odisha; Madho Singh of Ghess was a Binjhal zamindar
Chauhan	The ruling dynasty of Sambalpur and Patnagarh
Doctrine of lapse	Dalhousie’s policy of annexing states whose rulers died without natural male heirs
Gauntia	Village headman responsible for revenue in Sambalpur
Garhjat	The tributary hill states of Odisha
Madras Native Infantry	Sepoy regiments of the Madras Army, used against the Sambalpur rebels
Panda	Priest of the Jagannatha temple who serves pilgrims
Regulation III of 1818	Law permitting detention without trial for reasons of state
Transportation	Penal exile, here to the Andaman Islands
Zamindar	Landholder responsible for revenue from an estate; in Sambalpur often a local chief

11. Frequently asked questions

1. Who was Surendra Sai? Veer Surendra Sai (1809–1884), a member of the Chauhan ruling family of Sambalpur who claimed its throne, led resistance to the British from 1827 to 1840 and again from 1857 to 1862, and died in detention at Asirgarh on 28 February 1884.

2. Why did he oppose the British? Because the British set aside his claim to the Sambalpur throne in 1827 and 1833 and annexed the kingdom in 1849. His struggle also drew on the grievances of zamindars, gauntias and tribal communities under British rule.

3. How was he connected to the revolt of 1857? He was freed from Hazaribagh jail when the sepoys there mutinied at the end of July 1857, returned to Sambalpur, and led a rising that continued until 1862.

4. Who were his main associates? His brothers Udanta Sai, Dhruba Sai and Chhabila Sai; Madho Singh of Ghess and his sons Hati Singh, Kunjal Singh, Bairi Singh and Airi Singh; Kamal Singh, Khageswar Dao, Gajaraj Singh, Janardan Singh and many other zamindars and gauntias.

5. How did the rising end? Through the conciliatory policy of Major H. B. Impey, who offered pardon and pensions from 1861. Surendra Sai surrendered on 16 May 1862.

6. Why was he imprisoned again? He was arrested on 23 January 1864 on suspicion of conspiracy. Although acquitted in August 1864, he was detained without trial under Regulation III of 1818 and held at Asirgarh until his death.

7. What part did the rest of Odisha play in 1857? A limited one. The coastal districts remained quiet, garrisoned by loyal Madras troops; the tributary chiefs largely supported the British. Individuals such as Chakhi Khuntia of Puri are remembered as participants in the revolt elsewhere.

12. How to cite this article

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- Khurda Rebellion of 1804 and Jayi Rajguru
- British Administration in Odisha
- British Occupation of Odisha

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