

*The wisdom of the barbarian: rebellion, incarceration and the Santal body politic*¹

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Introduction

The Santals are the third largest *adivasi* (tribal) community in India, living in what are now the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Tripura.² One of the most important events in their nineteenth-century history was the insurrection or *hool* of 1855, which is now understood as a significant precursor to the 1857 uprisings. Ranajit Guha's classic history of peasant insurgency in colonial India argues that the *hool* exposed the fragility of the changing relationships between landholders, peasants, and itinerant cultivators like the *adivasi* Santals and, as such, it spilled over into and became a significant element of the later mutiny-rebellion. The *hool* was a full-scale uprising in the Chota Nagpur Santal areas of the Bengal Presidency, in the region that now traverses the states of Bihar and West Bengal. The Santals felt acutely the incursions of logging agents into the forests, and the deforestation implied by the expansion of the railways. And so during the insurrection, the Santals attacked railway engineers, as well as the usual targets of rebellion: *zamindars* (landlords), *mahajans* (moneylenders), policemen, officials, and planters.³ Yet attacks on railway bungalows and works were not provoked only by Santal displacement, for the coming of the steam train had provided relatively lucrative employment for some. It could be a partial escape from the triple burden of what Guha describes as the 'landlessness, low wages and bonded labour' produced by British policies that favoured *zamindars* and *mahajans* over poor workers. According to Guha, the *hool* was also Santal revenge

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² K.S. Singh, *People of India, Vol. III: The Scheduled Tribes* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1994), 1041.

³ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1983), 26, 138, 140. See also C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1988), 174.

for the sexual violence perpetrated by railway officials against women.⁴ However, colonial magistrates represented this ‘collective bid for social justice’ not as rebellion but as crime, so transforming Santals from victims of oppressive Hindu moneylenders into violent *dacoits* (gang robbers).⁵

The aim of this article is neither to rehearse the trajectory of 1855 *hool* once more, nor to examine its place in the run up to the more widespread socio-economic unrest of 1857-8. Readers need look no further than Guha’s magnificent *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* in these respects, or for a critical reading of the rebellion in relation to Santal notions of time the work of Prathama Banerjee.⁶ Rather, I want to look at the aftermath of the Santal rebellion, and focus on what happened to the many Santals who came before the courts on charges of treason, rebellion, plunder, and robbery. Large numbers of Santals were killed in combat, and the British executed dozens more. They sentenced hundreds to imprisonment in jails like Bhagalpur and Beerbhum (the latter in the town of Siuri) in the heart of Santal country, or to transportation to the East India Company’s penal settlement at the Burmese port of Akyab (Arakan).⁷ The article will elucidate two related processes in the history of Santal incarceration. First, is clear that Santals suffered appalling death-rates in jail. Even Inspector-General of Prisons F.J. Mouat, himself a physician, described the ‘fearful mortality’ that afflicted them.⁸ Second, both imprisonment and transportation afforded British officials a unique opportunity to examine closely Santal society, and this led to the consolidation of extant discourses of the ‘wild tribes’. Yet these discourses were complex and in many ways contradictory, for as we will see colonial notions of ‘tribal wildness’ on occasion produced simultaneously the Santals as ‘model’ prisoners.

In relation to this, it is also worth noting that, as Banerjee illustrates, the *hool* was neither a singular nor an exclusively Santal event, for a large number of non-Santals also participated.⁹ Neighbouring tribal communities in Chota Nagpur like the

⁴ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 142-3.

⁵ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 97-8.

⁶ Prathama Banerjee, ‘Historic Acts? Santal Rebellion and the Temporality of Practice’, *Studies in History*, 15, 2 (1999), 209-46.

⁷ Now Sittwe (Rakhine State).

⁸ IOR V/24/2062: Fred. J. Mouat, *Report on the Jails of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1855-6* (Calcutta, John Gray, *Calcutta Gazette* Office: 1856), 14.

⁹ Banerjee, ‘Historic Acts?’, 211.

Ho, Munda, Oraon, Bhumij, and Paharia all became involved.¹⁰ Later on the Kols in the region took the lead in district uprisings during 1857-8.¹¹ Yet, in their dealings with arrested *hool* rebels the prison authorities always referred to their charge as ‘Santals’. I will follow them in this respect, but readers should note that the descriptor ‘Santal’ was often part of colonial shorthand for the many and often diverse *adivasi* communities who populated particular regions of Bengal.

Imprisonment, Mortality, and the Model Prisoner

In August 1855, with the imprisonment of dozens of Santals arrested during the *hool*, Bhagulpur jail was so full that cholera broke out.¹² During the epidemic, fifty-two prisoners died in a single week. By the beginning of 1856, the number of Santals in the prison had doubled and it had become so overcrowded that a large number of prisoners were sleeping outside. With three hundred Santals camped in a large grove on the site of the jail, Mouat warned at the start of February that death-rates were rising.¹³ The civil surgeon of the jail, A.J. Sheridan, reported at about the same time that the daily ratio of sick Santal prisoners was almost seven per cent, as compared to almost four per cent of other prisoners.¹⁴

There were immense pressures on Beerbhum jail too. In 1855 it had been converted into a fortress, magazine, and granary to house and to supply troops engaged in anti-*hool* operations nearby. By the end of the year, the jail was overcrowded, manufacture had more or less ground to a halt, and the prisoners were no longer engaged in their usual productive labour.¹⁵ As death-rates began to rise, the Bengal government asked the civil surgeon of the prison to send in weekly sanitary returns. Though these returns did not enumerate Santals separately, the accompanying notes leave no doubt that they constituted the largest proportion of sick inmates. Sheridan, who had previously worked in the Indian penal settlement in Arakan,

¹⁰ Kaushik Ghosh, ‘A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India’, in Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (eds), *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1999), 13.

¹¹ Gautam Bhadra, ‘Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven’, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1985), 256-63.

¹² IOR P.145.17 Bengal Judicial Consultations (henceforth Ben JC) 6 Sept. 1855: W. Grey, Secretary to Government Bengal, to W. Bell, Session Judge Bhagalpur, 21 Aug. 1855.

¹³ IOR P.145.33 Ben JC 28 Feb. 1856: Inspector-General of Prisons F.J. Mouat’s memo on Bhagalpur Jail, 9 Feb. 1856.

¹⁴ IOR P.145.35 Ben JC 20 March 1856: Weekly sanitary report on the state of the prisoners in Beerbhum Jail, week ending 10 Feb. 1856.

¹⁵ IOR P.145.30 Ben JC 17 Jan. 1856: Mouat’s memo on Beerbhum Jail, 18 Dec. 1855.

reported the Santal prisoners' 'very low state of health', and the speed with which they 'sink very rapidly'. He underlined the urgency of their trial, release and/or transfer. Three of the women had six young children, one of whom had been born in prison. The children were ill and he feared that they would die if not released: 'it is painful to behold the condition of these poor children'. The government had in fact already released sixteen Santal women and children, though not before many had already succumbed to dysentery and dropsy.¹⁶ Sheridan's report was the first of many representations on behalf of aged, infirm, and sick Santal prisoners.¹⁷ By March 1856, twenty-five Santals had died while still awaiting trial.¹⁸

After the *hool*, Mouat sought advice on how to avoid high death-rates among the Santals, but he was never optimistic about his ability to prevent them altogether. He made enquiries amongst railway overseers used to employing Santals, as well as Rivers Thompson, the magistrate of Beerbhum, about how to ensure their good health. Thompson interviewed the Santals then in prison, and reported back to Mouat on their desired provisions and clothing. Mouat also consulted the medical official Dr Cheek, who worked in Bankura prison. He made a series of suggestions that subsequently Mouat recommended to government. First, prison officials should issue all Santal prisoners with a daily supply of vegetables and meat twice a week. Second, they should not give Santals too plentiful rations, for they were not accustomed to unlimited supplies of food. Third, they should limit the use of fetters in order to avoid the production of sores. Fourth, government should only imprison Santals in their home region. Finally, local officers should employ them on the roads in preference to indoor labour. Cheek pointed to the example of the terrible mortality that succeeded the imprisonment of Kol rebels after the insurrection of 1831-2, writing of 'the known depression which causes all such savages to sink and die when incarcerated, "like old birds when caught and confined in cages"'.¹⁹ His was the first of many allusions to imprisoned Santals as wild creatures, a theme to which we will return in a moment. His claimed management of large numbers of 'hill tribes' also speaks to the all-encompassing nature of colonial discourses of 'tribe', for colonial officials used the

¹⁶ IOR P.145.26 Ben JC 20 Dec. 1855: Weekly sanitary report of Civil Surgeon A.J. Sheridan on the state of health of the prisoners in the Beerbhum Jail for the week ending 10 Nov. 1855. See also Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 131-2.

¹⁷ For instance, IOR P.145.33 Ben JC 3 Jan. 1856: Weekly sanitary report of the state of the prisoners in Beerbhum Jail, week ending 22 Dec. 1855, 2 Feb. 1856.

¹⁸ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 18 Mar. 1856.

¹⁹ IOR P.145.31 Ben JC 24 Jan. 1856: Mouat to Grey, 29 Dec. 1855.

terms *dhangars*, *junglis* (of the jungle), *boonahs* (wild men) and Kols to refer to *adivasi* communities in Chota Nagpur.²⁰

At the time of the Santal rebellion British officials understood that the imprisonment of 'hill tribes' always resulted in high death-rates. Of course prison mortality rates in general were very variable. In 1837, the Committee on Convict Labour reported that they ranged from less than one to more than twenty per cent per annum.²¹ The main causes of death amongst prisoners were cholera, malaria, dysentery, and diarrhoea.²² However, there is no doubt that tribal communities suffered out of all proportion to other prisoners. A good example was the aftermath of the Ghumsur Wars, which the British fought against the Konds of central Orissa in an attempt to take over (or as the British put it to pacify) territory in 1835.²³ Of the one hundred and eighty Konds put on trial, forty-three were executed, forty-seven sentenced to life imprisonment or transportation overseas, and forty-eight to shorter terms of incarceration, mostly with hard labour on road gangs in chains. The government shipped at least three to the penal settlement in Moulmein.²⁴ Judicial procedure in the Kond areas was administered through the Madras Presidency, and the British thus transferred most of the remainder to jails in South India: Bellary, Trichinopoly, Chingleput, and Ganjam.²⁵ Ten died before their terms had even started.²⁶ As David Arnold puts it, the real end for communities like the Konds came not with military defeat and judicial sentence, but with a miserable death in prison.²⁷ Later in 1860, Inspector-General of Prisons Mouat even suggested that because a sentence of imprisonment was a near death sentence for *adivasis*, 'Hill Tribes and jungly races' generally should be sent to the new penal settlement at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands in lieu of incarceration in mainland jails.²⁸

²⁰ Ghosh, 'A Market', 17.

²¹ IOR P.141.9 Ben JC 14 Mar. 1837: Second and Concluding Report of the Committee of Convict Labour, 28 Jan. 1837.

²² David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1993), 103-4.

²³ For a fascinating account of the campaign, see Felix Padel, *The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1995), ch. 2.

²⁴ TNSA Madras Judicial Proceedings (MJP) Vol. 304B: H.G.A. Taylor, Commander Northern Division, to H. Chamier, Secretary to Government Madras, 26 Jan. 1836.

²⁵ Padel, *The Sacrifice*, 51, 60-1, 334 (n. 52).

²⁶ Padel, *The Sacrifice*, 334 (n. 52).

²⁷ David Arnold, 'The Colonial Prison: Power, Knowledge, and Penology in 19th-Century India', in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds), *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 168.

²⁸ IOR P.146.38 Bengal Judicial Proceedings(henceforth Ben JP) (Jails) March 1861: Mouat to Rivers Thompson, Junior Secretary to Government Bengal, 26 Dec. 1860.

The colonial authorities faced a seemingly insurmountable problem with regard to the treatment of *adivasi* rebels, for if they were to be punished effectively, how could penal administrators avoid excessive mortality rates? Mouat reported that he believed that no severity of punishment or discipline could be too stringent for the serious crimes of which they had been convicted, mostly rebellion or *dacoity* (gang robbery). He wrote of the need to punish Santals so that they would ‘profit by the experience of the past, without encouraging other savages to repeat the same experiment’. Yet in practice their imprisonment was almost invariably a death sentence. In a bid to ameliorate Santal sickness, at the end of 1855 Mouat ordered either their transfer to Hazaribag jail, which due to its cool climate later the British chose as a particularly salubrious site for the incarceration of Europeans, or their employment outdoors on the roads. Those Santals who worked well would, in addition, get a daily dram of liquor. However, he was not hopeful about the capacity of these recommendations to have any effect, writing that if the Santals were to be punished at all, inevitably they would suffer high death-rates.²⁹ One solution proposed by Mouat, but rejected by government, was the forced resettlement of ‘the misguided and starving’ Santals in the Indian penal settlement at Arakan.³⁰ At the time there were just forty-three transportation convicts there,³¹ for in 1854 the government transferred almost all its life convicts to Singapore, and subsequently transported only term convicts to the settlement. Labour was therefore in great demand.³² Mauritian planters too, desirous of indenturing ‘hill tribes’ to work in the island’s expanding sugar industry, also suggested that migration was a preferable option for the emiserated Santals.³³

The Bengal government made some limited concessions to Santal prisoners. At the end of 1855, for instance, it released the four remaining women in Beerbhum jail, though this was rather to protect their children from almost certain death than to

²⁹ IOR P.145.30 Ben JC 17 Jan. 1856: Mouat’s memo on Beerbhum Jail, 18 Dec. 1855.

³⁰ IOR P.145.47 Ben JC 18 Sept. 1856: Mouat to Grey, 19 Apr. 1856.

³¹ Fred. J. Mouat, *Reports on Jails Visited and Inspected in Bengal, Behar, and Arracan* (Calcutta, Military Orphan Press: 1856), 172. For the original manuscript, see IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Mouat’s memo. on Akyab Jail, 26 Mar. 1856.

³² IOR P.144.43 Ben JC 21 July 1853: Cecil Beadon, Secretary to Government Bengal, to G. Powden, Officiating Secretary to Government of India, 19 July 1853.

³³ Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, ‘Tribal and Indentured Migrants in Colonial India: modes of recruitment and forms of incorporation’, in Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1993), 167.

mitigate their own punishment.³⁴ Additionally, after an outbreak of mumps in March 1856, the local authorities issued Santals in Bhagalpur with a tobacco ration. Though tobacco had been banned in most Bengal Presidency jails in 1853, prisoners were usually able to get a supply through their guards or while working at outdoor labour. This explains why its sudden withdrawal from jails had had no ill effects generally. Yet the Santals' sense of deprivation points to their relative social isolation as a prison community.³⁵ They told Sheridan that outside prison they always suffered from sore mouths and throats when they were unable to acquire chewing tobacco.³⁶ Once Mouat learnt of the concession, however, he withdrew it. He maintained that the outbreak of mumps had not been caused by the lack of tobacco, and once again pointed to the need to balance the issues of punishment and privilege with the prevention of crime and the protection of society.³⁷ At the same time, according to the magistrate in charge of the jail, W.J. Wigram, it seems that the issue of tobacco to the Santals had caused considerable resentment on the part of other prisoners.³⁸

The tension between the punishment and medical treatment of prisoners inevitably led to disputes between jail officials and doctors. As noted above, the civil surgeon of Beerbhum jail was quick to call for the release of sick Santal prisoners. Neither was he reticent about bringing poor jail conditions to the attention of his superiors, writing in one weekly sanitary report in January 1856: 'Many of the santhals possess no warm clothing whatever and sleep almost naked on the bare earthen floor ... at this inclement season'.³⁹ Officiating Magistrate Thompson did not take kindly to this criticism, noting in his submission of the report to government that the prisoners had been issued with blankets, though there had been some delay.⁴⁰ Sheridan would not let the matter rest, complaining again and again about jail administrators' failure to supply Santals with warm clothing, and the issue of too few

³⁴ IOR P.145.35 Ben JC 3 Jan. 1856: Grey to Thompson, 29 Dec. 1855.

³⁵ IOR P.145.39 Ben JC 15 May 1856: Mouat to C.J. Buckland, Junior Secretary to Government Bengal, 25 Apr. 1856, enclosing district reports on the withdrawal of tobacco (Beerbhum Jail).

³⁶ IOR P.145.35 Ben JC 20 Mar. 1856: Sanitary report, week ending 8 March 1856; A.W. Russell, Under Secretary to Government Bengal, to R.J. Wigram, Officiating Magistrate Beerbhum, 25 Mar. 1856.

³⁷ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Mouat to Buckland, 28 Apr. 1856; Ben JC 12 June 1856: Mouat to Buckland, 25 Apr. 1856.

³⁸ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 12 June 1856: Wigram to Mouat, 18 Apr. 1856.

³⁹ IOR P.145.31 Ben JC 24 Jan. 1856: Weekly sanitary report of the Civil Surgeon on the state of the prisoners in the Beerbhum Jail for the week ending 12 Jan. 1856.

⁴⁰ IOR P.145.31 Ben JC 24 Jan. 1856: Note of Officiating Magistrate Rivers Thompson, n.d.

blankets of poor quality.⁴¹ By the time Magistrate Wigram returned to the district the following month little had changed. Though he conceded to the issue of two blankets to each Santal, he believed that sickness was to a large degree inevitable, and at least partly caused by the overindulgence of a community unused to good food.⁴² In response to Sheridan's criticisms, he wrote:

I cannot help having an idea that a good deal more illness among them has been occasioned by pampering and overfeeding than the reverse. Nothing can exceed Dr Sheridan's attention to the prisoners, but he is continually trying to procure some luxury or indulgence for them; in my opinion injudiciously, and this over pampering combined with the sense of confinement and comparative want of exercise is I believe the cause of a good deal of the illness that has prevailed.⁴³

Other factors were the thin clothes Santals customarily wore and jail administrators' refusal to allow them to light warming fires in prison. At the time of this letter, March 1856, over ten per cent of the Santals were sick in the jail hospital.⁴⁴

Wigram's opinions on the matter were strongly at variance with Santals' own perspectives on their punishment. Subaltern views on imprisonment are notoriously difficult to ascertain. Yet with respect to the Santals, there are some clues. Mouat reported that during a visit to Beerbhum jail in December 1855, he had received more requests for the removal of fetters and increases in rations than during his whole presidency wide tour of inspection the year before, when he had seen over four thousand prisoners. He wrote that the Santals 'generally entertain a very erroneous notion of the objects of imprisonment, and evidently consider themselves the victims of society'.⁴⁵ No substantive mention is made of imprisonment and/or transportation in surviving Santal accounts or songs of the *hool*, except that it took place.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in reading against the grain of colonial correspondence a sense of the agency of Santal prisoners emerges. Though the *de facto* separation of Santals in prison acted against their interests with respect to the illicit acquisition of tobacco, it

⁴¹ For instance IOR P.145.35 Ben JC 20 Mar. 1856: Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 16 Feb. 1856.

⁴² IOR P.145.35 Ben JC 20 Mar. 1856: Wigram to Russell, 22 Feb. 1856.

⁴³ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Wigram to Grey, 7 Apr. 1856.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ IOR P.145.30 Ben JC 17 Jan. 1856: Mouat's memo on Beerbhum Jail, 18 Dec. 1855.

⁴⁶ For instance in *Mare Hapram Ko Reak Katha (The Traditions and Institutions of the Santals)*, which had been dictated to a missionary by Santal Kolean Haram in 1871. The only other written Santal account of the *hool*, Chotrae Desmanjhi's, made no mention at all. See W.G. Archer, 'The Santal Rebellion', *Man in India*, 25, 4 (1945), 223-39.

could afford them relative advantage in other ways. Neither guards nor prisoners could speak Santali, meaning that jail officials lost a vital source of information about their charge: the prisoner informer. In March 1856, for instance, two hundred and fifty Santals escaped from Dumka Jail, apparently having planned to do so within earshot of the entire prison establishment.⁴⁷ Prison officials' failure to understand Santali perhaps also explains at least in part why they regarded Santal prisoners with a degree of ambivalence: on the one hand easily managed, on the other, according to administrators like Magistrate Wigram, 'an uncertain set'.⁴⁸ One is left pondering the huge possibilities for subversions of all kinds on their part, not least of which linguistic. In relation to this point, it is worth noting the case of a Santal convict returned from the Andamans penal settlement to the Indian mainland as 'insane' almost three decades later. The surgeon of the transportation committee in Bengal examined him and remarked that it was quite possible that because the man was 'uneducated and uncivilised', his 'clumsy, stupid and cunning' nature had been misunderstood. The medical officer at Alipur jail near Calcutta, the largest in the Bengal Presidency, added that because the convict could not speak Bengali very well, he seemed stupid and 'slow of understanding.'⁴⁹

As operations against the rebels continued in the districts during the military campaign against the *hool*, more and more Santals arrived in jail. This added to the problems of overcrowding and sickness, and of course raised the grim spectre of further rebellion and resistance. Colonial administrators were quick to express their authority in this respect. In March 1856, for instance, they marched seventy-five of the escaped Santal gang taken at Dumka back to Beerbhum, a two-day journey. They did not give them shelter, rest, food or blankets on the way. On arrival, sixty-eight were admitted to hospital. The remainder were crammed into Beerbhum prison, chained together in pairs, and expected to sleep on the bare earthen floor. Sheridan wrote of their 'extreme suffering' as they literally gasped for air. He urged a reduction in prison numbers or at the very least the removal of the Santals' fetters and the provision of clean straw for them to sleep on. Otherwise, he urged, they might as well

⁴⁷ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Wigram to Grey, 28 Mar. 1856. Seventy-five were later recaptured.

⁴⁸ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Wigram to Grey, 28 Mar., 1 Apr.; Wigram to Russell, 7 Apr. 1856.

⁴⁹ NAI Home (Port Blair) A May 1885, 129-33: note of C.J.J. Jackson, Medical Officer Alipur Jail, 3 Dec. 1884; note of G.D. Harris, Surgeon-Major and member of Transportation Committee, 5 Dec. 1884.

have been sentenced to death. By this time, there were about a hundred prisoners more than the jail was designed to hold (three hundred and seventy-five).⁵⁰ Just three months earlier, Mouat had likened such overcrowding in Bengal's jails to the Black Hole of Calcutta, that most evocative of colonial metaphors, warning district magistrates to guard against it.⁵¹ There was little the magistrate of Beerbhum could do to deny the problem. Even according to him, the number of sick had doubled in just one month, and a quarter of the Santal prisoners were in hospital.⁵²

The Bengal authorities were clearly aware of the agency of their potentially rebellious charge and, after the Dumka escape, ordered that one hundred of the most 'dangerous' offenders or those with the longest sentences to serve be sent to Alipur, which had the most stringent discipline in the whole presidency.⁵³ But the problem was not solved, for the transfer left Beerbhum free to receive more prisoners.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding practical concerns, Wigram did not take kindly to Sheridan's criticisms about the treatment of Santals jail, submitting his report to the Bengal government with a note stating that it exceeded what was expected of a civil surgeon. '[I]f I am not responsible for the safe keeping of the prisoners', he wrote, 'I must be able to secure them as I think best and I trust Government will decide whether I, and all the other officers connected with these prisoners are to be attacked in the strong language and charged with gross inhumanity and unnecessary cruelty.'⁵⁵ The government did indeed make a decision, but in support of Sheridan. It called for the implementation of Sheridan's suggestions and noted Wigram's 'want of proper care and attention'. Wigram suffered the further humiliation of the correspondence being copied to his civil surgeon and the inspector-general of jails.⁵⁶ By this time, a third of the original gang of seventy-five Santals marched from Dumka were still in the jail hospital. The jail officers transferred the remaining fifty to Alipur.⁵⁷ With Mouat

⁵⁰ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Weekly sanitary reports Beerbhum Jail, 29 Mar., 6 Apr. 1856.

⁵¹ IOR P.145.30 Ben JC 17 Jan. 1856: Mouat's circular, 26 Dec. 1855.

⁵² IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 6 Apr. 1856.

⁵³ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Grey to Wigram, 5 Apr. 1856.

⁵⁴ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Wigram to Russell, 7 Apr. 1856.

⁵⁵ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 6 Apr. 1856 - Wigram's remarks, n.d.

⁵⁶ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Buckland to Wigram, Mouat and Sheridan, 18 Apr. 1856.

⁵⁷ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Weekly sanitary report Beerbhum Jail, 20 Apr. 1856.

adding his support to the Bengal government, Wigram meanwhile assured them that he would no longer interfere in matters of jail discipline.⁵⁸

As this controversy shows, at least part of the reason that Santals suffered so greatly was their sudden arrival in big groups after periods of socio-economic deprivation, the authorities' concurrent failure to issue any or enough warm clothes, bedding, and blankets, or to allow the lighting of warming fires. This meant that they were prone to illnesses like dysentery. In some respects, as visiting Sessions Judge O.W. Malet remarked, such treatment was unavoidable. Jails like Beerbhum were unprepared for the reception of large numbers of rebels, and space, blankets, and provisions were all in short supply. Moreover, European officials were keen to avoid prisoner escapes, especially by those convicted as rebels, and so subjected prisoners to harsh discipline. Their Indian guards were no doubt complicit in this, for if prisoners escaped they faced the wrath of their superiors.⁵⁹

And yet despite the recognition by some prison doctors like Sheridan that Santal sickness was the result of the nature of rebellion and their treatment subsequently, more usually officials represented it as caused by the intrinsic nature of the Santal body itself. They viewed tribal communities used to living in the open air as suffering more from incarceration than other prisoners, and argued that they fell ill with what commonly they described as 'mental depression'.⁶⁰ Indeed, during the same period migrant *dhangars* suffered high death rates at sea, when conditions on board overcrowded indenture ships bore a strong resemblance to those in colonial prisons.⁶¹ Officials used the language of contagion, described so eloquently by Guha in relation to peasant insurrection more generally, liberally. They represented Santals as both physically and morally infectious. Mouat wrote that like the Kols 'and all similar tribes of savages', there was 'pestilence and contagion into all places in which they are confined'. This could be explained by the type of food Santals customarily ate, 'the flesh of what most nations regard as vermin' (snakes), and their liberal indulgence in alcohol. Moreover, like all tribal communities, they responded to imprisonment with a 'peculiar despondency', causing depression and thus disease.

⁵⁸ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Wigram to Buckland, 23 Apr. 1856, Mouat to Buckland, 30 Apr. 1856.

⁵⁹ IOR P.145.46 Ben JC 4 Sept. 1856: Remarks by Sessions Judge O.W. Malet, 13 June 1856.

⁶⁰ IOR P.145.66 Ben JC 9 July 1857: Memo on Bhagalpur Jail, 27 Jan. 1857.

⁶¹ Ghosh, 'A Market', 20-1.

What is most significant about this discourse is Mouat's direct comparison between *adivasi* communities and 'wild beasts'. There was no question in his mind as to the relative development of India's *adivasis*, for he compared the Santals directly with the 'monkey tribes' who, he claimed, always died once they were imprisoned.⁶² For him, there was little difference in some of the physical symptoms displayed by both 'wild animals' and 'wild tribes'.⁶³ Other prison administrators compared the Santals with supposedly uncivilized communities. The civil surgeon of Akyab, for instance, wrote of their similarity with the 'half-tamed' Mughls under his charge.⁶⁴ Thus within the medical discourses of colonial jails, notions of primitivism, wildness, and sickness became inextricably intertwined.

As unrest in the districts and the threat of prison-based resistance receded, these discourses were further developed to transform 'tribal rebels' into 'poor Santals'. To some degree, this was reflected in Sheridan's sympathetic eye with regard to high prison death-rates. Also, it became related to claims about the 'natural state' of Santals, which denied them political consciousness. For instance, the Bengal authorities maintained in May 1856 that most Santals were in prison because their leaders had taken advantage of their 'barbaric ignorance and superstition'.⁶⁵ They found Santal prisoners easy to manage, and this also fed into their descriptive transformation. Colonial categories of rule were of course inherently contingent and unstable. An excellent example of this is produced through a close reading of the transportation of large numbers of convicted thugs to the Burmese penal settlements during the 1830s and 1840s. There they were transformed from the scourges of India into what penal administrators described as the most orderly prisoners in their charge.⁶⁶ The Santals too came to embody such complex slippages. By March 1856, there were forty-four Santals in Alipur jail. Superintendent H. Fergusson was effusive in his praise for their exemplary behaviour. They had, he said, submitted to being washed and having their hair shaved, and after being put to work had become expert gunny weavers and the best rope spinners in the prison. In fact, their work had been

⁶² IOR P.145.30 Ben JC 17 Jan. 1856: Mouat's memo on Beerbhum Jail, 18 Dec. 1855; P.145.31 Ben JC 24 Jan. 1856: Mouat to Grey, 29 Dec. 1855.

⁶³ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 12 June 1856: Mouat to Wigram, 5 Apr. 1856.

⁶⁴ IOR P.145.52 Ben JC 11 Dec 1856: J.W. Mountjoy, Civil Assistant Surgeon Akyab, to C. Mackinnon, Superintending Surgeon Barrackpur, 27 Sept. 1856.

⁶⁵ IOR P.145.37 Ben JC 8 May 1856: Buckland to Wigram, 23 Apr. 1856.

⁶⁶ Clare Anderson, *Legible Bodies: race, criminality and colonialism in South Asia* (Oxford, Berg: 2004), 28-30.

selected for display at the forthcoming exhibition of jail manufacture that Mouat was organising in Calcutta. The Santals were not savages, but touchingly attached to their homes and families.⁶⁷

Almost certainly part of the reason Fergusson was so effusive in his praise with respect to the management of Santhal prisoners was the avoidance of conflicts over issues relating to caste that were so central to the multiple meanings local communities attached to north Indian jails in the lead up to the mutiny-rebellion of 1857-8.⁶⁸ Santals could be put to any type of labour, and did not protest against particular types of caste-based occupation. For instance, they were chosen to work as *mehtars* (sweepers), a lowly occupation that involved the disposal of human waste.⁶⁹ Subsequently, the Bengal authorities decided that the Santals would not be transported, but would remain in Alipur jail where they were easily managed and worked, and they enjoyed good health.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, a call for information about their families was forwarded to their home districts, for the Santals were keen to receive news.⁷¹ An interesting aside in relation to the Santals' supposed attachment to their families was the preference for tribal migrants among Mauritian sugar planters, on the grounds that they had fewer concerns about migrating in family groups and thus were more likely to form a population of permanent settlers.⁷² It has been estimated that about seventeen per cent of the total migration to Mauritius (by far the largest recipient of indentured labour in the British Empire) during the period 1842-70 were *dhangars*, the colonial term for *adivasi* migrants. The history of indentured immigration also shows that the devastating mortality suffered by Santals in prison was not unique. Death rates amongst tribal migrants were ten times that of others signing contracts of indenture. In the Mauritian case, this eventually led to the favouring of non-tribal groups in indentured recruitment, notably those from South India.⁷³

⁶⁷ IOR P.145.44 Ben JC 5 June 1856: A. Fergusson, Magistrate 24-Parganas, to Russell, 17 Mar. 1856. On the Santals' work chosen for the exhibition, see also IOL P.145.61 30 Apr. 1857: Mouat to Buckland, 21 Mar. 1857.

⁶⁸ Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857-8: Prisons, prisoners and resistance* (London, Anthem: 2007), chs 2, 3.

⁶⁹ IOR P.145.65 Ben JC 2 July 1857: Mouat to Buckland, 24 Mar. 1857.

⁷⁰ IOR P.145.44 Ben JC 5 June 1856: Buckland to Fergusson, 29 May 1856.

⁷¹ IOR P.145.44 Ben JC 5 June 1856: Statement containing the particulars respecting the families of the Santal Prisoners confined in Alipur Jail, 4 Apr. 1856.

⁷² Marina Carter, *Sirdars, Servants and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1995), 104.

⁷³ Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*, 104-5.

In the eyes of colonial officials Santals became model jail inmates. What made them attractive as prisoners was to a large degree what earlier had made them attractive as railway workers, and later as indentured labourers. As well as being well versed in seasonal migration, colonial officials considered *adivasi* migrants more generally as unrestrained by caste taboos, and thus willing to perform menial labour. Kaushik Ghosh argues that such de-casting was another way of putting them outside the pale of civilization.⁷⁴ And yet as a group the Santals present a clear contrast with other socially marginal caste Hindu communities who used their experience in jail as a means of launching periodic claims for social mobility.⁷⁵ Within the prison system, colonial officials came to regard Santals so well that district magistrates often requested them specifically for road labour projects.⁷⁶ Their expertise in prison manufactures also came to be admired widely.⁷⁷ Even magistrate Wigram in Beerbhum, who had once regarded the Santal prisoners under his charge as an ‘uncertain set’, wrote against their transfer to road labour because he found them so skilled at indoor manufactures.⁷⁸ Their conduct was so exemplary that in February 1857 Superintendent Fergusson arranged for the one hundred and sixty-eight Santals then in Alipur jail to be given a conditional pardon on the condition that they go to the Sunderbans to work on land clearing projects. In April, cholera broke out amongst the transferred men and twenty-one of them died. With the exception of three men who were too ill to move, the remainder asked to be readmitted to jail rather than face certain death in the jungles. Fergusson saw this as evidence of their general trustworthiness, and asked government to issue them a conditional pardon in exchange for their agreement to work anywhere where there were labour shortages.⁷⁹ The commissioner of the Santal Parganas, however, advised against the measure. By now, it was June 1857. After a series of military mutinies in the north, and the outbreak of civil revolt, rumours about the fragility of British rule were circulating, he

⁷⁴ Ghosh, ‘A Market’, 21-2.

⁷⁵ Anderson, *The Indian Uprising*, ch. 2.

⁷⁶ IOR P.145.47 Ben JC 18 Sept. 1856: W.H. Henderson, Magistrate Chittagong, to Mouat, 2 June 1856.

⁷⁷ IOR P.145.47 Ben JC 18 Sept. 1856: Fergusson to Buckland, 21 June 1856.

⁷⁸ IOR P.145.47 Ben JC 18 Sept. 1856: Wigram to Buckland, 5 July 1856.

⁷⁹ IOR P.145.68 Ben JC 30 July 1857: Fergusson to E.H. Lushington, in charge of the office of the Secretary to Government Bengal, 14 Apr. 1857.

said, and the return or release of the men would agitate the already rebellious Santals in the district further.⁸⁰

The Mutiny-Rebellion and its Aftermath

When mutineers and rebels broke open Hazaribag and Maunbhum jails during the 1857-8 revolt, they released hundreds of Santals. Their liberation caused huge concern to the colonial administration, for they became involved in what the officiating commissioner of Chota Nagpur described as ‘widespread plundering’ in the district.⁸¹ In one attack, six or seven hundred Santals marched on a village in Rampur. As during the *hool* they were accompanied by a drum, a flag, and music.⁸² Subsequently, a handful of Santals were convicted of offences like rebellion, *dacoity*, and plunder connected with the revolt and imprisoned on the mainland or shipped as transportation convicts to Port Blair in the Andaman Islands, though we know almost nothing of their experiences there.

As the British reoccupied and secured jails like Hazaribag and Maunbhum in the aftermath of the crisis of 1857-8, it faced a new set of problems relating to what to do with hundreds of newly-convicted prisoners, many of whom were in poor health as a result of the deprivations of revolt. It was not long before the jails became overcrowded. Alipur jail, for instance, was almost fifty per cent over capacity. It was designed to hold a maximum of 1307 prisoners, but at this time its daily average rose to 1895.⁸³ Later, Inspector-General of Prisons Mouat described the ‘formidable sickness’ that had gripped the jail at the time. During 1858 there were serious outbreaks of cholera and gangrene, caused by the constant arrival of sick prisoners and insufficient or unsuitable rations for ‘up-country’ inmates from the plains. Four hundred and forty prisoners died during the year. Mouat wrote that he hoped that such ‘disastrous a history’ would never be repeated.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ IOR P.145.68 Ben JC 30 July 1857: G.U. Yule, Commissioner Santal Parganas, to Lushington, 16 June 1857.

⁸¹ IOR P.145.75 Ben JC 1 Oct. 1857: E.T. Dalton, Officiating Commissioner Chota Nagpur, to A.R. Young, Secretary to Government Bengal, 14 Sept. 1857.

⁸² IOR P.146.44 Ben JP (jails) Oct. 1861: Dalton to H. Bell, Under Secretary to Government Bengal, 19 Aug. 1861.

⁸³ IOR V/24/2063: Fred. J. Mouat, *Report on the Jails of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1858-9* (Calcutta, John Gray General Printing Department – Report and Appendices; Special Reports of Jails Alipur Jail Press: 1859) (henceforth Mouat’s report, 1858-9), 31.

⁸⁴ Mouat’s report, 1858-9: App. I: special reports of the jails in the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for the year 1858-59, 74.

In August 1857 the government decided that all male life prisoners, including Santals, who were fit enough to work, would be transferred to the penal settlement in Akyab where there was an acute labour shortage.⁸⁵ The death-rates suffered by prisoners in Alipur were nothing to those of this set of prisoners. During the first year, a phenomenal eighty per cent of a daily average of three hundred and eighty-four prisoners died.⁸⁶ Although the government had ordered the retention in Alipur of infirm or elderly inmates, in effect the jail authorities took the opportunity to dispose of every prisoner it could.⁸⁷ Many of the men sent to Akyab were in a terrible state. Of the first batch of eighty convicts, for instance, just eight were fit for labour. Only sixteen men were younger than fifty years, and their average age was fifty-eight. On arrival in Akyab the commissioner split the prisoners into two gangs, putting one to work at the civil station and the other at clearing jungle in the Noakhally salt water marshes. Most of the convicts, referred to by Civil Assistant Surgeon J.W. Mountjoy described as 'Hindu' and 'Bengali', went on hunger-strike. It was not long before cholera, bowel disorders, and fever broke out in both gangs.⁸⁸ One hundred convicts died, including a man who committed suicide. Mountjoy claimed that this was the inevitable result of 'moral causes acting on the physical frame' after the British quashed the revolt. Therefore, convicts had resorted to 'voluntary starvation' and refused to take medicine.⁸⁹

At the end of 1859 the government of Bengal instructed Mouat to conduct an enquiry into the devastating death-rates experienced by convicts in Akyab. By the time of he visited the settlement, most of the remaining Indian convicts had died.⁹⁰ Mouat disagreed with Mountjoy's assessment, and concluded that high mortality was the result of the convicts' work in the salt marshes, for their camp had been ill-chosen and no sanitary measures had been put in place. Moreover, it had been unusually hot

⁸⁵ Mouat's report, 1858-9, 34. As these were controlled by the Bengal Presidency, strictly speaking the prisoners were subject to prison transfer not transportation. This avoided any potential difficulties in changing the terms of their original sentence.

⁸⁶ Mouat's report, 1858-9, 28.

⁸⁷ This was a common feature of local policy in relation to transportation. For the case of Mauritius, see Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-53* (Basingstoke, Macmillan: 2000), 23-5.

⁸⁸ Mouat's report, 1857-8, App. I: Mountjoy to R. Shepherd, Second Principal Assistant Commissioner Arakan, 11 Sept. 1857.

⁸⁹ Mouat's report, 1857-8, App. I: Mountjoy to Shepherd, 11 Sept. 1857.

⁹⁰ IOR V/24/2063: Fred. J. Mouat, *Report on the Jails of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1859-60* (Calcutta, Savielle and Cranenburgh Printers, Bengal Printing Co. Ltd: 1860) (henceforth Mouat's report, 1859-60): App. I (special reports), 38.

and wet.⁹¹ Mountjoy, however, remained convinced that the convicts had died because of widespread hunger-striking. ‘The remedy’, he claimed, ‘is in the hands of the convicts ... There is no reason, but their own whining obstinacy, why they should die.’⁹² While it is impossible to pinpoint the exact cause of high death-rates during 1858, it seems likely that they were the result of a combination of factors: the poor condition in which most of the prisoners arrived, the climate, working conditions, poor sanitary provision, and the prisoners’ refusal of medical treatment and food. The latter of course took on a whole new dimension in the context of the mutiny-rebellion, in which the public perception of widespread colonial violations of caste in jails, particularly the introduction of the system of common messing, was so central.⁹³ This was foremost in Mountjoy’s mind, for he compared the ‘pampered’ prisoner with the ‘petted’ army. He wrote that even if convicts were given purple silks (to indicate their nobility) they would remain as dissatisfied as the recently mutinous sepoys. Caste objections to the cultural conditions of imprisonment and transportation, notably with regard to rations, were evidence of the ‘gross ignorance and prejudice’ through which they ‘whined, cried, sulked with their food, became skeletons ... and died’.⁹⁴ Typically, the voices of the convicts themselves are absent from the account and so it is not clear whether the hunger-strike had broader political motives or aims. Nevertheless, there is some suggestive evidence that when the British transported mutineer-rebel convicts to the Andaman Islands after 1858, they suffered appalling death-rates, perhaps for similar reasons.⁹⁵

The Santal convicts alone escaped this devastating mortality, with Mountjoy describing them as ‘very robust and splendid fellows’.⁹⁶ It seems that they complied with the Akyab convict regime with respect to rationing. Mountjoy reported that Santal convicts ate well, and so remained ‘sleek, laughing and in good condition’. He lamented the fact that other Indians did not possess ‘the wisdom of the barbarian’.⁹⁷ The Santals both ate their jail rations and took advantage of their employment at outdoor labour to collect herbs, leaves, and other foodstuffs, a practice which

⁹¹ IOR P.146.28 Ben JP June 1860: Thompson to Mouat, 29 Dec. 1859; Mouat’s memo, 30 Apr. 1860.

⁹² Mouat’s report, 1859-60, App. I, 118.

⁹³ Anderson, *The Indian Uprising*, ch. 2.

⁹⁴ Mouat’s report, 1859-60, App. I, 119.

⁹⁵ Mouat’s report, 1859-60: App. I, 114.

⁹⁶ Mouat’s report, 1857-8, App. I, 111-13; Mountjoy’s annual report of Akyab jail hospital, 1858.

⁹⁷ Mouat’s report, 1858-9: Annual report Akyab jail hospital: Mountjoy to Shepherd, 11 Sept. 1857 (n.p.)

Mountjoy urged other convicts to follow.⁹⁸ It was not long before local officials promoted Santal *majhis* (chiefs) to *burkundauses*, or overseers over ordinary convicts.⁹⁹ This was a considerable elevation of penal rank awarded to few convicts. For Indians of rank in the settlement, the men Mountjoy called ‘Hindus’ and ‘Hinduised Muslims’, this must have been an extraordinary inversion of the social order, and one that could only add to the grievances they felt as transportation convicts.

Meanwhile, at the end of 1859 the Indian authorities extended a general pardon to Santal prisoners still in jail for rebellion or plunder committed during the *hool*. Fergusson’s successor at Alipur jail was no less effusive in his praise for the nineteen Santals then remaining there, writing that their conduct was excellent and that he had never had cause to reprimand them.¹⁰⁰ Another official described them as the best prisoners in jail, writing, ‘They are always willing to work and are never found malingering, are patient, contented and never grumble, and it has never been found necessary to punish any of them.’¹⁰¹ The government directly referred to their pardon and release as a sort of moral bargain, or clemency in exchange for guarantees of their future loyalty and good conduct.¹⁰² In 1861, and considering once again their model behaviour in prison, the Bengal government also pardoned Santals convicted of riots attended with murder during the *hool*. Only those concerned in murder or other violent crimes were kept in jail.¹⁰³ At the same time, the government also made moves to extend the same provisions to those Santals in other prisons for the same offences.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Despite the insights attempted in this article, evidence of post-*hool* experiences of Santals is at best fragmentary. Of particular interest is the question of what happened to those Santals who managed to evade the clutches of the colonial courts during

⁹⁸ Mouat’s report, 1859-60, App. I, 119.

⁹⁹ Mouat’s report, 1859-60, App. I, 115.

¹⁰⁰ IOR P.146.30 Ben JP (jails) Aug. 1860: ‘Statement of the nineteen santal [Santal] prisoners who were in confinement in the Alipore [Alipur] Jail on the 23rd November 1859’.

¹⁰¹ IOR P.146.44 Ben JP (jails) Oct. 1861: ‘Statement of Santal prisoners confined in the jails of the Lower Provinces except Alipur’, 9 Aug. 1861.

¹⁰² IOR P.146.21 Ben JP 20 Oct. 1859: Thompson to Commissioner Santal Parganas, 19 Oct. 1859.

¹⁰³ IOR P.146.44 Ben JP (jails) Oct. 1861: J. Munro, Officiating Under Secretary to Government Bengal, to W. Le F. Robinson, Officiating Commissioner Santal Parganas (Bhagulpur Division), 9 Oct. 1861.

¹⁰⁴ IOR P.146.44 Ben JP (jails) Oct. 1861: Munro to Robinson, 9 Oct. 1861.

1855-6. Did they continue their tradition of seasonal migration, or perhaps sign contracts of indenture to overseas sugar colonies like Mauritius as was suggested at the time? Moreover, to what extent were the Santal rebels of 1855 involved in the tribal rebellion that gripped the district of Chota Nagpur two years' later?¹⁰⁵ Reports at the time suggest that mutineer-rebels liberated Hazaribag and Maunbhum jails in the middle of 1857 in order to release the *hool* Santals imprisoned there. To the British, the prospect of their crossing into the far from pacified neighbouring districts and combining with their fellow Santals was extremely worrying.¹⁰⁶ It is clear that the British later imprisoned or transported Santals for mutiny-rebellion offences. In 1861 over one hundred were still in prison in mainland jails, most for the offences of plunder or riot rather than rebellion *per se*.¹⁰⁷ The colonial perspective was that they had taken advantage of widespread social anarchy for their own personal gain. They were not, the commissioner of Chota Nagpur assured his colonial superiors, 'political' prisoners.¹⁰⁸ His comments of course speak to a narrow definition rather than a nuanced understanding of the social meaning of tribal insurgency. And, as we have seen the same linguistic turn was employed by officials writing of Santal prisoners in the aftermath of the *hool*.

After the 1855 revolt, Santal prisoners experienced appalling death-rates in prisons. There was a combination of reasons for this, including their already poor health in the aftermath of the *hool* and their admission to jail in large numbers, leading to overcrowding and shortages in clothing, bedding, and rations. And yet colonial discourses commonly heaped the blame for elevated mortality on the Santal body politic and its intrinsic savagery and/or embodied wildness. This presented a stark contrast to the overseas penal settlement at Akyab, where officials used the same discourses in representing Santal rebels as the healthiest convicts of all. At the same time, Santals seemed uninterested in using their experience of incarceration or transportation for the purpose of social mobility and were apparently willing to take on tasks usually performed by low or outcaste communities, and to learn a variety of penal trades. Discourses of wildness thus became intertwined with corresponding

¹⁰⁵ On the Kols, see Bhadra, 'Four Rebels', 256-63. See also K.S. Singh, 'The "Tribals" and the 1857 Uprising', *Social Scientist*, 296-9 (1998), 76-85.

¹⁰⁶ IOR P.145.72 Ben JC 10 Sept. 1857: S. Grey, Assistant Magistrate Govindpur, to Young, 8 Aug. 1857; IOR P.146.3 Ben JC 12 Nov. 1857: Dalton to Young, 25 Oct. 1857.

¹⁰⁷ IOR P.146.44 Ben JP (jails) Oct. 1861: Statement of Santal prisoners confined in the jails of the Lower Provinces except Alipur, 9 Aug. 1861.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*: Dalton to H. Bell, Under Secretary to Government Bengal, 19 Aug. 1861.

understandings about ‘the model prisoner’. This led to some remarkable social inversions, including the appointment of Santal convict *majhis* as convict overseers in Akyab. Thus the Santal as ‘rebel’, ‘barbarian’, ‘victim’, ‘sage’, and ‘model prisoner’ existed in discursive parallel, with some unintended outcomes.