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## **The Blood of the Adivasi Martyrs**

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**Abstract:** This article reflects on the Banjhi Massacre of 1985 and the martyrdom of Anthony Murmu, an ex-MP and ex-Jesuit, who had been working for the welfare of the Adivasis in Jharkhand. The martyrdom of Murmu has borne fruit. It also reflects on the hopes and aspiration of the Santal tribals in this region, which is the largest Adivasi group in India, with a population of 7,600,000.

**Keywords:** Santal Tribes, Anthony Murmu, Banjhi Massacre, Martyr

For the Adivasis (formerly called tribals or aboriginals) of Jharkhand, April 19, 1985, was a blood-drenched day. On that fateful day, their respected leader Anthony Murmu (1930-1985; affectionately called 'Murmu Baba') and 14 others were felled down by the combined force of non-tribal exploiters and the Sahibganj district administration in erstwhile Bihar. This article

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reflects on this incident, which took place 35 years ago. It traces the history and causes of this tragic event and draws some lessons and hope for today.

### **The Atrocity of 1985**

The scene of the atrocity was Banjhi market, 20 kilometres from the district HQ of Sahibganj in Jharkhand. The 15 victims included Ex-MP Anthony Murmu, a 12-year-old boy and a scheduled caste person.

The prolonged exploitation of the tribal population by non-tribal moneylenders and traders coupled with land grabbing mafia went on unabated. The gullible Adivasis had become the target point of exploitation by Banjhi's business community which included Muslims and Hindus.

Extortionist money lending was rampant. It became a convenient route for moneylenders and petty traders to grab people's cultivable land from defaulters. The illegal timber trading in connivance with the corrupt forest department personnel caused depletion of forest cover. To add insult to injury, the timber mafia would stack their stolen timber on Adivasi land to avoid detection and to cunningly shift the blame.

The snobbish and derisive behaviour of the non-Adivasis towards the Adivasis by the exploiting community was keenly felt by the Adivasis. Tension was building up. The flicker that burst into a flame of anger and resentment was the suspected murder of Santal Adivasi Matru Murmu from a fish pond on March 25, 1985. He had gone missing for a week.

On a common fishing day, Moti Bhagat, a non-tribal, had instructed the Santals not to cast their net in one portion of the pond. Minutes later, Santals fished out the dead body of Matru Murmu from that very spot.

The Santals got agitated. Moti Bhagat disappeared through an escape route. The police were slow in taking action. Though inquest

was done, the body remained in the open for three days, preyed upon by dogs and birds and without post-mortem. No one was arrested and the police did not bother to conduct a proper enquiry. That again caused anger and revulsion among the people.

Three weeks later Some Adivasis, wanting to plough their land for cultivation, sought to get the illegally stacked timber from their land. Sadik Mia and other non-tribals, who had stacked such timber, resisted it by firing in the air to frighten the Santals. The firing went on for a long time (Sarkar, 2005).

The Santals could not stomach such highhanded action by the non-Adivasis. About 600 of them gathered outside the market for a meeting. The non-Adivasis sent a quick signal to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) of Sahibganj that they were going to be attacked by armed Santals.

The SDM came with a police contingent. The Santals chose five of their representatives with Anthony Murmu as their leader to convey their grievances to the SDM. But the result turned out to be disastrous. Prompted by the rumour mongering non-Adivasis, the SDM ordered firing. The firing operation was done by the police force and the waiting money lenders with country guns. 14 people lay dead in the market area while Anthony Murmu was not seen anywhere. It was learnt later that Murmu's dead body was rushed to far away Bhagalpur district for post-mortem.

### **Murmu, the Martyr**

An Ex-Jesuit, Murmu was at the time an Ex-member of the Parliament (Jose, 2021: 100f). Due to political compulsions to serve his people better for their welfare, he opted out into politics

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As a grassroots social activist, he had the people's cause at heart. He had an ear to the ground. He was a born singer. Equipped with musical and composing talents, he organised a cultural troupe and conducted animation programs in villages. His popular techniques gathered crowds and they imbibed his messages. He was their 'Murmu Baba'. The civil administration, fed with rumours from non-Adivasi community, had their eyes on Murmu.

After felling Murmu and others, a Commission of Enquiry was constituted by the then Bihar state government. Nothing came out of the Commission's findings. The unfeeling presiding judge who enquired into the atrocity gave a clean chit to the district administration and to the murderers. As if adding insult to injury, he made a tongue-in-cheek statement: 'It was a pity that so many people lost their lives.'

PUCL (Bihar) conducted its own enquiry. The team was headed by Dr. Prabhakar Sinha, Acting President, PUCL Bihar, and was assisted by Sri. Ravi Shankar Prasad, Advocate, Patna H.C., (current Law Minister in Modi government), Adv. Jawahar Prasad Karn, Patna H.C., and Dr. Shashi Bhushan, Social Scientist, A.N. Sinha Institute, Patna.

Their report spared no words in pointing out the collusion between the police and the traders in exploiting the Adivasis. It also pointed out that the Enquiry Commission ordered by the Bihar government was a pre-planned ploy to suppress the truth and to give a lean chit to the administration and the business community.

Late Advocate Basudeo Besra (1985) asserted that "the Commission was one-sided, government-controlled and a mock-opera. Its operation and findings were on pre-planned lines to cater to the dictates of the government. Such actions are totally unacceptable to the Adivasis."

## Conclusion: Hopes and Aspirations of the Santals

The blood of the martyrs has given birth to a strong movement among the Adivasis of the area to free themselves from the clutches of money lenders and extortionists.

Through a slow and steady process of awareness building, initiated by NGOs like Sona Santal Samaj Samiti, the once victimized people have reclaimed their land and given a fitting burial to the notorious money lending system. The Jesuits of Dumka Raiganj province played a very supporting role in building up the Sona Santal Samaj Samiti.

Today self-reliance through saving schemes, cultivation of their own land and protection of the forest cover and self-rule through Panchayat Raj provisions are the priorities of the Adivasis of the area.

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