

Tantya Bhil: India's Robin Hood

It is an indisputable fact that freedom fighters have all along been termed as rebels by the powers that be it the Mughal Empire of Aurangzeb or the British Rule. Tantya Bhil was one of the greatest revolutionaries who waged an armed struggle against the British Rule for twelve years and endeared himself to the masses by virtue of his indomitable courage and passion to uproot the foreign rule. Political parties and educated class launched forceful movement for ending the British Rule. But much before these movements, tribal communities and revolutionary like Tantya Bhil raised a banner of revolt against the British rule. Tantya Bhil became a symbol of the feelings of tribals and general people.

About one hundred twenty years ago Tantya Bhil emerged as a great hero of the masses and became since then a long cherished pride of Bhil tribe. He epitomized the indomitable courage, exceptional agility and organizing skill.

Tantya Bhil used to plunder the government treasuries of the British government and wealth of their sycophants used to distribute it among the poor and needy. In fact, he was the Messiah of the have-nots. He was popularly called Mama by people of all age groups. This address of Tantya became so popular that the Bhills still feel proud in being addressed as Mama. He used to reach out to those who were in need of financial help in a miraculous manner.

The news of the arrest of Tantya Bhil was prominently published in November 10, 1889 issue of the New York Times. In this news he was described as the Robin Hood of India.



Tantya Mama(centre) at time of arrest

Tantya Bhil was born at village Badada in Pandhana tahasil of East Nimar (Khandwa) of erstwhile Central Provinces. He wanted to teach a lesson to the British and to realize the Bhil's dream of an equitable society. He was fired with a passion to free India from British subjugation. He broke the jail many times. He was skillful in Guerilla warfare. He was also a great shooter and proficient in traditional archery. 'Davas' and 'Falias' were his main weapons. He had also learnt to handle guns.

Right from his young age he lived in dense forests, valleys, ravines and mountains all his life measuring swords with the British and Holkar State's armies. He inflicted reverses on the police of mighty British Empire and eluded them for many years. Thousands of people were arrested and hundreds of them were thrown behind bars on the charge of helping Tantya.

Ultimately, Tantya was arrested due to treachery of Ganpat, the husband of his formal sister. He was kept in the Central India Agency jail in the British Residency area at Indore. Later, he was taken to Jabalpur under strict police guard. He was heavily chained and kept in Jabalpur jail where the British officers tortured him inhumanly. All types of atrocities were perpetrated on him. The Sessions Court, Jabalpur sentenced him to be hanged till death on October 19, 1889. The British government was so scared that even today it is not known as to when and on which date he was hanged. It is generally believed that after hanging him his body was thrown near Kalapani railway station on Khandwa rail route near Indore. The spot where his wooden effigies were placed is considered to be the Samadhi of Tantya Mama. Even today all the train drivers stop the train for a moment as a mark of respect to Tantya Mama.

Tantya Bhil is a cult figure in tribal belts of Nimar, Malwa, Dhar-Jhabua, Betul, Hoshangabad, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan. Most stories and songs about his life and deeds were composed in Nimar region. Poems and songs eulogizing him are also popular in Malwi, Marathi, Gujarati and Rajasthani.

With a view to encouraging tribal talents Madhya Pradesh government has instituted a Rs one lakh Jannayak Tantya Bhil Award after this great tribal hero. The annual award will be given to a tribal youth in recognition of his or her achievements in education and sports.

This article has been taken from the Madhya Pradesh department of Public Affairs article "Tableau of Madhya Pradesh-Tantya Bhil, The "Indian Robin Hood" by Dinesh Malviya released for Republic Day 2009, seen at : <http://www.mpinfo.org/mpinfonew/english/articles/2009/210109lekh06.asp>