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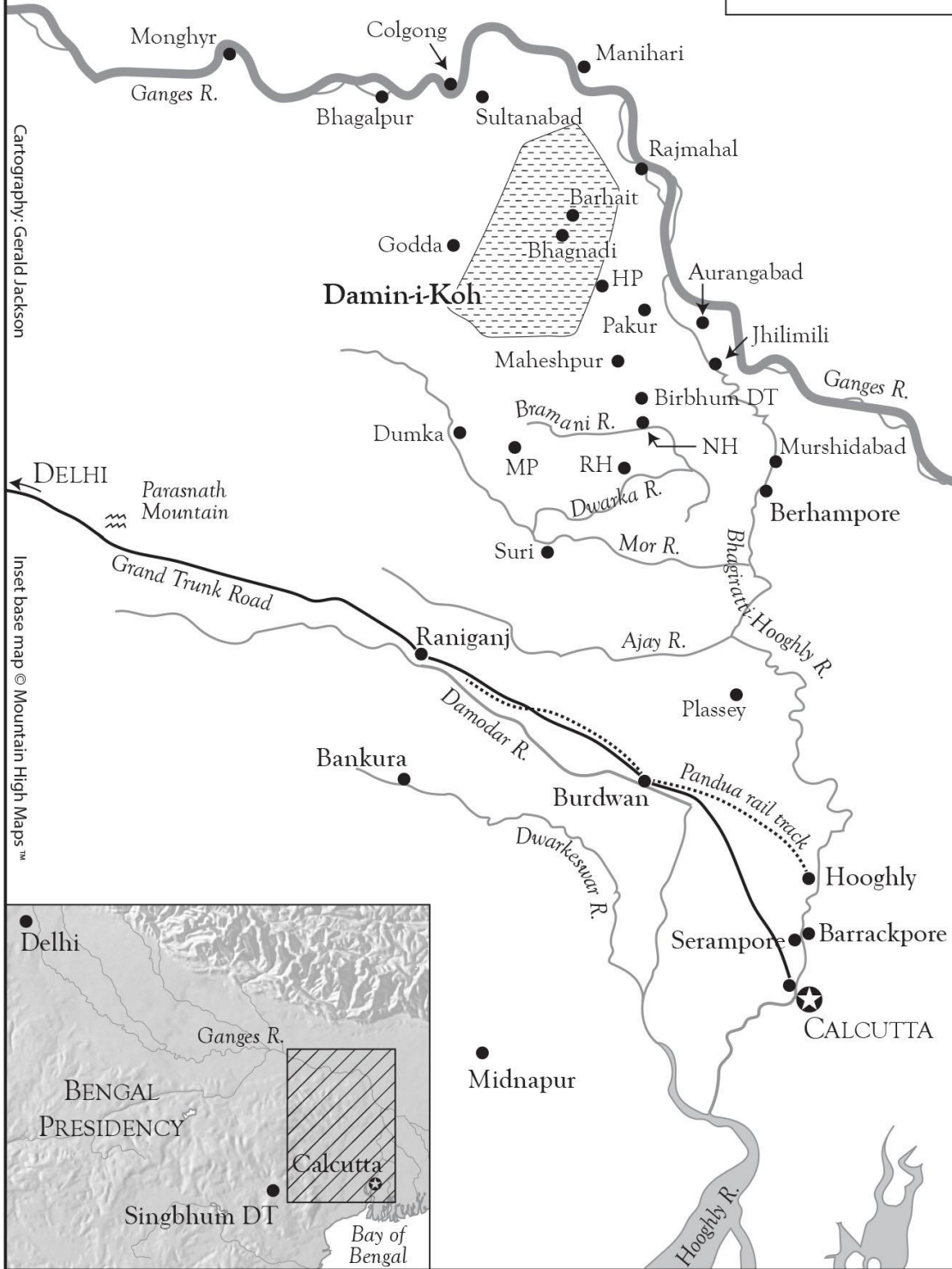
The Call of Ṭḥakur:

The Santal Rebellion 1855–1856

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Summary of *The Call of Ṭḥakur: The Santal Rebellion 1855–1856*

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This is a summary of *The Call of Ṭḥakur: The Santal Rebellion 1855–1856*, submitted to the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Copenhagen for the degree of dr.phil. Wednesday, DATE.

Two themes link the chapters in this study together. The first is ‘the call of Ṭḥakur’, which forms part of the title of the book. This theme is investigated using performative ritual studies. The other theme concerns how marginal groups attempt to develop strategies, including discursive strategies, to improve their cultural and economic situation, and when and why such arguments are taken seriously by the dominant groups they live among. The latter theme frames the study and is featured in the introduction and conclusion, but it is also pursued in the chapters in between, which argue against Marxist and Gramscian materialist interpretations of the rebellion. Throughout these discussions, it is maintained that the rebellion was carried out by an isolated tribal people outside the ritual order of society, and that it is untenable to interpret it as a general peasant rising.

Theoretical context¹

The study aims to engage in a critical discussion with scholarly voices arguing that only minimal and unimportant differences separate so-called tribes (Ādivāsīs, Scheduled Tribes, indigenous peoples or other similar designations for the tribal peoples) and the majority population in India, among whom the tribes continue to live. This argument is put forward on the backdrop of large-scale historical studies that identify the overall similarities between minority populations and the peoples they live among. In India, this has been treated in S. Guha’s historical study of the *Environment and Ethnicity in India*² wherein he sees tribal peoples as having been integrated into larger economies since the 13th century. G.S. Ghurye’s study on the Scheduled Tribes³ similarly identifies cultural resemblances between the cultures

¹ Large parts of this introduction are based on the thesis’ Summary and Conclusions (Chapter 13) and the Introduction (Chapter 1).

² S. Guha 1999.

³ G.S. Ghurye 1963 and earlier editions under other names.

of Scheduled Tribes and those of the surrounding majority societies. On this basis, Ghurye argues for assimilatory policies towards the Scheduled Tribes. These studies are in dialogue with other studies that argue that, pressed by the expansion of capitalist organisation of agriculture, the social organisation of tribal communities has been undermined. In this regard, S. Kela's⁴ critical response to S. Guha's study is important, and J.S. Scott's⁵ series of studies on the relations among mountain peoples living in the South Asian mountain massif have been inspiring as well. Scott did not put forward any formal political argument for the protection of the tribal peoples living in the mountains, even if his compassion with their gradual and often violent inclusion in the societies of the plains leaves little doubt of his personal attitude. In contrast to Ghurye, Scott did not search for simple similarities, but for elements in the culture of the subjugated peoples that mirror the culture of the plains in order to demonstrate that they were sustaining and defending their culture against dominant peoples from the outside.

The Santal rebellion of 1855–1856 is an apt case for critically engaging in this discussion, as Santals had moved out from the jungles and the mountains and joined the expanding capitalist agriculture on the Gangetic plain since the last decade of the 18th century, when East India Company (EIC) surveyors recorded them for the first time. Even if the Santals had joined the expanding capitalist agriculture of their own free will, they faced the same troubles as other subsistence peasants who were pressed by the expansion of capitalist agriculture.

The main argument regarding the differences between tribal and other cultures is organised around a number of related themes. From an overall point of view, I attempt here to link the different levels of the main argument, which are put forward through the chapters into an integrated whole. Santal culture and religion are approached as dynamic entities, and changes in any dynamic culture do not in themselves indicate the assimilation, or not, of a culture into larger cultural units. In order to evaluate the relationship between assimilation and cultural change, such changes have to be approached and analysed in their context. In the present study, this approach leaves space for interpreting adaptations to larger developments in Indian culture and religion as adaptations intended to defend and sustain Santal culture and society. Such an approach is new to the study of the Santal rebellion and, in a larger context,

⁴ S. Kela 2012.

⁵ J.C. Scott 2009 as well as 1976 and 2009.

it challenges the bases of S. Guha's advocacy for economic non-recognition of tribal status and and G.S. Ghurye's advocacy for cultural policies of assimilation.

In order to carry this argument through, it is necessary to approach the religious legitimization of the rebellion in a new way; most studies of the rebellion have had difficulties in grasping the religious content of the movement, and many have omitted religion entirely from their analyses. By contrast, my approach utilises the concept of self-fulfilling ritual utterances in so-called performative rituals, as developed by C. Six.⁶ J. Quack and P. Töbelman have criticised the 'the vague and indeterminate'⁷ ways in which the term 'ritual efficacy'⁸ has been used, and stress that 'it is of the utmost importance to be as precise as possible about what affects what, how, and according to whom.'⁹ Six changed the approach by following how ritual practices sometimes successfully legitimate political transformations. Six considered *Performative Nation-building and Religion in Modern India* as he stated it in the subtitle of his book on *Spectacular Politics*, where he transforms the analysis of performative rituals from the consideration of the assumed effects (the efficacy of the utterances or speech acts) into an approach that allows for the identification of how, where, when and why speech acts turn into 'reality', or not. 'Reality' is here bracketed, as this reality concerns how far people accept the utterances. Six takes T. Meyer's approach to analysing political mobilisation as his point of departure. Meyer, on the basis of his analysis of political strategies, concludes that there is a need for 'a strategy to set up an institutional framework', for a 'programmatic-operative strategy' and for a 'strategy of cultural argumentation'.¹⁰ In the case of the Indian nationalism, Six assesses the extent to which these steps have materialised in the Independence movement and in later debates on how far religious aspects should be included in national and local politics. His analytical frame is eminently applicable to the case of the Santal rebellion, in which context it can deepen understanding of where the rebellion's leaders in some ways did all the right things, but also explains why they did not manage to create a larger social acceptance of the commands of the godhead Ṭḥakur.

⁶ C. Six 2010.

⁷ J. Quack and P. Töbelman 2010:14.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ T. Meyer 1994:56-57, cut out of the larger quote from C. Six 2010:51-52 quoted in Chapter 1, p. ____.

The Santal rebellion 1855–1856

In 1765, 90 years before the Santal rebellion and seven years after EIC forces defeated the Nawab of Bengal's army at the Battle of Plassey, the Great Mughal endowed the EIC with right and obligation to administer civil issues (*divani*) in the Suba of Bengal. This led the company to change from a mainly commercial enterprise to a landed colonial power. The company soon took to developing the Mughal system collection of land rent where landlords, called zamindars, paid a certain amount of money for the right to collect tax or rents for a period of time. In 1793, the EIC severely increased the payment it demanded from the zamindars and made clear that the obligation should be fixed at this level in perpetuity. Thus, the Permanent Settlement of Land Revenue of Bengal was established. In order to comply with the permanent settlement, zamindars were compelled to bring jungle, fallow and virgin lands under cultivation, and this expansion led to the first-ever recognition of Santals by the company's surveyors. They were found in the hills, jungles and plains on the northern part of the Chota Nagpur Plateau. The zamindars had recently employed some Santals to crop the land; other Santals seem to have lived independently on slash and burn cultivation in the jungles.

Santals moved further towards the north and arrived at a government estate, the Damin-i-Koh, just south of the river Ganges. Those who settled here did so under better terms than outside the estate, where people remained directly under the zamindars. By 1851, 83,265 Santals had settled there. In spite of the relatively good conditions, Santals faced problems here as elsewhere, and their leaders wrote a letter of complaint to the government in 1854. The increase in gang robbers (*dacoits*) convicted might have served as a warning of deeper unrest, but the government considered them to be simple, separate criminal acts.

Sometime during the 1855 rainy season, the brothers Sidu and Kanhu proclaimed that the godhead Thakur had commanded them to lead the Santals and restore justice to them. As many as 10,000 Santals joined gatherings in their village in the Damin-i-Koh. On the 7th of July, 1855, they led a group of Santals who killed a police officer (*daroga*) and some of his men, and this date is usually seen as the beginning of the Santal rebellion, also known as the Santal Hul. Santals terrified moneylenders, zamindars and low-caste Bengalis, as well as members of other tribes whom they attacked and often abused in a variety of ways. The government of Bengal responded by deploying troops supported by irregular soldiers and elephants from wealthy Bengalis. On the 22nd of July, 1855, the two leaders were wounded in

a surprise attack at the river Mor,¹¹ which is remembered in later Santal narrations about the rebellion as a terrible event.¹²

Soon after the fight, troops reached the village of Sid̄ and K̄anhu, forcing them to flee. In spite of the company's formal victory, the rebellion continued for most of the autumn 1855 and, according to the company's correspondence, it seems that Sid̄ and K̄anhu were central in the leadership until they were captured, separately, during the autumn. Martial law was formally declared on the 10th of November, 1855 and enforced until the 3rd of January, 1856. Most troops began to return to their barracks during February 1956, while some remained in the area.

After the rebellion, the company worked to ameliorate the situation of the Santals, that is, to respond to some of the grievances that had motivated the rebellion. Emergency programmes aiming at food for work were initiated in order to help the starving Santals. Another longer-lasting initiative was the creation of a new district around the Damin-i-Koh, the Santal Parganas, where Santals were able to report directly to the European authorities.

An outline of the book

The several concerns addressed in this book are linked together into a continuous argument, meaning that the descriptive and analytical chapters again and again return to the theoretical approaches that inform a novel interpretation of events leading up to, during and following the rebellion. At the end of the study, several chapters address how far the theoretical approaches used during the analysis, together, can inform a larger understanding in the sociology of religions and well as in some aspects of the understanding of tribes in general. To achieve these aims, it is necessary to present the rebellion on its historical background, based on a rereading of the primary accounts of the rebellion.

The theoretical approach, including the performative approach to ritual acts, is presented in the introductory Chapter 1, as are issues regarding the critique of the Marxist and Gramscian approaches. The chapter adds further depth as it discusses studies of millenarian movements that work to realise justice for suppressed peoples. It is pointed out that many

¹¹ R.I. Richardson to W.H. Elliot, 2nd August 1855.

¹² Durgā of Muṇḍhā Am (2011:182–185) who participated, and Choṭṛae Desmañjhi (in press, paragraph 039), who had it on second hand.

studies of millenarianism have faced troubles when they consider the religious content of prophetic messages that proclaim the coming of a new and just world order. This problem became pertinent for religious studies after a millenarian movement successfully led the Iranian revolution in 1979. Here, the performative approach is introduced as a framework for understanding millenarian movements while avoiding the pitfalls of earlier approaches. This is presented with reference to J.L. Austin's original conceptualisation in 1955¹³ and the development of the performative approach in religious studies with special emphasis on S.J. Tambiah's work from 1985,¹⁴ which explores how the efficacy of performative acts may be seen through performative studies addressing theatre and ritual studies considering the attendance of the people influenced by the acts. There is, however, still an open field of interpretation between performative rituals and their efficacy. It is at this point that it is relevant to introduce C. Six's turn from the analysis of the performative acts to his larger political considerations of *Spectacular Politics*, where he develops a theory regarding when performative acts turn into become convincing and when not.

Chapter 1 also introduces the frame of reference used to analyse the aims of Sidō and Kānḥu's attempt to carry through a reform of Santal religion. The conceptualisation is inspired by a Weberian line of reasoning, but instead of employing Weber's concept of rationalisation, it is argued that it may be more apt to frame the analysis of Sidō and Kānḥu's religious reform with his concept of religious universalisation. Several chapters return to this theme.

Over the years, a number of well-researched analyses of the Santal rebellion have been published. The main investigations, from the first analytical article published during the rebellion to the recent discussions, are presented in Chapter 2. A special emphasis is put on the postcolonial critique of the colonial historians and the later Indian historians who saw the rebellion through the eyes of the EIC and, later, through the eyes of the colonial power directly under the English crown. The work on the Santal rebellion by R. Guha, one of the central founding actors in the Indian school of subaltern studies, is seen in this light and placed within that school. The methodological argument is that each of the approaches to the Santal rebellion has blind spots and suppresses the voice of one or the other social group, and that it is necessary to create an analytical space wherein all voices are equal.

¹³ This conception is most widely disseminated in J.L. Austin 1975 [1962].

¹⁴ S.J. Tambiah 1985.

The book then turns to contemporaneous descriptions of the rebellion and Santal religion, which are presented in Chapter 3. The sources are divided into groups based on the voice of the narrator. Voices related to the EIC and the upper layers of the Bengali society are found in the *Bengal Judicial Proceedings (BJP)*, and some contemporary Santal voices have been preserved there as well. The Santal experience is mostly preserved through retrospective narrations. Some of these narrations were recorded shortly after the fact, for example during interrogations and proceedings from the cases against Sidu and Kanhu and other captured Santals. Others were recorded years or decades after the rebellion. The value of these voices as historical sources is critically considered. No sources have preserved the voice of Bengali society's lower orders, but much indirect information is preserved in the *BJP* files. Santal religion poses a specific question, since the large existing collections of Santal religious texts were compiled 15 years or more after the rebellion. Reports of pre-rebellion travellers through the area offer, however, some interview-based information as well as descriptions of rituals. Besides these, one good collection related to the Santal creation myth can be triangulated with the later collections of Santal myth and ritual.

The Santals were not recorded before the 1790s, when they were noticed by surveyors and local EIC officers. At that time, they were on the move from the southern parts of Bengal towards the Damin-i-Koh, which later was to become the core of the rebellion. As has been mentioned, one of the reasons behind this population movement was the EIC's reform of the collection of land rent in 1793, which compelled the zamindars to increase their incomes by bringing virgin land under the plough. This development and its effects are presented in Chapter 4, where Santal steps towards the north are recorded. Besides the specific movement towards the Damin-i-Koh, their settlement in nearby areas in the decades leading up to the rebellion is recorded as well. These settlements seem to have reached some distance to the west of the Damin-i-Koh and up to the river Ganges to the east; some Santals even crossed the Ganges. As Santals arrived at the Damin-i-Koh from the south, they were found there as well.

Most descriptions of Santal religion are based on recent collections or on L.O. Skrefsrud's earlier collections, which came to supersede all earlier collections except for the analysis of very specific issues. As this book address such an issue, the sources for earlier sources to Santal religion, notably, reports from the EIC's surveyors and stray reports from other hands, have been critically examined in Chapter 5. With regard to myths, the Christian

missionaries had a special interest in mythology and the use of language, and the only pre-rebellion collection of Santal myths was gathered by a missionary. The chapter links collections from before the rebellion with the later collections in order to identify ethical and moral concepts prevalent before, during and after the rebellion. This enables a consideration of the gradual expansion of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, as well as of the Christian missions in areas inhabited by Santals.

The course of the rebellion is delineated in Chapter 6, where it is described from the early days of July, 1855, to the dismantling of EIC military operations in February, 1856. The chapter is mainly arranged chronologically, according to the events, but is also structured in order to let the reader consider Santal movements towards the west, the east and the south, respectively, from the core of the rebellion in the Damin-i-Koh. The chronology documented from reports found in the *BJP*, but the Santal experience is included insofar as possible from the later retrospective Santal narrations allowing for different views on the backing of the rebellion among the Santals, about their possible plans and considerations of why the rebellion failed, among them the massive military response from the EIC and wealthy Indians who supported it. The imposition of martial law is analysed as emerging from competing goals that included not only genuine safety and security issues, but also possibly an interest in terrorising Santals into accepting a more subservient position in society. This perspective allows for painstaking discussions of specific military events to be sidestepped. In this regard the Calcutta press offers relevant information, even if its analysis regarding the proclamation of Martial Law is indecisive.

Then follow two chapters that consider various theoretical aspects regarding the rebellion. Chapter 7 addresses the changes to Santal religion that Sidḡ and Kaṅhu attempted to introduce, in light of how far they managed to carry them through. Of particular relevance is their introduction of a new universal approach to moral and ethical questions that would provide legitimacy to their attacks on moneylenders, zamindars and not the least the EIC for all of their illegal and immoral acts. The chapter is organised with reference to the steps regarding performative rituals advanced by C. Six: from a simple claim of a religious legitimisation for the acts, to the organisation of the rebellion, the court, and the transformation morals and ethics, which are seen as elements of the major programmatic transformation of society attempted by the leaders of the rebellion. In practical terms, the chapter addresses how

Siḍ and Ḳanhu announced that they acted under the orders of Ṭḥakur, how far Santals and other people living in the area accepted the claim, and the extent to which the invocation of religion affected popular support for the rebellion. The chapter argues that the backing beyond Santal ranks was limited and that a number of Santals who joined only did so in response to threats on their life. *Contra* R. Guha and N. Kavirag, whose work is addressed critically, only scarce evidence is found to support the idea that this was a class-based rebellion or insurrection, and considerable evidence challenges such an interpretation.

All parties to the rebellion committed atrocities against each other. Great pains are taken in Chapter 8 to avoid moral absolutism and instead address all of these atrocities in the light of moral implications as seen from contemporaneous Bengali and European points of view, as well as from Santal points of view. It is argued that the terror released against the Santals, formally against the orders of the Government in Calcutta, was carried out in accordance with orders issued to officers in the field. Ritual cleansing among the Santals, advocated for in the moral reforms introduced by Siḍ and Ḳanhu, is also taken into account. With regard to these ritual cleansings, it is shown that responses to allegations of witchcraft (often resulting in the death of the accused) as well as the forced marriage of unmarried women may have been parts the ritual cleansings introduced by Siḍ and Ḳanhu, but also that these reasons were understood in this light by only a small minority of Santals, and many of these few later condemned them as immoral. At a later point in time, moral ambiguity or even impurity came to carry explanatory power for the loss of the rebellion.

Colonial authorities investigated the reasons behind the rebellion and, while they did not understand the religious background, they were well aware of social grievances. The tremendous taxation was not reconsidered, but the government did try to ameliorate many of the issues regarding corruption among police officers and the collection of taxes by establishing a new district, the Santal Parganas, where Santals would be administered directly by European officers. Besides this effort, a number of relief projects were initiated in order to reduce the effects of a famine that had hit the areas of the rebellion. Such efforts came to legitimate the EIC Government and the later colonial government in the eyes of some Santals, as is documented in Chapter 9.

The following chapter, 10, aims to fit the innovations brought to Santal religion by Siḍ and Ḳanhu into the larger context of religious and social reforms during the 19th century. It is

argued that some of basic premises, such as the importance to which Sidḡ and Kaṅhu rendered the concept of truth (*sat/satya*), were prominent in later religious reform movements in 19th century India, but that Sidḡ and Kaṅhu were the first to stress that the present age would end imminently and would be followed by an age where truth would prevail. This application of ancient puranic ideas to the 19th century context was a major innovation which, until now, has not been acknowledged.

The two following chapters return to the theoretical issues raised in the introduction, but try to address them from a wider perspective than was possible while investigating empirical details of the Santal rebellion. Chapter 11 addresses the identity question and its implications for the understanding of tribal and Ādivāsī, and argues that it is relevant to address the development of marginalised populations on their own terms and not on the terms of the surrounding majority populations. This investigation challenges R. Guha's reduction of many different kinds of insurgencies or rebellions into peasant insurgencies and G.S. Ghurye's argument for hasty assimilation of India's tribal peoples into the mainstream populations, on the basis of the many Hindu elements he identified in their religions. It is argued that Guha's position is untenable from an historical point of view, and that Ghurye overlooks the fact that the Hindu elements found in the religions of the tribal peoples in many instances were the result of loans from the surroundings, with the object of defending the tribal peoples against exploitation by groups who lived nearby. In this way, they sought to present their grievances literally in a universal language that their alleged exploiters could understand.

Throughout the book, the transformation of moral and ethical questions attempted by Sidḡ and Kaṅhu is seen as a universalisation of morals, ethics and law. In Chapter 12, this position is seen in the larger context of M. Weber's studies. Weber argues that a similar transformation of religions took place in the middle of the first millennium before the Common Era resulting in the appearance of the salvation religions.

The findings are summarised in the concluding Chapter 13.

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