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Nationalist Movement and Popular Protest in Dhenkanal State of Odisha: 1938-39

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(Abstract) The princely states of Dhenkanal, resembling with many other states of Odisha, suffered socio-economically under British colonial domination. The people of the Dhenkanal state therefore had to wage prolonged protest movements against the ruling chief as well as colonial power. During the Gandhian movement, the masses of Dhenkanal—tribals, non-tribals, and caste Hindus—unitedly fought against the authorities with redoubled zeal in non-violent ways. To quell the popular protests in the state, the authorities however let loose a reign of terror. On a few occasions, to bring out a possible solution to the popular protest movement, attempts were made for negotiations, but all that ended in failure. Maheswar Subahu Singh, who was considered a natural leader, mobilized the masses in the state in the 1920s and remained active during the Prajamandal movement that began in the late 1930s. With the birth of Dhenkanal Prajamandal in 1938, the state people's movement was revitalized, and simultaneously, it brought about a significant transformation in shaping up the popular movement in Dhenkanal. Along with Maheswar Subahu Singh, the other prominent leaders who actively supported and mobilized the masses of Dhenkanal were Hare Krushna Mahatab, Harmohan Pattanaik, Sarangadhar Das, and a few others during the period under study. As the popular protest movement in Dhenkanal was so intense, it caught the attention of the national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Subash Chandra Bose, and Jawaharlal Nehru, Bhulabhai Desai, and Sahajanand Saraswati. They were sympathetic and supportive of the movement in the state of Dhenkanal, as it had national significance. Thus, the popular movement in Dhenkanal state could be essentially discussed from the broader perspective of the national liberation movement in India.

(Key words: Dhenkanal, Princely States, British, Colonial, Congress, Prajamandal, BajiRaut, National, Popular, Movement, Satygraha, Non-violence)

In the twentieth century, there were many intensive and active political movements in the province as well as in the 26 princely states of Odisha. The rural agrarian masses living there enthusiastically participated in those movements that directed against either the ruling chief or against the British colonial power for their long socio-economic sufferings. These states were formerly known as *Garjat* areas under Mughal and Maratha rules.^[1] Geographically, these 26 states of Odisha were largely found in the hill region in the north and western part of the province subjugated by the local chieftains. Before colonial domination, these rulers used to pay tribute (*peshkus*) to the Mughals and later to the Marathas. In return, Mughals or Marathas, as the sovereign power, interfere in the internal administrative matter at the occurrence of any disturbances. With the British occupation of Odisha in 1803 for administrative jurisprudence, these states were divided into three categories, such as "A," "B," and "C.". Dhenkanal was placed in the "A" class category and was kept under the Commissioner of Odisha Division.^[2]

All these 26 princely states, including Dhenkanal, had everything in common with the neighbouring province of Odisha. The people of the states were united with common culture, traditions, social usages, religious thoughts, and modes of living. ^[3] The ruling class of these states was given free hands to rule over their subjects, so long as they were loyal to the British Crown. The ruling chiefs were nothing but the agents of the British Raj. Thus, a kind of superordinate feudal structure was created under the British colonial *Raj*, leading to various socio-economic marginalization of the large mass of people living in the states of Odisha. ^[4]

To discuss further, the economy of the state in Dhenkanal was largely based on agriculture and forest products. Due to the prevailing feudal and oppressive system, the peasantry in the state became the immediate victim of the tyranny of the ruling chief. The agrarian masses suffered incalculable miseries as there was non-existence of tenancy rights over the land they cultivated and inequitable land revenue, which were against their capacity to pay. Besides heavy land taxes, there were extra burdens on the peasantry as they were forced to pay various kinds of illegal taxes, such as *bethi*, *begar*, and *magan*. The ill and tyrannical administrative system apparently contributed to the political marginalization of the people of Dhenkanal. The colonial government did nothing substantial to ameliorate the poor agrarian conditions as well as restore civil liberties in Dhenkanal state. Consequently, the people of the state became restive and agitated against the ruling chief on numerous occasions. ^[5] It was true to the remark of the State Inquiry Committee, 1938, that "the agrarian situation in these states is getting more acute everyday by the increase in rents, which knows no check, aggravated by the present economic depression. The peasantry is naturally restive and shows signs of impatience for lightening of the burden." ^[6]

The agitation of the people, however, was not well planned or organized nor even political in character, which made it easy for the ruling chief to quell easily. In order to redress the grievances of the people in Dhenkanal, there was no separate political organization till mid-1930. The opportunity came after the birth of the State Peoples Conference in 1931 and the formation of Prajamandals' in respective states. Accordingly, Dhenkanal State Prajamandal was born on 27 June 1938 to ventilate the grievances and intensification of people's movement in the state.^[7]

During the Gandhian mass movement, the agrarian problem thus contributed to the peasant protest in the state of Dhenkanal. In 1922, under the leadership of Maheswar Subahu Singh, Purna Chandra Mohapatra, and Benudhar Panda, the people protested against the ruling chief, forcing the Raja to make a compromise with the tenants. But four of the leaders of the movement were sentenced to imprisonment for three years. Maheswar Subahu Singh, who was considered to be the natural leader of tribal society, was falsely implicated in a conspiracy case, and it led to the setback to the popular movement in Dhenkanal. [8] However, Maheswar Subahu Singh earned a lot of fame for his concern for the toiling agrarian masses in Dhenkanal, for which he had been compared with Sahajananda Saraswati, a popular *kisan* leader of Bihar. He possessed a capability to mobilize the masses, which was evident when he was able to arrange a gathering of 50,000 people out of 3 lakhs several times; even when Jawaharlal Nehru agreed to personally lead the Dhenkanal movement, he was able to collect Rs 10,000 for all expenses. [9]

The formation of Dhenkanal on 27th June 1938 mentioned earlier proved a catalyst for the people's movement. The veteran Prajamandal leaders such as Harmohan Pattnaik and Sarangadhar Das mobilised the people against the state authority, demanding the abolition of obnoxious, *bethi*, *begar* and *magan*, enactment of tenancy law as per clauses of Odisha Tenancy Act 1913, management of state forests, monopoly of betel leaves, protection of crops from the ravage of wild animals, appointment of a committee to enquire into the oppression of the state for last 12 years and etc. The Dhenkanal Prajamandal organized a number of meetings within the state from July 1938 to create political consciousness amongst the people against the oppressive rule of the Raja. Sarangadhar Das, a leading Prajamandal leader of Dhenkanal, distributed '*Krushak*' (an Odia organ of the Socialist Party) in the state and persuaded the masses to agitate against the state for their natural rights. [10]

The public meetings were held from July 1938 at Parjang Bisos and Palasuni of Dhenkanal State that caught the imagination; accordingly, the rural masses came forward and joined in the movement. In local village areas of Dhenkanal, the state Prajamandal took out *kirtan* parties and moved from the village to village singing songs about the socio-economic marginalization of the people. The Dhenkanal Durbar tried to desist the people from holding public meetings, but it had no effect, and the popular movement took visible shape in the state. Simultaneously, another Prajamandal conference was held at Jenapur (Cuttack), and it was attended by 12,000 people of the state, consisting of lower caste and aboriginal tribals. Many resolutions were passed, including the establishment of responsible government in the state. The people of Dhenkanal expressed their willingness to face all sufferings and to carry on struggle till the end. The most unique feature of Dhenkanal agitation was the peaceful and non-violent Satyagraha movement.

The popular protest movement in Dhenkanal continued in August 1938 as well against the ruling chief. To suppress the agitation, punitive measures were taken by the Dhenkanal Durbar and a notice Under Section 144 was served against Harmohan Pattnaik, President Dhenkanal Prajamandal directing him not to address gatherings within the state. Harmohan Pattnaik, however, did not defy order. However, on his return to Dhenkanal town, he was called by the Raja to address the grievances of the people, but the attempt ended in failure. Later on, Maheswar Subahu Singh, the popular leader of the tribals of Dhenkanal state, was called by

the Raja for a negotiation to settle the disputes. There was a huge gathering in the Dhenkanal town intended to intensify the protest movement against the Dhenkanal Durbar on various issues. The people shouted slogans against the ruling chief and hoisted the tri-color flag of the Congress. Harmohan Pattnaik, Laxmidhar Sahu, and many Prajamandal leaders were arrested while protesting. The act of the Durbar infuriated the people further, and they demanded the immediate release of their leaders. The people gathered for protest were threatened by the forces of the ruling chief to return to their home, but they refused to do so. Consequently, the Dhenkanal Durbar opened indiscriminate firing in which hundreds were wounded, and with the timely help of Malati Devi Choudhury, they were admitted to Cuttack Hospital. Seeing the continuous protest of the state people of Dhenkanal as a mark of solidarity, Naba Krushna Choudhury and Hare Krushna Mahatab arrived at Dhenkanal Railway Station for help. Meanwhile, the people in thousands came out with traditional weapons to release Maheswar Subahu Singh and other Prajamandal workers who were arrested and tortured in the jail. The repression of the Dhenkanal Durbar did not stop. The Raja imported 200 armed police from neighbouring states and the Eastern State Agency of the British government to suppress the agitation of the state people of Dhenkanal. In Dhenkanal *Garh*, an additional European soldier, about 230, was stationed with an apprehension to stop the vandalism of the people. Simultaneously, the ruling chief of Dhenkanal also requested Biswanath Das, the PM of Odisha under the Congress Ministry, for help, but he refused to tender any help on the ground that the people were fighting in a constitutional way to get their rights redressed.

The forces of the *Raja* from 21st September 1938 raided village after village, looted the houses, and indiscriminately assaulted men, women, and children. There was a general clash and vandalism in Parjang Biso between the agitators and the armed forces of the authorities. When the news reached Bhuban about the oppression at Parjang Biso and the presence of the colonial police force, hundreds of men and women-folk locked out of their houses and left Bhuban to the neighbouring villages of Sukinda as a mark of protest against the Raja. Since the sanctity of the women folks were violated, and to safeguard their honour, the Dhenkanal Prajamandal declared a '*hizarat*' in the state. However, in Bhuban, the police force continued oppressions by dishonouring the sanctity of the women-folk and restored to indiscriminate firing on the agitators, resulting in a death on the spot and another at death at Jenapur. The six wounded people were admitted to the Cuttack Hospital for treatment.

In Dhenkanal, the agitation remained unabated, and in October 1938, the Prajamandal offered non-violent Satyagraha in the state. The Dhenkanal Prajamandal held meetings and conducted processions, which were in defiance of Durbar's order. Batches of Congress volunteers marched into the Dhenkanal town and offered Satyagraha, but they were cruelly beaten. The clothes of the Satyagrahis' and the little money they had were forcibly taken away by the forces. Many of the Congress Satyagrahis', including the Secretary of State Prajamandal, were arrested. The news spread like wildfire, leading to the intense agitation of the people of Dhenkanal. Most significantly, at Nilakanthapur *ghat*, on the river Brahmani, while the police forces were crossing the river, Baji Rout, a young boy of 12 years, stopped them. But the colonial police force brutally shot him to death with another three agitators. Baji Raut, for his bravery and supreme sacrifice, became a martyr

and remains immortal in the state history of the people's movement of Dhenkanal. Till yet, he is fondly remembered in the living memory of people of Dhenkanal/Odisha.

In a largely inhabited caste-Hindus area of Godidini village of Dhenkanal state, looting, arson, and molestation of women were very common to subdue the popular agitation. To create a fear psychosis, the Durbar forced the agitators to say "*Raja ki Jai*." Similarly, at Kotamunda village, another mostly inhabited by Catholic-Hindu people, there were six firings in two months and a *lathi* charge in November 1938. In the course of the agitation, one person of the village was killed in the bullet of the forces. Two persons from the village were seriously injured. Thus, due to suppressive measures of the combined forces of Raja and British power, a total 15 agitators were killed, and as many as 133 persons were seriously injured, and hundreds of Satyagrahis' received minor injuries during the popular movement in Dhenkanal state.

Meanwhile, efforts for settlement were started in October 1938. Hare Krushna Mahatab, in his meeting with the Joint Political Secretary at Puri on October 19, 1938, handed over the demands made by Dhenkanal Prajamandal. [11] The demands included (a) a judicial inquiry into the alleged allegation of looting, firing, and outrage on women; (b) responsible government in Dhenkanal; (c) restoration of civil liberties of the people; (d) abolition of *bethi*, *beggar*, and *magan*; (e) abolition of daily necessities of life; (f) revision of tenancy and forest laws; (g) removal of the ban on Prajamandal, etc. [12] It was towards the close of 1938 that, compelled by the situation, the Raja declared certain constitutional rights to the people, refusing many. Around that time, the AICC passed a resolution drafted by Mahatma Gandhi asserting the responsibility of the Congress to protect the people against an unwarranted use of military or police forces by the British authorities. [13]

During the course of the movement in Dhenkanal, many Satyagrahis' were arrested, and false cases were implicated against them. Unfortunately, the Home Political Department, Government of Odisha, issued extradition warrants against many Prajamandal leaders, which were unacceptable to the Congress Socialists of Odisha. The Socialist Party of Odisha took up the issue of extradition cases seriously. They vehemently condemned the extradition warrants and attempted to intensify people's movement in the state. As a mark of protest against the extradition warrants of the government of Odisha, Naba Krushna Choudhury, a Congress Socialist leader, resigned from the post of Secretary of the Odisha Provincial Congress Committee. Soon after that, he joined the Dhenkanal movement and mobilized the people. Consequently, he led a batch of Satyagrahis' to offer non-violent Satyagraha in the state. [14]

Another significant development was the participation of communists in the Dhenkanal protest movement. In 2nd December 1938, on Dhenkanal agitation, a meeting was held at Town Hall, Cuttack, under the leadership of left-wing communist leader Pranath Pattnaik. The meeting was attended by five hundred people. Pranath Pattnaik strongly condemned the act of the Dhenkanal Durbar. He retreated, saying that British imperialism was responsible for the mishaps in the state. He earnestly appealed to the people to begin a non-violent Satyagraha in the state on the very next day of the meeting. Another meeting was held under the leadership of Bhusan Dutta at Budapanka Camp (Anugul). He extorted the people of Dhenkanal to accompany

the movement. Naba Krushna Choudhury, on the other hand, appealed to people to join in thousands for the Satyagraha movement in Dhenkanal. Rabi Ghose a Prajamandal leader referring to the oppressions in Dhenkanal encouraged the people to fight against the oppressive Raja bravely. He accused the colonial government siding with the Dhenkanal Durbar for not holding an impartial inquiry into all allegations, including the killing of 18 people in police firings.

In December 1938, a few batches of Satyagrahis' started coming from Cuttack, Khurda, Sambalpur, and other parts of Odisha as a mark of solidarity with the people of Dhenkanal, and on 3rd December 1938, Bhagirathi Panigrahi, Naba Krushna Choudhury, and Anant Pattnaik offered Satyagraha on the Prajang side of the Dhenkanal. However, in order to suppress the Satyagraha movement, the state authority came down heavily. Many Satyagrahis' were arrested and subjected to severe torture. Anant Pattnaik and Baidyanath Rath, who visited Bhuban to distribute Rs 500/- received from the Bombay Socialist, were caught and assaulted. Anant Pattnaik, another Satyagrahi, was kidnapped and handed over to the state police. Baidyanath Rath, however, managed to escape and return to Cuttack.

Thus the state authority dealt with the populist movement in Dhenkanal in a high-handed manner. Consequently, the movement slowly started collapsing and loosening its grip. To revitalize the agitation, the Congress Socialists of Odisha invited N.G. Ranga for help. Accordingly, he promised to come to Cuttack towards the close of December 1938 to lead the movement personally in the Dhenkanal state. Simultaneously, S.P. Sharma, a local representative of Hindustan Times, Delhi, was employed as an adviser to the Dhenkanal State to work out and draft a scheme of constitutional reforms for the state. He advised the *Raja* of Dhenkanal to look into the grievances of the people and against the alleged oppressions of the police force to pacify the resentment in the state.^[15]

Conclusion

Thus, the popular protest movement in Dhenkanal state of Odisha was unparalleled in India's struggle for freedom. The movement had a great mass character. The method of fighting against the mighty Durbar was on the Gandhian model of non-violent Satyagraha. The Odisha State Congress and the Dhenkanal Prajamandal were at the forefront to mobilize the masses of Dhenkanal against the authoritarian rule of the ruling chief as well as against the British dominations. Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Ballabha Bhai Patel, Subash Chandra Bose, and Bhulabhai Desai were the great sympathizers and supporters of the people's movement in Dhenkanal. While Jawaharlal Nehru in London issued a statement that 'he would personally lead the state's Peoples' Movement' that put a new life in the masses who were looking forward to his visit to Odisha. ^[16]

Another notable feature of the popular Dhenkanal movement was the participation of low-caste Hindus (Harijans), giving the social character of the movement. The caste Hindus (Harijans) fraternized with each other in every way in the popular movement in Dhenkanal. The demand of the caste-Hindus was social equality, since they were the worst sufferers in the state. The socio-political unity of the Dhenkanal movement,

however, was unparalleled in India's struggle for independence. The courage that had been displayed in facing the bullets was second to none anywhere in the country. Baji Raut, a young, courageous boy of only 12 years, did not let go of the boat even though he was thrust with a bayonet and consequently killed by gunshot. The people at Tumusingha and Kualo villages displayed great courage and fearlessness against the outrage of the ruling chief and British colonial power. [17] Thus, the state people's movement in Dhenkanal was a great success and contributed to India's march towards freedom.

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