



SARANGADHAR DAS AND PRAJAMANDAL MOVEMENT IN DHENKANAL – AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

The Prajamandal Movement in Odisha posed a great challenge to the British imperialism in the first half of the 20th century. The mal-administration of the British as well as chiefs of the Garjat states, prompted the people to be revolutionary. The Congress activities in Balasore, Cuttack, Puri and Sambalpur districts touched the hearts of the people of the state. They could no more remain as silent spectators to the political events that were going on in the neighbouring British administered territories and desired to stage similar agitations in different Garhjat states of Odisha from the age long slavery and oppression. The people of Nilgiri Princely state were first to raise their voice against the mal-administration of the king and became successful. After this, Prajamandal Movement took a drastic turn in Dhenkanal state under the redoubtable leadership of Sarangadhar Das.

KEY WORDS:

Sarangadhar Das And Prajamandal Movement , Analysis.

INTRODUCTION:

Nilgiri agitation opened the eyes of the oppressed people in almost all the feudatory states. It was Dhenkanal that caught the fire in the first quarter of 1938. Sankar Pratap singh Deo Mahindra Bahadur, the Raja of Dhenkanal was of most oppressive and tyrannical type. In April 1938, the socialists first raised their voice against the oppressive acts and tyrannical rule of the Raja¹. In the beginning, the people organized secret meetings in different quarters of the state in the name of Yajna and religious discussions to organize their state Prajamandal to fight for their rights. In August the congress leaders with the support of the people held meeting in Dhenkanal and put forth their demands before the Raja. Sarangadhar Das, after organizing Prajamandal movement in Nilgiri, planned to spread it to Dhenkanal. Girija Bhusan Dutta (Congress MLA) and Sarangadhar Das convened the Garhjat Praja Samilani and enthused about 400 subjects to resist the oppression by the state and secure their rights by focusing on companion of their condition with that of the tenants of British India². The preliminary steps towards the organization of Prajamandal in Dhenkanal state was taken in the context of the visit of the enquiry committee appointed by the state people's organization to probe into the conditions of the states. When the enquiry committee visited Dhenkanal and camped in Anugul (26 and 27 June 1938) to compile information by interviewing the people of the state, the move to form the Prajamandal was formalized. In a large public meeting in the town of Dhenkanal the state Prajamandal was officially formed on 27th June 1938 with the following leaders³:

Harmohan Pattnail	-	President
Maheswar Subahu Singh	-	Vice-President
Laxmidhar Sahoo	-	General Secretary

Baishnab Pattnaik	-	Joint Secretary
Bhajan Sahu	-	Treasurer

Sarangadhar Das guided the Dhenkanal Prajamandal. Other leaders who had their moral support to this movement were Nabakrushna Choudhury, Malati Devi, Braja Kishore Dhal, Musa Malik and several others⁴. Sarangadhar Das encouraged Prajamandal workers to demand for constitutional rights. Under his guidance the Prajamandal formulated 39 demands⁵ and broadcasted it by the volunteers in every village. These include, among other things, a demand for an enquiry committee to enquire into various fine, exactions by certain officers constituting a sort of a parallel, court, forcibly confiscation of lands and to restore the property and money and to punish the guilty officers. It was alleged that these illegal acts had occurred during the last ten or twelve years. The foremost demands were the establishment of fundamental rights and of full responsible governments. Since then the Durbar (royal court) had called many meeting to persuade people to desist from this agitation, but those meetings were generally unattended, while those convened by the Prajamandal counted the audience in thousands. The Durbar had also issued many bulletins announcing certain minor concessions which it is said, fell absolutely flat.

Twenty days after the distribution of the demand sheet, over ten thousand representatives from the entire state, even from distances of sixty and seventy miles assembled in a mass meeting in Jenapur in the then Cuttack district under the presidentship of Sarangadhar Das, Secretary, Orissa States' Peoples' Conference and displayed a quiet but determined enthusiasm. The president fully explained the aims and objectives of the Prajamandal and exhorted them to strengthen the organization in their thousands and to fight for their rights and remain absolutely non-violent in spite of every provocation. He congratulated them for having remained peaceful and united for the last two months. Several resolutions were unanimously carried with acclamation according recognition and support to the Dhenkanal Prajamandal approving the demands, and condemning the proposed Federation in which the state people had no place. The meeting terminated with the signing of national songs and various slogans, such as "Down with absence of law". It was evident that new life had taken hold of the dead bones of these rustic villagers and the lowliest of the lowly was taking of the vote"⁶.

On 9th September 1938 under the guidance of Sarangadhar Das, the Secretary of the state Prajamandal wrote to the ruling chief for receiving a deputation of the people in connection with their demands. But before anything could be done in this regard, the situation took a sudden and surprising turn in the evening of 11th September when the state police raided the Prajamandal office and arrested the President, Vice-President, Secretary and many others⁷. The news spread rapidly and peaceful crowds gathered on the road to protest against the arrest of their comrades. It was reported that there was immediately lathi and bayonet charge. The morning of the 12th saw groups of police, magistrates, doctors, forest department officers and men in motor cars, on elephants back and horseback blocking ingress into the town. Men and women were then mercilessly lathi charged on the railway line, which was under the railway jurisdiction and not state jurisdiction.

At noon and in the afternoon firing was resorted to in three different places, first near Bhagirath Sagar, second time between Mandaba Sahi and Alasua Hat, and lastly in the Hat itself where by the afternoon fifteen to twenty thousand men and women had gathered to discuss what was to be done. There were altogether three rounds fired and first shot by a magistrate. People being largely injured became violent and counter attacked the officials. This aggravated the situation by causing loss on both sides, one Sub-Inspector and a body guard were severely injured and from the peoples' side four were shot dead at the sight and more than one hundred were severely injured. In spite of such mobilization of police force and firing, the people were not demoralized rather their number swelled to approximately 50,000 by the morning of 13th September⁸. Sarangadhar Das, Malati choudhury, Nabakrushna Choudhury, Harekrushna Mahtab, Bhagabati Panigrahi and others addressed the people and advised them to carry on peaceful and non-violent agitation and to open negotiation with the state authorities.

The negotiation between the leaders and the political Agent and the Raja of Dhenkanal was a failure. Consequent upon firing on the Prajamandal workers by the state authorities in the first half of September 1938, there was strong and vehement public resentment in British Orissa particularly, in Cuttack. Radhanath Rath, Sarangadhar Das and others organized meeting in the town Hall of Cuttack in support of the agitators of Dhenkanal⁹.

On 20th September 1938 a special train arrived at Dhenkanal carrying 200 British troops. The town was surrounded and the Prajamandal leaders were arrested. The state police assisted by the troops entered the interiors of the states, searched houses and dragged the Prajamandal volunteers from their homesteads. Prajamandal was declared unlawful, and the leading Oriya weekly "Krushak" was banned¹⁰. Harmohan Pattnaik was arrested by an extradition warrant under section 124A I.P.C and was detained in

Cuttack jail¹¹. In Parjang, the houses of Prajamandal leaders like Maheswar Subahusingh, Dibakr Biswal, Rama Prusti were demolished and burnt. The villagers were thoroughly beaten and their womenfolk were dishonoured¹². The Prajamandal advised the people to leave the state in protest and to save them from police brutalities. About thousands of people men, women and children, resorted to mass exodus and settled in a number of camps in British Odissa; at Jenapur, Anugal, Balarampur, Budhapank, Sukinda, Kalanda, Gholpur¹³. In the camps, the people suffered all sorts of privations but stood determined not to return unless their legitimate demands were fulfilled¹⁴.

Thus, Dhenkanal entered into a phase of chaos. Police became barbarous. Arson and loot became the order of the day. Villages around the state were looted by police. Firing and lathi charge were very common. The situation became very worse when state police on 10th October 1938 opened fire in the village Bhuban resulting in the death of a person and injury to several persons who were admitted to Cuttack Hospital¹⁵. On 11th October 1938 firing opened at village Nilakanthapur, six persons died and eight were seriously injured due to police firing. Beji Rout, a boy of eleven years who took the courage of facing the bullet of armed forces was shot dead on the spot and his name had become a legend in Orissa¹⁶. Thus, the Prajamandal in its renewed direction asked the people to return to their village and launch Satyagraha against the state authorities. Sarangadhar Das severely criticized the inhuman activities of policy¹⁷.

After the incident he made a plan to start Satyagraha inside the Garhjats and to open offices of Prajamandal there also. He further suggested that henceforward the Prajamandal workers, instead of taking shelter in the Mogulbandi areas, should start non-violent agitation in Garhjats. Prof. N. Ranga rushed from Madras to Orissa, after hearing such bad news. Mahatma Gandhi desired to know details about the incident, and H.K. Mahtab on his advice, requested the Government of India to depute an officer to the spot for an enquiry and report. The congress leaders under the guidance of Sarangadhar Das collected subscriptions for the people of Dhenkanal.

Sarangadhar Das guided the Prajamandal movement, which continued nonstop. “Do or Die” was the motto of the people. As a true Gandhian, Sarangadhar Das managed the agitation peacefully¹⁸. People shouted in the name of Mahatma Gandhi hoisting the congress flag. They gheraoed the police with slogans not to arrest their comrades. But in order to disperse the crowd, the police took resort to firing at Banguringa near Hindol Road, causing one death and six wounded¹⁹. Sarangadhar Das condemned the activities of the police and addressed the people at Cuttack. Being encouraged by him students from schools and colleges of Cuttack started picketing and slogans against the feudal oppression in the Garhjats²⁰.

The police also opened fire on Satyagrahis on 21st October at Tumusingh and Katumuda when the people refused to sign the loyalty tickets issued by the Durbar. The firing resulted in the killing of four persons and injuring more than a hundred others²¹. The congress workers of the state were greatly alarmed on account of the firing of the state police on innocent and anon-violent people, observing such wide spread repressions and lawlessness in the state the leaders like Malati Choudhury, Nabakrushana Choudhury Bhagabati Panigrahi, Sarangadhar Das, Sarojini Naidu and Mahatma Gandhi condemned the state administration and urged upon the congress and the provincial government for timely intervention²².

On 8th September 1939 Sarangadhar Das made an appeal to the brothers of Garhjats to follow the principles adopted by the National Congress in its Wardha working committee meeting. As the Second World War has already started, the viceroy had proclaimed the ordinance. The meeting of Mahatma Gandhi with viceroy resulted in nothing. Gandhi suggested to stop the agitation in Garhjats. It brought a golden opportunity for the rulers who started their oppression on the people. Orissa sate people’s committee submitted the enquiry report to the viceroy but it had no result²³.

Sarangadhar Das criticized H.K. Mahtab as he had met the king of Dhenkanal on the issue of people’s agitation²⁴. In spite of the decision of the congress working committee Naba Krushna Choudhury was in favour of staging Satyagraha in Dhenkanal. He resigned from his seat in the Orissa Assembly, so that he would be able to lead the Satyagrahis in Dhenkanal. He led a batch of volunteers to offer Satyagraha, but his whole party was arrested by the state authorities of Dhenkanal on 3 December 1938. The Satyagrahis and the Prajamandal was backed by the socialists. Thus, throughout the month of December 1938 the political affairs in Dhenkanal engaged the attention of the leading politicians of Orissa. Every effort was made to keep alive the movement and the people fought with unstinted vigor. Sarangadhar Das remained at Cuttack for the proper organization of these Satyagrahis²⁵. The situation compelled the Raja of Dhenkanal to allow the representatives of the Prajamandal to associate themselves in the administration of the state. But it was in vain²⁶.

Prajamandal movement in Dhenkanal was led by Sarangadhar Das in a constitutional way during the first quarter of 1939. Refugees were provided with new camps. At Budhapanka, a vernacular pamphlet was published named “Husiar” that served as the organ of the Prajamandal in Dhenkanal²⁷. In may 1939 the

movement entered a quieter phase with the hope of getting legitimated grievances redressed by the authorities. As the movement drew attention of the government of India, Mahatma Gandhi and other national leaders, and as the rulers felt its impact, the Raja of Dhenkanal, on 26 June 1939, announced in his Durbar a number of measures, in grading reforms of improvement of administration in the state. The proclamation contained the following measures.

- “(1) Remission of six months on the sentences of persons undergoing imprisonment in the state jail.
- (2) Withdrawal of proceeding against all persons awaiting trial under section 17, Cr.L.A. Act.
- (3) Resuscitation of the old village Panchayat system which will introduce an elective element in the administration of the civil welfare of the people.
- (4) Improvement in the organization and personnel of the High Court and the addition of a judge of unimpeachable integrity, and
- (5) The establishment of a Town Municipality in the Dhenkanal Town”²⁸.

But the peculiarity of the king’s proclamation was that no date was indicated as to when the proposed reforms would be given effect to. So regarding the actual execution of the reforms generated doubt in the minds of the agitators as to the integrity of the ruler’s purpose. The proclamation failed to appease the Prajamandal workers. So the situation in Dhenkanal did not improve. Their primary demand for the grant of civil liberty has not been granted to them and the warrants of arrests on their leaders has not been withdrawn. So the movement continued till the goal was achieved. After independence, Sarangadhar Das remained contended as he had spearheaded the movement and became successful in his mission.

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