The Praja Mandal Movement and the Birth of Greater Orissa

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Orissa, was made a separate province independent of Bihar on 1st April' 1936, due to the untiring effort and endeavour of some great sons of the soil of Orissa. The birth of the province, which happened to be the first state in the whole of India, formed on the basis of language, fulfilled the long cherished dream and demand of the Oriyas. It brought jubilation for millions, who were longing for long a united Orissa and had experienced the oppression of linguistic majorities in scattered territories. But it made no difference to the life of the people living in the Garjat areas and brought no solace to them as these areas remained tight in the grip of native rulers. These Garjat states known as "Andhari Mulak" remained beyond the purview of Orissa administration. However, the agitation of the people for a united Orissa and the formation of the province served as a beacon light for the Oriyas in the Garjat areas and their struggle found reflection in the Praja Mandal Movement, which started in the Garjat states in parallel with the National Movement for Independence.

The Praja Mandal Movement in the Garjat states, basically a peasant movement was an epoch-making struggle that considerably influenced the politics of the province as well as the nation. There were 26 Garjats or, feudatory states of Orissa and it took long twelve years after the formation of the province to merge those states with Orissa. The movement, which initially was directed against the mis-rule and autocracy of the rulers, subsequently demanded responsible government and the merger of the states with Orissa. Thus the struggle has great significance in modern Orissa, as it gave shape to greater Orissa.

In the second decade of the last century when the National Movement for independence gathered momentum with the entry of Mahatma Gandhi in to the National Politics and the call of Gandhi had an enchanting influence upon the Indian people, it had little impact upon the people of the feudatory states. Even during the Non-Cooperation Movement and Civil Disobedience Movement, greatest mass movements in history, the people of the feudatory states kept mum and did not raise their voice against the British or their own autocratic rulers. However, only one incident of Hartal was reported from Keonjargarh, the headquarters of the state of Keonjhar during the Non-Cooperation movement. The Hartal, organized under the leadership of two ex-students of Satyabadi High School, was observed on 17th May'1921. The British authorities took stern action against the non-cooperators and hardest punishment was given to them. Presumably, for this reason no sign of protest or, revolt was witnessed in the feudatory states for several years after 1921-22.
The attempt to organize the people of the feudatory states took real shape during the Civil Disobedience Movement, when the First All Orissa States People Conference was organized at Cuttack in 1931. The organization that went into hibernation soon after its formation was revived again in 1937, with the efforts of Sarangadhar Das, known as "Garjat Gandhi" in the Garjats. The second session of the All Orissa States People's Conference was held at Cuttack on 23rd June 1937. The conference declared its objective as the attainment of responsible government. It also exposed the exploitative character of the Garjat administration and urged upon the rulers to remove the grievances of the people. The conference provided the impetus to the people of the Garjats and thus in almost all the states the people formed Prajamandals. Through this organization, they put up before the rulers their demand lists, which included the abolition of numerous feudal exactions and restoration of civil liberties. The feudatory rulers saw the prajamandals as real danger to their authority. They not only refused recognition to this organization but adopted several repressive measures to restrict their activities.

The first popular agitation against the Garjat administration was witnessed in the state of Nilgiri, a small state in the border of Balasore. The punitive action of the ruler of Nilgiri on the people of the village of Ayodhya, incited the people and on 2nd May 1938, disturbances started in Nilgiri. The people under the leadership of Kailash Chandra Mohanty and Banamali Das pressed the ruler to yield to their demands, which included the recognition of their civil liberties and removal of unjust laws. Brutal and repressive measures adopted by the ruler to calm down the agitation failed to dislodge the people. Ultimately a compromise was made through the mediation of H.K. Mahtab. Thus peace was restored in Nilgiri but only for a brief period that broken again in the subsequent years.

Talcher and Dhenkanal were the two other Garjat states, where the activities of the prajamandal created troubles for the ruling chiefs. The Talcher prajamandal movement attracted the attention of national leaders, for it adopted a novel measure to fight against the ruler. The repressive measures of the ruler compelled the people of Talcher to adopt a new form of passive resistance and they left their homes and moved to the neighbouring areas of Angul, in British Orissa. It was estimated by the prajamandal leaders that about 60 thousand people out of the total population of 86 thousand had left their homes and taken shelter in the temporary camps. The mass migration of the people, their plight in the camps, who stayed there for long 8 months, even tormented Gandhiji. In the state of Dhenkanal, a reign of terror was instituted by the ruling chief to suppress the prajamandal, which had started its agitation against the reign of tyranny in Dhenkanal. However, the most tragic incident that shocked the people and represented the police repression in severe form was committed in the villages of Bhuban and Nilakanthapur at the night of 10-11 October 1938. There, the police party attacked the innocent villagers and killed six persons including a 14 years old boy, Baji Rout. This sort of wanton repression not only invited condemnation but also it strengthened the determination of the people to fight for the fulfillment of their just demands.

In the Garjat states of Athagarh, Baramba, Narsinghpur, Nayagarh and Tigiria the people raised their voice under the aegis of their prajamandal units. The popular agitation in Ranpur assumed a violent character and the people's hysteria reached its climax. On 5th June 1939, the people gheraoed the royal palace and pressed for the release of their arrested leaders. Major
R.L. Bazelgette, the political agent, who was present on the spot, without heeding to the people's demands, ordered the crowd to dispose. To frighten the crowd he fired a few shots. This infuriated the crowd and in their retaliatory attack Major Bazelgette was killed. In the wake of this, police repression started in Ranpur. Many people were arrested, some fled to the neighbouring areas. Finally two persons Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida were hanged and others suffered exile and life imprisonment.

On 29th October 1938, All "Orissa Garjat Day" was observed at many places, where the people urged the rulers to accept their charter of demands and shun the path of violence and tyranny, which the ruler had perpetrated on them. The Orissa States Enquiry Committee, which was constituted under the chairmanship of H.K. Mahtab in 1937, to enquire in to the condition of the people in the Garjat states, came out with its report in 1939. The finding of the States Enquiry Committee and the recommendations suggested therein was brought to the notice of the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow. But no action was taken in this regard. The outbreak of the Second World War, the British policy of ruthless suppression of all popular agitation during the war brought a temporary lull in its activities.

The formation of a popular government in Orissa after the war, the prospect of British withdrawal from India, the arrival of Cabinet Mission provided the impetus to the people and they revived their agitation with renewed vigour. To coordinate the movement of the prajamandals, the Orissa and Chhatisgarh Regional Council was formed. In some states the people took the pledge do or die to establish popular government and recruited voluntary forces to wrest power from the hands of the rulers. In Nilgiri, a parallel Govt. known as the Azad Nilgiri Government was formed and it started functioning from Balasore.

A beginning of the merger of the Garjats with Orissa, was made with the takeover of the administration of Nilgiri state by the Govt. of Orissa. The designs of the ruler to weaken the activities of the prajamandal and his instigation to the tribals to attack the non-tribals proved boomerang for him. It created law and order problem, which prompted the provincial Govt. to intervene and with instruction from central Govt., it assumed the administration of Nilgiri on 14th November 1947. The retrograde steps of the rulers of the Garjat states to maintain their separate existence and the formation of the Eastern States Union comprising the Garjat states of Orissa and Chhatisgarh region in this regard however could not withstand the popular pressure. The British withdrawal from India, the lapse of paramountcy made it difficult for the Garjat states to maintain their separate identity. After much persuasion and coercion from the Union Home Minister Sardar Patel, the rulers of Garjat states except the ruler of Mayurbhanj signed the instrument of Merger on 15 December 1947. Ultimately all the Garjat States except the twin states of Sareikala and Kharaswan were merged with Orissa which gave birth and shape to Greater Orissa.

References:


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