

Emergence of Orissa as a Separate State and Contribution of Khallikote Raj Family

Dr. Dasarathi Bhuyan

The Khallikote Raj Family was the brain, heart and soul of the Oriya nationalist movement which aimed at linguistic, literary, cultural and territorial integration of Oriya-speaking people with a separate identity of their own. In 1901 four prominent persons of the time-Harihara Mardraj Dev-the Raja of Khallikote, Nilamani Vidyaratna-an eminent litterateur, Narasingh Das and Harihara Panda, the first Oriya pleader of Ganjam-met at the Rambha Palace of the Raja of Khallikote to discuss the future of the Oriyas under the leadership of Madhusudan Das. "It was in this conclave of secret deliberations that the foundation of the future of the race was laid", wrote L.M.Patnaik in his book "Resurrected Orissa".

In April 1903 the Ganjam National Conference held under the auspices of Ganjam Jatiya Samity. In this conference the Oriyas of Ganjam led by Harihara Mardraj, the Raja of Khallikote expressed their desire for a united Orissa. Madhusudan Das, who was present in the conference proposed to convene another conference on a much bigger scale to press the demand. Thus the Utkal Sammilani or Utkal Union Conference was born in December 1903 with the Utkal Sabha merging in it.

Sri Nilamani Vidyaratna, a prominent Oriya nationalist and journalist was working in the Badakhemundi Raj Darabar. On one occasion

he advised to Shri Sashibhusan Rath of Ganjam to publish an Oriya Weekly. Soon after, Sashibhusan Rath started his Oriya Weekly "Asha" which was published from Brahmapur. During that time Vidyaratna was very close to poet Radhanath Roy because earlier he was a Primary Teacher where Roy was the School Inspector. Roy introduced Nilamani Vidyaratna to the Raja of Bamanda, Sri Sudhala Dev for the purpose of publication of an Oriya journal. Raja of Bamanda started an Oriya Journal named "Sambalpur Hitaisini" and Vidyaratna was appointed as the editor. When Vidyaratna came to know about the nationalist movement and patriotic activities of Harihara Mardaraj he soon left Bamanda and joined hands with the Raja of Khallikote. Very soon Raja Harihara Mardaraj purchased a press and he started a weekly journal "Prajabandhu". Nilamani Vidyaratna took the editorship of that weekly. The press was set up at Rambha Palace and later on it was known as "Mardaraj Press". 'Prajabandhu' all through its career focused the grievances of the Oriyas. When the Oriya nationalist movement was taking boost, Raja Harihara Mardaraj met with untimely death on 20th July 1909. At the Prince Ramachandra Mardaraj was minor, the estate of Khallikote kept under the Madras Court of Wards. On Fourteenth of January, 1921 Raja Ramachandra Mardaraj Dev came to the throne.

Ramachandra Mardaraj Dev was nominated as the President of District Board of Ganjam by the Madras Government in 1922 and continued this position until 1937. He managed to hold this office unopposed in every successive term of three years. Ganjam district benefited a lot by the endeavour of his presidentship. A number of bridges were constructed throughout Ganjam district during his tenure. The major bridges over Rushikulya, Bahuda, Badanadi, Bansadhara and the Mahendratana were built because of his endless efforts. That's why the people of Ganjam popularly called him as the "Bridge President". Not only the bridges but also a huge number of Road networks and new Dak Bungalows were constructed during his tenure as the Ganjam District President.

In order to improve the agriculture production, he made available a number of irrigation projects in the district. Notable among them were the "Niraspalli Project" at Athagada, "Narendra Sankha" of Biridi, "Purnachandra Sagara" and "Mohan Sagar" at Khallikote. Because of his selfless service to the mankind he was honoured with the hereditary title of "Raja" in July 1927.

He earned good name and fame as a dynamic member of the Madras Legislative Council from 1923 to 1936 till the new province of Orissa was created. As a member he took active part in all important debates in the floor of the legislature and made marks. He always fought for the interest of Orissa. As a legislator he was principled, honest, sincere, dutiful and punctual. He fought for protecting the interests of the Oriyas. He demanded amalgamation of Oriya speaking areas into one common province.

Role of Ramachandra Dev for the formation of separate Orissa State is noteworthy. It was he who successfully convinced the Phillip-Duff-Committee, who visited Rambha and stayed

at Rambha palace from seventeenth December to twenty-first of December, 1924. He convinced the Commission giving all the logical arguments right from the birth of Utkal Sammilani and his father's sincere attempts for the amalgamation of Oriya speaking tracts.

The Viceroy appointed the three-member Orissa Boundary Committee with Samuel O'Donnell as the Chairman and H.M. Mehata and T. Phookan as members. The Committee was to go into the question of a separate administration for Orissa from financial and other angles and to make recommendations regarding adjustment of boundaries in the event of separation. The O'Donnell Committee visited Gopalpur-on-Sea on fifteenth of December, 1931. Ram Chandra Mardaraj helped the Committee in giving all the evidences for the amalgamation of the Oriya speaking tracts. Sashibhusan Rath, Niranjan Pattanayak, Shrikrushna Mahapatra, Laxmidhara Mahanty, Biswanath Mishra, Bhubanananda Das, Lingaraj Panigrahi, and Laxminarayan Pattanayak were the members of the Witness Committee. A huge gathering welcomed the Committee at the Brahmapur Railway Station. During this time the people of Ganjam were going to Rangoon for numeral works for livelihood. They were gathering at Gopalpur before one or two days for boarding the ship. The Raja of Khallikote Ramachandra Mardaraj motivated the members of the O'Donnell Committee to witness the people gathered for sea journey in nearby places. The Committee recommended that if the province of Orissa was to be created it should include the Orissa Division consisting of Cuttack, Puri, Baleswar and Sambalpur districts, Anugul, the Khariar Zamindari of Raipur district and the greater part of the Ganjam district and Vizagapatnam Agency Tracts.

The Third Round Table Conference was held in London in December, 1932. Ramachandra Mardaraj was invited to this

conference as a delegate. There he successfully presented the grievances of the Oriyas and played a prominent role in the deliberations regarding Indian Constitutional Reforms.

Ramachandra Mardaraj earned a good name in the Orissa Legislative Assembly both as a legislator and as a minister. He was a member of Indian Central Legislature from 1945 to 1951. After the new Constitution came into force he was elected twice to the Orissa Legislative Assembly in 1951 from Khallikote constituency and in 1957 from Kodala constituency.

After the formation of Orissa as a new province then came the general election to the 60-member State Assembly in January 1937-the first ever poll in the new-born province. For the Congress it was a great challenge. The very thought of fighting against the combined strength of the resourceful Zamidara sent shivers down the spine of many a Congress leaders. Mahatab retired to his Ashram at Agarapara practically boycotting the poll. Very few were optimistic of the party's success. The organization was so weak that it was difficult even to get persons brave enough to fight election on Congress ticket. The election took place in January 1937 on the basis of limited franchise. The Legislative Assembly consisted of 60 seats-of which 56 were open to contest and four were reserved for nominated representatives of backward tribes. The principal contestant parties, besides the Congress, were the National Party of the Maharaja of Parlakhemundi; The United Party of (Raja) S.N.Bhanja Deo of Kanika and the Independent Party of (Raja) Ramachandra Mardaraj Dev of Khallikote. The Congress Party successfully appealed to the rural masses in the magic name of Mahatma Gandhi. The short tour of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in the second week of November 1937, immediately before the election, also exercised magnetic influence on the minds of the voters in favour of the Congress. The out-

come was a landslide victory for the Congress. Fresh hurdles stood in the way of the Orissa Congress Party. The Congress protested against the Governor's special powers of interference and declined to accept the office. In the circumstances the Governor of Orissa, J.A.Hubback invited the National Party leader, K.C. Gajapati Narayan Dev, the Maharaja of Parlakhemundi, to form the Ministry in 1937. The minority Ministry of Parlakhemundi was in an anomalous position. It would have been defeated had the legislature met. The three months that followed the constitutional crisis created by the Congress party's refusal to accept office, gave rise to much political excitement. Realizing the untenability of the situation the Viceroy made a statement in June 1937 clarifying the constitutional position virtually backing out of his earlier posture. The misgivings over, the Congress decided in July 1937 to accept office. The Maharaja of Parlakhemundi tendered his resignation. Biswanath Das came into power on July 19, 1937. But things inside the Congress were hardly looked up. Intra-party quarrel intensified instead of abating. The Ministry did not last beyond October 1939 when it had to resign in pursuance of the Congress resolution not to co-operate with the British war effort. Orissa came under the direct Governor's rule for the first time and the Assembly was kept inanimated suspension. Nilakantha Das and Godavarish Mishra, openly flouting the Congress directive, made a bid for an alternative Ministry under the leadership of Raja of Khallikote, Ramachandra Mardaraj Dev. But it was torpedoed by Mahatab, Biswanath Das and Nabakrushna Choudhary. Then a three-member Cabinet headed by Gajapati Narayan Dev and with Godavarish Mishra and Sobhan Khan as Ministers assumed office in November 1941. But the inner contradictions among the Coalition partners, which remained under the carpet during the Ministry-making exercise, were soon manifesting

over the share of spoils. The Raja of Khallikote, his aspirations for the office of the Chief Minister having been dashed, wanted to be the National War Front leader for Orissa, a prize post blessed by the British Rulers. The Raja was not only a very popular figure of Ganjam but was also in the good book of the British who naturally wanted him to adorn the post. But here also he had a formidable contestant in Nilakantha Das who had preferred the War Front Office to a ministerial berth for certain reasons. The Raja sought to prejudice the British Governor against Das kicking up a row over the publication of a book on Subhas Chandra Bose which came out from the printing press owned by Das and heavily subsidized by the Government. At the instance of Governor the press was searched and the book prescribed. But eventually, on the recommendation of the Ministry, Das was nominated by the Governor as the National War Front Leader. But the book episode cleft the tie between the two architects of the second Coalition Ministry-Nilakantha Das and the Raja of Kallikote.

As the leader of National War Front, he took extensive tour all over India particularly the military training camps, strategic points and manufacturing centres. The most important strategic points he visited were Quetta and Khyber Pass in the North West Frontier province. Everywhere Mardraj visited, he advised the government that the army of caste, creed or language should be amalgamated. He was in favour of christening the Indian Army accordingly by the name of a respective caste. He suggested for the abolition of the Auxiliary forces and reorganization of Indian Territorial Army. He also pleaded for the establishment of a military cantonment at Cuttack in the province of Orissa. He donated two thousand rupees for the benefit of Royal Indian Navy and it was he who gave valuable suggestions for its improvements. For his honest

work during the war, he was extremely admired by the British authorities.

After the release of arrested Congress leaders from jail following suspension of individual *Satyagraha* a move was made to pull down the minority Ministry of Gajapati through a vote of no-confidence during the budget session of the Assembly in 1942. Meanwhile Gandhiji gave his historic call for the "Quit-India" movement. And, shortly before the budget session, 18 Congress legislators including Biswanath Das, Nabakrushna Choudhury and Pranath Patnaik were arrested under the Defence of India Rules and were put behind bars for the entire period of the session. Yet, the Ministry was not free from threats: and the threat now came from within. The Maharaja of Kahallikote, Sri Ramachandra Mardaraj Dev, who was extremely unhappy about the Ministry, assumed the role of an Opposition Leader for all practical purposes.

In a remarkable speech, loaded with wit and sarcasm, delivered in the State Assembly on November 5, 1942 the Raja exposed the political game of the Ministers. "Congratulating" the Ministry "on the unexpected lease of life it has had on account of the present political situation" he said, "the miracle which has brought about this change is the fact that eighteen members of the House have been spirited away and shut up behind the prison bars. One can hardly find a paralleled to this state of affairs in the pages of constitutional functions or come across an instance where a minority is suddenly converted into a majority by the simple process of putting its opponents into jail".

Ramachandra Mardaraj brought serious allegations against the Ministers. "A handful of people who are responsible to nobody and do not know what they are about, so long as they stick to their place, whatever happens to the war, to the country and to the empire.....So far the

Ministry had failed to do anything in promoting war effort. Some of its doings in the normal working of the administration are such as to exasperate even those who mean well of the Ministry. The Ministry had attempted to divert the course of law and ordered withdrawal of cases and they are all serious accusations under the ordinary law of the land against persons who are connected with the Ministry in some way or the other”.

No doubt Khallikote Raja's voice was the voice of the British Government, but it underscored the inner contradiction in the ruling coalition government.

By that time most of the Congress Legislators were in jail. A few remained outside. The Ministry of Gajapati adopted all sorts of questionable methods to wean them away from the Congress in order to have a majority in the Assembly. And Godavarish Mishra masterminded this dirty political strategy. Punea Nayak was a Congress MLA from the double-member Aska-constituency in Ganjam district. At first Godavarish Mishra deputed a PWD officer to entice him away. The attempt having failed, Maharaja of Parlakhemundi (the Prime Minister) himself went there accompanied by Godavarish Mishra and others. Gajapati stayed in the Dak Bungalow at Aska while Godavarish Mishra and others went to the dilapidated cottage of Nayak. To tempt him Godavarish Mishra told Nayak that the Gajapati himself had come down to invite him to join the Cabinet. If he accepted the offer Gajapati would take him personally to the State Capital. He would no longer remain poor. But the Harijan legislator politely turned down the offer. Godavarish Mishra had carried with him Rs.10,000/- all in coins. Since the poor Harijan was eyeless they jingled the bagful of coins near his ears. Even this vulgar method failed to work. For a handful of silver he refused to leave the party.

A Harijan MLA from Baragarh Bishi Bihar's was yet another case of unfaltering party loyalty. Similar attempts on Krupasindhu Bhukta, another MLA from Anugul, also proved futile. The Ministry fell. Gajapati could not prove his majority.

In 1957 Ramachandra Mardaraj was elected from the Kodala constituency on Congress ticket and became a cabinet minister in the Nabakrushna Choudhary ministry. He was given the portfolio of River Valley development, Capital Construction, Vigilance, Administrative Tribunal and Rourkela Affairs.

He was an illustrious son not only of Ganjam but also of whole Orissa. He was a patriot, an educationist, a politician, a Raja and a social worker rolled into one. He was a great supporter of education. It was due to his upbeat endeavor the Khallikote College at Brahmapur was established. It was due to his sincere efforts that Science Colleges at Khallikote and Hinjilicut were established. He also founded a Girl's High school and a Boy's High School at Brahmapur. Hence he started an era of cultural and political renaissance in Orissa through the spread of education. He was a front ranking leader of Oriya Nationalism. The great soul of Orissa breathed his last in 1963.

The contribution of Harihara Mardraj and Ramachandra Mardaraj were remarkable for the amalgamation of Oriya speaking tracts. They devoted their entire life for the greater cause of Orissa and the Oriyas. The pioneer of the Orissa Movement, builders of separate Orissa Province, accomplishment towards formation of modern Orissa will be remembered forever. They have carved a niche for themselves in the annals of Orissa history.

Dr. Dasarathi Bhuyan lives at Vani Vihar, PO-Aska, Ganjam-761110.