Merger of Princely States of Orissa with Indian Dominion and Importance of 1st January

Dr. Janmejay Choudhury

The lapse of British Paramount over the Indian states created an immediate problem of vast magnitude. There were 26 Feudatory states of Orissa whose merger with British Orissa was an outstanding demand of the political leaders of the province. The administration of the feudatory chiefs of Orissa had evoked much reaction from the people at different times. There were some small risings during the first two decades of the 20th century in those states which were aimed at the removal of maladministration of the kings. In most cases the rulers suppressed those risings with strong hands.

The Orissa State People’s Conference was convened at Cuttack under the guidance of Balunkeswar Acharya, Radhanath Rath, Madhusudan Patanaik and Govinda Chandra Misra. The second session of Orissa state People’s Conference was held at Cuttack on 23rd June 1937 under the Presidency of the Congress leader, Dr. B. Pattabhi Sitaramaya. He emphasized the need of awakening the people of the Feudatory states of Orissa and appealed them to come in line with their fellow countrymen in British India for the national cause. Several resolutions were adopted in the conference with the hope of achieving the outstanding demands of the people. The first resolution of the conference, which exposed the maladministration of the state. It was urged upon the rulers of Orissan States for conferring upon their subjects immediately the rights of occupancy on their holdings and some fundamental rights of citizenship. The attention of the rulers was drawn to the widespread distress among their subjects caused by the illegal and forcible exactions like Rasad, Magan, Bethi and Beggari, etc. The conference strongly urged upon them for total abolution of such evil practices. In order to investigate and report on such illegal practices in the states, the conference appointed a Committee consisting of Satish Chandra Das. Thus the Orissa State People’s Conference in June 1937 paved the ground for the formation of political associations in the states and tried to focus the attention of all concerned in removing their grievances.

With the encouragement from the Congress party and due to the favourable circumstances after the installation of the popular ministry in the province, Praja Mandals or People’s Associations were formed in a number of Feudatory states of Orissa. The leaders of Praja Mandals presented their charter of demands to the ruling chiefs and claimed the abolition of numerous feudal exactions such as, forced labour, Forced contributors, free supply of ration to officers on tour etc.
The first open revolt against the autocratic system of the feudatory chiefs began in Nilagiri, in early 1938. The people were united under the leadership of Kailash Chandra Mahanty and Banamali Das, and they demanded the recognition of their civil rights and removal of unjust laws. By September 1938, the Praja Mandal agitation took serious turn in the states of Talcher and Dhenkanal. The Praja Mandal leaders of Talcher then submitted a long list of demands to their rulers. Such an unprecedented exodus of people drew the attention of many political leaders and philanthropists in the country including Gandhi. In January 1939, A.V. Thakkar Bapa, Prof. N.G. Ranga, Rev. C.F. Andrews etc. visited the camps and saw the heroic sufferings of the people. Miss Agatha Harrison, the Secretary of the Indian conciliation Group in London and C.F. Andrews, the noted philanthropist, who had seen the miserable condition of the refugees in the camps, brought the matter to the notice of the British authorities in New Delhi and also gave some publicity outside India. By the force of circumstances, the ruler finally agreed to give some important concessions and on 21st March 1939 an agreement was signed between the Assistant Political Agent and the representative of the people which was popularly known as Hennessey-Mahatap Pact. But even after the agreement was signed, the ruler tried to play mischief and he did not make an open declaration to that effects.

In early January 1939 the most violent incident occurred in the state of Ranpur, a small state on the borders of Khurda and Nayagarh. Its Praja Mandal was declared unlawful and some of the leaders were imprisoned. The British authorities adopted strong repressive measures against the people of Ranpur. Such widespread movements and violent occurrences in the Feudatory states of Orissa also roused the Congress leaders in the province to greater responsibilities. On 29th October 1938, “All Orissa Garjat Day” was observed in many places in which the policy of the rulers was criticized and the acceptance of the people’s charters was demanded. Thus, the Congress Ministry rendered valuable help to the people of the Garjats in their awakening against the oppressive rulers and encouraged their peaceful movements by all possible means.

It has been mentioned earlier that a Committee was set up by the Orissa states People’s Conference in 1937 to enquire into the condition of the states it was reconstituted in 1938 with H.K. Mahtab, the member of the Congress working committee, as the Chairman Balabanta Rai Mehta and Lal Mohan Patanaik as members. The reconstituted Committee began its works in June 1938 and collected evidences from large number of people. In the final stage, a legal expert was deputed by the all India State’s People’s Conference to help the Committee and the report was completed in July 1939. In first week of August 1939, Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy, visited Orissa. A copy of the Orissa State’s Enquiry Committee’s Report was handed over to him and the problem drew his immediate attention. Before any concrete step could be taken by the authorities for the solution of the problem on a permanent basis, the world war broke out and the Congress Ministry was out of office. Thus the problems could not be tackled and the administration of the Feudatory states could not be streamlined to serve the interests of the people. During the Second World War, the British authorities and the feudatory chiefs strengthened their group over the states. The prominent leaders, who were suspected to create troubles, were arrested by the defence of Indian Rules.

Thus, the feudatory chiefs ruthlessly suppressed the popular movements in their states
by the help of military forces. It was no longer possible to carry on agitation in any form openly and most of the prominent leaders of the Garjats either absconded and carried on some underground activities or were put behind the prison bars during the years from 1943 to 1945.

The situation did not improve till the end of the Second World War. With resolution of popular administration in the province in April 1946, H.K. Mahtab, the new Congress premier, made serious attempts to solve the problem of the Feudatory states once for all. Mahtab met the members of the Cabinet Mission on 6th April 1946 and placed a memorandum before them in which he pleaded strongly for amalgamation of the Garjats with Province. The Cabinet Mission was busy to this specific problem of Orissa. However, in the statement issued by the Cabinet Mission on 16th May 1946, it was contemplated that a satisfactory solution to the problem of the Indian states would be achieved by mutual negotiations. Mahtab wrote letters to all the rulers of the Orissa states on 10th May 1946 and again on 29 June 1946 in order to convince them about the benefits of mutual co-operation. Mahtab was convinced that the amalgamation of states with province on terms agreed upon by the parties concerned would best serve the interests of both the province and the states. But then, the rulers did not show any interest to join with province. Rather they took a very hostile attitude to the whole problem.

In July 1946, the rulers met in a Conference held at Alipore and decided to form a federal union of the Chhatishgarh and Orissa states. The British Resident of the Eastern States Agency who was present in the Conference encouraged such a move and in general, all the rulers were in favour of a federation of the Chhatishgarh and Orissa states.

However, Mahtab did not give up the hope of some understanding with the ruling chiefs. On 16th October 1946, he met some of them at Sambalpur in the presence of the political Agent and tried to convince them about the necessity of one administration for both the states and the province. The discussion lasted for about six hours, but it yielded no satisfactory results. Mahtab even approached the Nawab of Bengal, the Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes to solve the problem of the feudatory chiefs. It was felt that some arrangement for administrative, financial and economic collaboration between the two parties should be arrived at by mutual understanding and agreement. It failed to produce the desired results. In fact, the rulers of the Garjat were bent upon maintaining their separate identities and did not like to amalgamate with the province.

In the meantime, some Congress leaders of Orissa had started serious anti-state propaganda with the help of the Praja Mandal who now demanded for the introduction of democratic rule and also in some cases for complete amalgamation with Orissa. In the first session of the Orissa and Central Province Regional Council of All India State’s People Conference held at Cuttack on 1st March 1947, several resolutions were passed which urged upon the Rulers of the Eastern State Agency to abandon their scheme and devise ways and means for establishing mutual contact with the provinces around. After prolonged deliberation, 39 States of Orissa and Chhatisgarh fromed the Eastern States Union which started functioning from 1st August 1947. It had an elaborate constitution and a secretariat. The constituent state made financial contributions to maintain the administrative machinery of the union. A month later, the Governor of Orissa wrote to Jawahalal Nehru about the constitution of the states.

With the dawn of independence the situation so rapidly changed that the fond hopes...
of the Feudatory chiefs to maintain their status quo were shattered to pieces. The state Ministry under Sardar Patel was compelled by the force of circumstances to take necessary steps to arrest the process of ‘balkanization’ of India. The process of integration of the Indian state began in Orissa with the assumption of the administration of Nilagiri state by the Dominion Government\textsuperscript{17}. After the take over of the administration of Nilagiri, the states Ministry took the initiative to resolve the problem of the Orissa states. In order to explore the possibilities of associating the states with the provincial administration for common interest, it was finally settled to meet the rulers in a conference in Orissa as soon as possible. Accordingly, Sardar Patel, V.P. Menon and other officials of the States Ministry arrived at Cuttack on 13\textsuperscript{th} December 1947. The historic conference began in the Raj Bhawan at Cuttack in the morning of 14\textsuperscript{th} December 1947. Ten other ruling chiefs ultimately agreed after a good deal of pressure and persuasion, to accept the plan of merger and the documents were signed by the morning of 15\textsuperscript{th} December 1947\textsuperscript{18}. On 23\textsuperscript{rd} December 1947, in exercise of the powers conferred by the Extra Provincial Jurisdiction Act, 1947, the Government of India delegated to the Orissa Government the power to administer the Feudatory states ‘in the same manner as the districts in that province.’ It became effective from 1\textsuperscript{st} January 1948. Mayurbhanj signed the Instrument of Merger on 17\textsuperscript{th} October 1948 and the state was taken over by the Government of India on 9\textsuperscript{th} November, and then came under the control of the Government of Orissa from 1\textsuperscript{st} January 1949. Ultimately 24 princely states were integrated with the Orissa Province.

References:

3. *Ibid*, P.357
4. *Ibid*, P.358
5. Orissa State Enquiry Committee Report, 1939, p.2
7. Histroy of Talcher Praja Mandal, P.117
8. Harijan, 22 April 1939
17. *Prajatantra*, Cuttack, 5 November 1947
18. *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 20 November 1947

Dr. Janmejay Choudhury is a Lecturer in History in Sri Jagannath College, Kaipadar, Khurda.