

Socialist Movement and Sarangadhar Das

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The Indian National Congress that fought against the British imperialism was formed out of many elements and groups. The radicals in the Congress crystallised into a group in 1934 called socialists. The Congress Socialist Party fought for the interests of peasants in Moghulbandi area and tenants in Gadjats. These people were exploited by their masters such as Zamindars and Rajas like anything. Arbitrary rule, oppression exploitation and misuse of power in feudatory states were many times more than in the Moghulbandi areas. They led a miserable life. The law could not protect their interest, rather it worked to protect the interest of the rich and powerful.

Against such a background when the discontents pitched high, the socialists came forward to fire it. It was the fear of Zamindars and Rajas that frightened the peasants to form any organization. The Congress socialists tried to free them from fear psychosis and therefore, formed a “Krushak Sangha” (Farmer’s Organization) in the later part of 1933. Mrs. Malati Choudhury and Surendranath Dwivedy were the Joint Secretaries. Attempts were made to set up Krushak Sanghas in villages. But the rural people being frightened of the British government did not have the courage to respond to the call of the Krushak Sangha.¹

The Congress socialists, therefore, decided to launch programmes to make the peasants fearless. For this they sought the cooperation of the non-socialists and associated them with the peasant conferences. The first All Orissa Krushak Conference was organized at Bagalpur in Cuttack District in 1934. In the conference a resolution was adopted that the peasants would take a vow not to bow down before anybody except God. Some other resolutions on economic and social issues were also adopted. To demoralise the Congress socialists and to paralise the movement false cases were filed against the peasants.² There came a realization amongst the peasantry for the first time that the government was on the side of the Zamindars. This was exactly the political objective of the socialists to arouse class consciousness of the peasants. They gradually realized that both the government and the Zamindars were to be fought.

The socialists published a journal called Krushak. It was born with the objective of carrying peasants and workers’ struggle forward and for strengthening the socialist movement. The journal reflected the oppression of Zamindars and Rajas in princely states. It also published reports about the repression of the peasants by the Police even at the time of the Congress ministry.

Sarangadhar Das was very active with the States' Peoples' Movement. He was also closely associated with the activities of the Congress Socialist Party. He was a foreign educated agricultural scientist but his knowledge had no fruit in his native state Dhenkanal. He was a victim to royal oppression. He worked hard for the cause of the common people. All Orissa States' Peoples' Movement was rejuvenated under his leadership. He completely dedicated his life for the upliftment of the downtrodden and destitutes. He had no interest in power politics, so he had developed close friendship with the Congress Socialist Party with the interest to serve the people. The Praja Mandal Movement under his dynamic leadership gathered momentum in Dhenkanal and some other places. In this movement the socialists had effectively participated to fight for the cause of the tenants. They also fought for the integration of the princely states with the union of India. Sarangadhar Das, who became a popular figure in Orissa later on, could carry out his mission with the help of the Congress socialists in spite of the fact that his cause was often hampered and sabotaged not only by those who were opposed to it but also by the members of C.S.P. itself.³

The Praja Mandal Movement was in full swing in Dhenkanal and other princely states⁴. In Dhenkanal it acquired momentum when the socialists organized a huge peasant conference at Jenapur in Cuttack District under the initiative of the Cuttack District Kisan Sangha on the occasion of the All India Kisan Day celebrations on 1st September, 1938. It had been organized to fight oppression of the "Moghulabandi" Zamindars. As it was situated on the border of Dhenkanal, a large number of its inhabitants attended it. The socialists discussed in great detail the oppressive practices of "Bethi", "beggary" and similar other

oppressions suffered by the people of Dhenkanal. The evil consequence of oppression made thousands of poor people to leave their houses in Dhenkanal and to lead a miserable life in other places. In September 1938 thousands of people gheraoed the Court of the Raja (King) and revolted against him. This was an unprecedented event in the history of Orissa. The people were agitated and determined to carry on the campaign. In this movement the socialists maintained the utmost restraint to avoid bloodbath on that day. Entry into Dhenkanal had been banned. Those entering into it were arrested or tortured. So Sarangadhar Das, Nabakrushna Choudhury, Malati Choudhury and others addressed the people from the railway line on the British Indian territory.⁵ The leaders remained outside the boundary of Dhenkanal to guide the activities of the people.

During World War - II and owing to other political reasons, the Congress movement slowed down but the socialists had especially tried to carry on the Dhenkanal Movement in different ways. Batches of Satyagrahis entered into Dhenkanal from Moghulbandi areas. In the meantime the Peoples' Movement took violent turn in Talcher, Ranpur and other princely states.

The socialists published a magazine called "Krushak". It described vividly the oppression of the people, their humiliation, their suffering and torture, their agonies and miseries. The people of Gadajat states were greatly influenced by the magazine and secretly and anonymously sent information about the state of affairs in their region. The articles published in Krushak infuriated the rulers to such an extent that they invoked the Princes' Protection Act and demanded the political agents to take action against the socialists. The Congress ministry did not accept it.

The Peoples' Movement in Orissa demanded for full responsible government in the princely states, it also aimed at full integration of princely states with the province of Orissa. Orissa States' Enquiry Committee presided over by Harekrushna Mahatab had recommended the integration of the princely states with Orissa.⁶ The All India States' Peoples' Conference had advocated only for full responsible government within the frame-work of princely states. Orissa unit being one of its regular branches, it too demanded full responsible government in a formal way. But in Orissa the socialists stressed the demand for full integration. People in general supported it. Sarangadhar Das was the power behind the movement.

In the meantime, the workers of the reorganized socialist party plunged into the Praja Mandal Movement in various states. Some leaders became friendly with the rulers and started making efforts to secure the so-called self-government. The princes took advantage of this weakness and resorted to all kinds of tactics to win over the weakling leaders of Praja Mandal. The socialists, however, succeeded in frustrating the conspiracy of the Rajas of Balangir, Kalahandi, Gangapur, Bonai and some other states.

After the Nasik conference of the socialist party in March, all socialists were directed to leave the Congress by 1st April, 1948.⁷ After the separation from the Congress, the socialists played an active role in Orissa. The Congress leaders were not icons for the youth as they were running after power. The youths left the main stream of the National Movement and joined either the communists or some other parties. The activities of socialists began to spread among the farmers, workers, youth, students and artists. The socialists were no longer involved in the internal conflicts

of the Congress and they offered healthy criticism against its policies and faults of the ministry. For example, the Orissa premier H.K. Mahatab was reluctant to fully implement the Congress decision to abolish the Zamindari system. But he introduced variety of measures to the detriment of the peasants. The socialist party organized protest movements against this throughout the province. Sarangadhar Das supported this move of the socialists. They organized their movements in different princely states through peasant movements.

People had anticipated a lot after independence but their dream did not come true. There were still starvation, no cloths, no medicine, no education and no communication. Feudal oppression was there in villages. In the cities the rich continued to exploit the poor. This was the state of affairs of the country in August, 1948. The socialist party reflected all these in its mouth-piece the "Krushak". Sarangadhar Das was regularly writing about the suffering of the people in Krushak in the name of Landa Dehuri.

At this time an elected assembly and a ministry was functioning in Orissa. In order to provide representative government for the newly integrated states this temporary assembly was set up with nominated members as well as ministers. This was to satisfy the leaders of the States' People's Movement. However, the people did not get anything out of it. On the other hand, some leaders, who could have created discontent, were given some small offices to satisfy them. Sarangadhar Das was requested to head such a puppet government. But he declined this offer politely. Though the assembly was set up, the real authority was vested in the high government officials who had replaced the Rajas.⁸

To bring Sarangadhar Das to their side Congress leadership persuaded him in many ways.

He was offered Chairmanship of the Orissa Public Service Commission. He rejected it and together with Malati Choudhury set up Navjeevan Mandal for working among Adivasis and Harijans.

Sarangadhar Das was not the man to be a pawn in the political chess board of the Congress. So conspiracy was made against him. He was never interested in contesting for the membership of the Orissa Assembly. In a special resolution the Congress Committee stated that in the building up of a new Orissa, there was a great need for an expert technologist like him. They became successful in their attempt and Sarangadhar Das agreed to contest the election as a Congress candidate from the Tirtol-Erasama constituency. He won the election. But once the election was over he was taken neither in the ministry nor associated with any activity like the planning committee. He was not even one amongst the nine elected to the Constituent Assembly from Orissa. Later when under an agreement States' nominees were elected to the Constituent Assembly on behalf of the princes and the people, Sarangadhar Das contested one of the two seats on behalf of the Orissa Praja Mandal and was elected. At that time he was already a member of the Orissa Legislative Assembly. He was an extremely honest and dutiful person. In order to perform his job as people's representative in the legislature he used to collect facts personally, touring remote corners of the constituency.⁸

At that time in the Zamindari areas of Harishpur and Marichpur, the Zamindars and the government officials combined to destroy the forests and harassed the people. Sarangadhar Das gave a detailed report to the government demanding a suitable action. Because he had rejected premier Mahatab's overtures, utmost disregard was shown to him even though he was

a member of the ruling party. The government did not accept his suggestions. On the other hand oppression by the Zamindars and harassment by the government officials continued in that area. Sarangadhar Das felt that he had a greater responsibility to the people. He resigned the membership of the legislature and left the Congress party. A few months later he joined the socialist party.⁹

The socialistic ideology of reorganising the toiling people in Trade Unions, Kisan Panchayats, Cooperatives, Seva Dals of spreading socialism and the socialist way of living and thinking suited to the temperament of Sarangadhar Das.

Finance was a constraint on the way of the socialists, so they could not set up an elaborate central office of the party. In Orissa those socialists who were working full time for the party had no source of income of their own. At the time of framing rules for the party, a question was raised about the financial condition of fulltime party workers. In 1949, socialists took great pains and carried on organisational expansion. Farmers, students, youth and workers' organizations were set up all over.¹⁰ Movements were made to protect the rights of sharecroppers throughout the state¹¹ Sharecroppers movement created such a momentum that the socialists were invited to different parts of the state by the people for setting up peasant organizations in their areas.¹²

In the meantime Jaya Prakash Narayan had visited Orissa. It created high enthusiasm in all classes of people, especially the youth. A sum of twenty one thousand rupees was collected during J.P's tour. For cultural revolution the socialists had set up an organization at Cuttack named Jana Sanskruti Sangha.¹³ To make them financially sound they wanted to invest some money to renovate Krushak Press and to convert

it from biweekly into a daily. So they decided to float a public limited company to start a daily. The company was called “Jana Shakti Publication Limited” with Sarangadhar Das, Pandit Akula Mishra, Khatau Sundar Das and Surendranath Dwivedy as directors. Some shares were sold and an office was formally set up and work started. But they were all so busy with political activities that they could not pay any attention to this. Consequently the company had to be liquidated.

In the meantime the constitution of India was to come into force and elections were to be held. The socialists after severing from the Congress started working independently. They decided to fight the election and play the role of an effective opposition party. It believed in democratic socialism and not of proletariat dictatorship of the communists. In Orissa politics Surendranath Dwivedy, Nishamani Khuntia, Sarangadhar Das and Pradipta Kishore Das played a very vital role. In 1951 General Election Sarangadhar Das won the election and went to Lok Sabha. He died on 18 September 1956 after giving a will of his properties.

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