

1895-1905 : A Golden Decade in the History of Odia Language Movement in Sambalpur

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Finally, Sambalpur lost its independence in 1849 after the sad demise of last Chauhan Raja Narayan Singh. His widow queen Mukhyapan Devi, though assumed the charge of Sambalpur kingdom for a couple of months only, as the king died without a male issue, ultimately the country was annexed to British Government. During his lifetime, reportedly, Raja had intimated his wish that the British Government should take possession of his country and provide pension to his wife. So, Mr. Crawford, the Agent to the Governor-General issued proclamation that the State had lapsed to the British Government. He sent two officials, Munshi Prasanna Lal and Rai Rup Singh to take over the administration of Sambalpur. After that Mr. Crawford arrived at Sambalpur with a regiment of the Ramgarh Battalion in December 1849. He had with him Dr. J. Cadenhead, who was left in charge of Sambalpur as Principal Assistant with Rup Singh as Native Assistant. The widow queen Mukhyapan Devi was sent off to Cuttack with a pension of Rs.100/- (Rupees one hundred) only per mensem. Subsequently, there was a sea change in the socio-political arena of Sambalpur which was no more an independent country, but remained as a district of Central Provinces under British Raj.

During the second half of the 19th century AD, British Raj was firmly established in

Sambalpur which saw an environment altogether different from that of “Raja-tantra”. In fact, Sambalpur experienced this historical transition from “Raja-tantra” to “British Raj” with spread of western education and with formation of new administrative structure, judiciary, police and revenue system. Western education had its beginning in the Sambalpur district with the foundation of the Zilla School in 1852. The George High School at Bargarh originally started as an Upper Primary School in 1862. English education was introduced in Bamanda (present Deogarh and Kuchinda) and Raja Basudev Sudhal Dev took special interest in spread of education in his state. He raised the M.E. School of his state to the standard of a High School and got it affiliated to Calcutta (Kolkata) University in 1885.

Consequently, though small in number, an educated and enlightened middle-class emerged in Sambalpur due to spread of western education. This new intellectual group became aware of their rights. But the people of Sambalpur suffered humiliation. They were totally ignored and completely neglected in various government jobs in Sambalpur. Only “Hindi-knowing non-Odias” were preferred and absorbed in different government establishments.

On administrative ground, Sambalpur district was transferred to the Odisha Division of Bengal Province in 1860. Subsequently, it was again transferred to the Chhattisgarh Division of Central Provinces in 1962. By the end of the 19th century AD, Sambalpur was a district of Central Provinces under British Raj. Then, Sambalpur was regarded as an Odia speaking territory. Unfortunately, however, sub-ordinate staffs in various government offices, as mentioned above, were mostly non-Odias because of two main reasons. First, Sambalpur was in the Central Provinces, dominantly a Hindi speaking tract. Secondly, the British rulers were unable to understand Odia or any language other than Hindi. So, obviously, these non-Odia government servants were by and large Hindi speaking people. Since these non-Odia government employees were unable to read, write and understand Odia properly, they used to mobilize their higher authorities from time to time for introduction of Hindi as the official language in Sambalpur. The intellectuals of Sambalpur were well-aware of this fact. Odia poet like Gangadhar Meher started inculcating patriotism and Odia nationalism through his poems in the hearts and minds of Sambalpurias.

In 1895, Sir John Woodburne, the-then Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces passed an order. He directed that Hindi should be the official language of courts and government offices in Sambalpur. Formally, he sought the opinion of the general public. Mr. R. A. Chapman, the-then Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur, was also in favour of introducing Hindi as the medium of administration. The government servants had no problem in the introduction of Hindi as official language in Sambalpur. Thus, Hindi was introduced in Sambalpur by abolishing Odia on 19.01.1895.

As a result of this development, any document not written in Hindi could not be presented for registration. General public had to face difficulties in writing Hindi in various government transactions through documents and otherwise. Sir Andrew Fraser, the-then Chief Commissioner also realized this fact. He had seen people coming to attend the court after receiving summons from distant places. They were unable to read the summons written in Hindi. They had to locate a person who could read and explain the same to them. The government servants who used to serve these summons were also illiterate. They only served the summons and told them that they were required to attend the court.

Common people were very much afraid of the consequences in not attending the court. They had heard and seen the suppression of British Raj, particularly in case of Surendra Sai and his rebellious colleagues in Sambalpur. This had generated a strong fear psychosis among the common men in Sambalpur. So, they used to go to the court and enquired the contents of summons. Thus, the language issue took a serious turn. The conscious intellectual class of Sambalpur sprang up immediately to protect the interest of the common people. Some prominent citizens of Sambalpur sharply reacted to this order. They mobilized people and a meeting was convened on 13.06.1895. Dharanidhar Mishra chaired this meeting and a resolution was passed unanimously opposing strongly the introduction of Hindi as the official language in courts and government offices of Sambalpur. A memorandum containing the same was forwarded to Lord Elgin, the-then Viceroy.

Thereafter, the intellectual class of Sambalpur did not remain silent. They tried hard to raise their voice to protect Odia language on various platforms and through different media like

newspapers, literatures and meetings. They made concerted efforts for a larger cause. The “Sambalpur Hitaishini”, a weekly Odia newspaper, started publication on 30.05.1887 from the Sudhala Press at Deogarh. Its contribution to the cause of Odia language and literature was significant. Through this weekly “Sambalpur Hitaishini” and the “Hirakhand” attention of British administration was drawn regarding the problems of Hindi and demand for introduction of Odia as official language in Sambalpur.

It was during 1901 Census that the Hindi-knowing government servants had to experience difficulties to a great extent. These difficulties were not strange or unusual. Hindi-knowing non-Odia government servants were conducting Census among the Odia knowing people of Sambalpur. It was obviously an impractical and unrealistic assignment to them. So, the British administration sought the help of those few Odias who were engaged as government servants. One such young man was Baikuntha Nath Pujari. He was then working as Assistant Commissioner. The Census was virtually carried out in Odia with his co-operation and help.

As a person, Baikuntha Nath Pujari was very dynamic and energetic. He used to perform his official duties as usual in the day time but used to spend his nights in the villages. He travelled from village to village on horse-back and explained people. He relentlessly mobilized rural people in Sambalpur district to say and write Odia as their mother-tongue when the census enumerators would come to their doors. Census operation in 1901 gave a big jolt to the very root of Hindi movement of British administration. When the report came out, it was found that the entire population of Sambalpur was 7, 96,413 out of which the Odia-speaking population was 5,

95,601. In other words, Odia-speaking persons constitute 75 per cent population of the district. “Salam” to this man’s courage and nerve. All his labours and pains finally paved the way for the introduction of Odia.

The second phase of the language movement began immediately after the 1901 Census. This time, the people of Sambalpur had a valid ground to claim and justify their demand. They submitted a Memorial to the then Viceroy Lord Curzon and the then Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces Sir Andrew Fraser. It was submitted that, if it was considered impossible to introduce Odia in only one district of Central Provinces i.e., in Sambalpur then Sambalpur should be returned to Odisha. It was strongly felt that an area, in which a particular language like Odia was the medium of instruction, should be placed under one homogeneous administration. Four eminent persons of Sambalpur namely Balabhadra Suar, Mahant Behari Das, Madan Mohan Mishra and Braj Mohan Patnaik went to Nagpur carrying this Memorial and handed over the same to Sir Andrew Fraser, Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces in July, 1901. Sir Andrew Fraser assured them to forward the Memorial to the Viceroy Lord Curzon.

These four prominent persons on their return from Nagpur wrote a letter to Madhusudan Das narrating their experience and meeting with the-then Chief Commissioner and requested him to visit Simla. But due to communication gap Madhusudan Das could not accompany them. In the month of September 1901, five important persons of Sambalpur, namely Mahant Behari Das, Balabhadra Suar, Brajmohan Patnaik, Madan Mohan Mishra and Sripati Mishra decided to proceed to Simla to represent before the Viceroy. In his book entitled ‘Simla Yatra’ Sripati Mishra has narrated their journey to Simla.

Unfortunately, however, these ‘Pancha-Sakha’ of Sambalpur could not meet the Viceroy. They returned being disappointed. But visit to Simla in those days was not a matter of joke. Such a step created new strength and vigour in the minds of Sambalpurias. Thanks God. Mr. Fraser, the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces came to Sambalpur himself. He was received by hundreds of people in Sambalpur. It was a startling scene. The people had welcomed him by performing rituals. The Brahmins uttered sacred mantras, offered him *Durbakshata* by lighting sacred lamps – writes Sripati Mishra in his ‘Simla Yatra’. Mr. Fraser personally heard the grievance of the people and enquired into their difficulties. Undoubtedly, visit of the Chief Commissioner to Sambalpur was a remarkable event in the history of Odia language movement.

After finishing his trip, Sir Andrew Fraser invited all the representatives of the Sambalpur district and obtained their views on the matter. All were unanimous in their views that Odia language should be restored as the official language in the district of Sambalpur and the Sambalpur district should be transferred to Odisha. Mr. Fraser gave them positive assurance that he would make his recommendations to the Government of India. He ‘‘appreciated the cause of the popular movement of Sambalpur and recommended that owing to the ethnical and linguistic differences between Sambalpur and other districts of Central Provinces, the Chief Commissioner be relieved of the district altogether’’ (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:78-79). Consequently, from 1903 onwards Odia was introduced as the official language in the courts and government offices in Sambalpur with the abolition of Hindi.

With the introduction of Odia as official language in the courts and government offices in place of Hindi the people of Sambalpur usually placed their demand for the merger of Sambalpur in the Odisha Division. Subsequently in October, 1905 the bulk of the district was transferred to Orissa and remained a part of the province of Bengal until 1st April, 1912 when the province of Bihar and Orissa was constituted’’ (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:79). In fact, the introduction of Odia as official language in Sambalpur as well as amalgamation of Sambalpur in Odisha was more a result of the continued efforts of the conscious intellectual class of Sambalpur. For this, they had tried hard through various media like newspapers, literatures and meetings.

References:

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