



Aftermath of the Non-Cooperation Movement : The Kanika Uprising

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Kanika was a permanently-settled estate in the district of Cuttack. The Raja of Kanika, Rajendra Narayan Bhanj Deo was a man of public spirit and had distinguished himself as a leader of Utkal Union Conference and also as a member of the Legislative Council, both provincial and central, and a close associate of Madhusudan Das. But he incurred the displeasure and annoyance of the people within his estate because of his policy of heavy financial extortions from undue exactions of several taxes by his subordinate officials. The people were required to pay 64 illegal taxes. In 1918-19, there was an acute scarcity of food stuff in Kanika. In 1920 crops were destroyed by heavy flood. In such a state of economic misery, king proposed to undertake a fresh land settlement. The people opposed it on the ground that a new settlement by the Zamidar would result in an exorbitant rise in taxes, and suggested settlement by the Government. So a peasant's agitation was brewing in the Zamindari estate of Kanika, while the Non-Cooperation Movement was going on. Closely linked with the Non-Cooperation Movement in Orissa there was an anti-feudal peasant uprising which occurred in the Kanika Zamindari estate. This agitation assumed a militant form after the suspension of the Non-cooperation Movement.¹

While the agrarian discontent against the Raja was growing the Non-cooperation ideas were entering into the state. Consequently, the people were becoming bold enough to exhibit the open manifestation of their discontent. The Raja was opposed to the Non-cooperation Movement, and wanted to check the infiltration of the non-cooperation ideas into the estate. The Congress leaders of Orissa wanted not only to spread the Non-cooperation in Kanika as in other areas but also sympathized the peasant movement in Kanika which was interwoven into the anti-British movement, and the Raja succeeded in convincing the British authorities that the peasant movement of Kanika had their own grounds for agitation; and the leadership of the peasant agitation emerged from within the Kanika estate instead of being superimposed by the outside Congress leaders.

In September 1921 Babaji Ramdas entered the Kanika estate, and made fiery speeches for rousing anti-British and anti-Raja feelings. He was arrested on 21st September 1921. Other Congress leaders, namely Bhagirathi Mahapatra and Jadumani Mangaraj also visited Kanika and tried to spread Non-cooperation ideas. A Swaraj Ashram was established there and the Swaraj flag was hoisted. At this time six students of Raj Kanika High School left their



studies and joined in the Non-cooperation Movement. By December 1921 the Raja had obtained from the authorities the power of revenue collection through certificate procedure, and decided to undertake as new settlement. So an accountant of king named Chakradhar Behera resigned from his post and organized agitation against Raja. Under his leadership a meeting was organized in January 1922 where everywhere wanted to oppose the new policy of Raja. Then Kanika peasants arranged village meeting, circle meeting and grand meetings for carrying on the agitation.² In February 1922, H.K. Mahatab, distributed a poster in which he criticised the Raja for his new tax system and efforts to suppress the Non-cooperation Movement. Mahatab wrote, "the Kanika Sarkar thinks that he will obstruct the waves of the Non-cooperation Movement by stretching out his hand. But be it remembered that the awakening of the people caused by the Non-cooperation Movement will lower the head not only of the Kanika Sarkar but also of the Delhi Sarkar. Now we are awakened. Let the light of the awakening be kept up in our hearts. Eventually it will spread like wildfire, grow furious and serve as a guide to many countries".³ by February 1922, the discontented peasants of Kanika were in a militant motion. They wanted to pay the tax at the previous costs, which the Raja opposed. Consequently numbers of peasants deposited their taxes in the Government treasury at Kendrapada. In response to a petition from 5000 tenants of Kanika, B. N. Ray, the Collector of Cuttack conducted an inquiry to ascertain to what extent rents had actually been raised. Ray, found that rents had been raised, while the plight of peasants had not improved. But, Ray was immediately transferred probably because he had supported to peasant's genuinesses.⁴ Although the peasants felt emboldened by the anti- British Non-cooperation to challenge the Raja of Kanika, and

the Orissa Congress leaders sympathized with the distressed tenants of Kanika, the agitation of the peasants cannot be said to have been engineered by the Congress. But the Raja of Kanika, the great favourite of the Government, convinced the Government that the situation against him was engineered by the Congressmen and was a part on the Non-cooperation Movement. The Government trusted and supported the Raja and Raja carried on his oppression in all possible ways. About the oppression of Raja, Mahatab has described in his Autobiography: "At that time Raja of Kanika and the British Government were in very good terms. To speak against the Raja of Kanika was tantamount to treason, on the charge of which the gunned policemen were shooting and looting indiscriminately, many rich people were reduced to poverty and many women were molested. Such a reign of terror was created by the police that even pregnant women fled to jungle where they gave birth to their babies. Rich men like Khaietas Ray and Ashwini Kumar Palei were not only deprived of their huge landed property but also expelled from the estate."⁵

Raja wanted to suppress the peasants agitation ruthlessly with the Government's help. On 18th April, 1922 four peons were assaulted by a mob of 400 peasants when the peons were at Patarpur village to distribute notices on some judgment debtors. After this assault, the Inspector of Police of Kanika arrested five accused persons under section 147 of IPC. But the arrested persons were rescued by a mob of 2000 persons. Soon 24 armed forces were sent from Cuttack to suppress the rebellious mob of one thousand people at Patarpur killing three persons and injuring 18 persons, and virtually created a reign of terror among the people of Kanika. About 150 people were arrested for their association with the peasant agitation and were made to walk with



handcuff. Raja imposed upon his tenants a collective fine of 10,000/-. He ejected a number of tenants on the ground of non-payment of rent. Consequently, a number of tenants owning hundreds of acres of land became street beggars. The Raja of Kanika and the British authorities wholly co-operated with each other in suppressing the tenants. Any statement against the Raja of Kanika was considered by the authorities as high treason. Subsequently, however, when the High Court acquitted the arrested Kanika leader Chakradhar Behera who had been arrested under section 107 of IPC, it held that the Kanika agitation was only a peasant's agitation having no taint of treason.

The British Government not only suppressed the anti-feudal or anti-Raja agitation of the discontented peasants, but also took all possible steps to prevent the intervention of the Congress leaders in their affairs. Pandit Gopabandhu Das, the President of UPCC was inclined towards an amicable settlement between the Raja and the tenants rather than taking side with the tenants. When the Congress leaders heard of the ghastly stories of oppression on the tenants, they adopted a sympathetic attitude towards the tenants and strongly condemned the atrocities on the tenants. Pandit Gopabandhu Das criticized the atrocities on the peasants of Kanika in his 'Samaj'. Then Congress leader Dr. Atal Bihari Acharya visited Kanika in violation of 144 of IPC and exposed the informations about the oppression on the tenants. In Cuttack and Bhadrak section 144 was enforced to prevent the holding of any meeting on Kanika affairs. On 14 May 1922, UPCC held a meeting at Baleswar despite the enforcement of section of 144. This meeting passed a resolution which was moved by Gopabandhu Das demanding an important inquiry into the atrocities in Kanika. On 16 May

1922, Gopabandhu Das and the UPCC Secretary, Bhagirathi Mahapatra arrived at Bhadrak to attend Baleswar District Conference where section 144 was served on them. Nevertheless they held a meeting in a mosque campus. After returning from Bhadrak, Gopabandhu and other Congress members were arrested and imprisoned, and in could not be possible for the Congress leaders to do anything on Kanika matters. Raja of Kanika filed many defamation cases against Gopabandhu for his statement in "The Samaj" on Kanika oppression. A Government case held him for his violation of section 144 at Bhadrak. District Magistrate of Cuttack issued a warrant of arrest to him under section 17 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act for organizing of Swaraj Volunteer Crops. So Gopabandhu was arrested for two years. Though he remained in jail, his heart remained struck in Kanika.⁶ In the meantime other Congress leaders namely Bhagirathi Mahapatra, Ekram Rasul, A.B.Acharya, Nilakantha Das, Jadumani Mangaraj, Govinda Chandra Mishra, Ananta Mishra, Ramdas Babaji, H.K.Mahatab and Niranjana Pattanaik were arrested and sentenced to jail. On 25th August 1922 Choudhury Bhagirathi Mahapatra moved a resolution in Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council, demanding the appointment of a Committee with non-official members in majority for inquiry into Kanika troubles.⁷ In a lengthy speech the mover gave an elaborate description of the whole matters, and narrated the stories of inhuman sufferings of the people. He observed that an agrarian dispute of vast magnitude had been converted as a problem of law and order. Some members from Orissa also supported the move. On behalf of the Government Mc Pherson called it as 'the extraordinary case,' but justified the action of Raja. Raja put the whole blame on the shoulders of the Congress leaders for all the trouble and police



action in that estate. He refused to make any further enquiry into matter. The resolution was lost without any division.⁸ It revealed the attitude of the authorities in dealing with such agrarian issues which ultimately discredited the alien rules.

On 30 August 1923, two days before the prorogation of the first Reformed Council, an important resolution was moved to secure general pardon in favours of all prisoners. The purpose of the mover of the resolution was to render them eligible for election to the Council at the next general election in November 1923. Some members from Orissa whole-heartedly supported the resolution. It was observed that no violence had been committed in Orissa by the Non-cooperation and hence they could be granted general pardon. The Government was not prepared to consider the issue on the ground that the Congress still maintained the revolutionary policy. "They are still out", Mc.Pheron argued," for the overthrow or the paralysis of the present Government in India as by law established....."⁹ In spite of firm opinion of the Government on the matter, the Council adopted the resolution on the same day.¹⁰ In 1923, the Government decided to undertake a settlement in Kanika.

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