Nationalist Struggle in Odisha

Pritish Acharya

The modern state of Odisha was formed on 1 April 1936. Being the heartland of the ancient kingdoms of Kalinga, Utkal, Odra, Kosala, Tosali and Kangoda, among others, the state has a deep and colorful past. The nomenclature ‘Odisha’, derived from ‘Odra’, has been in use in some form or other since the early fifteenth century. While in Hindi and other north Indian languages it was pronounced as Oorisha and Udisha, in English as well as in official use it was Orissa till 2011. In popular parlance, ‘Kalinga’ and ‘Utkal’ are the most used names for the state in the historical context, symbolizing the prosperity, maritime glory, sculptural and artistic skills of the land. However, other names have mostly gone down to the pages of history.

From 1568 to 1803, Odisha remained under the control of the Afghans, the Mughals and the Marathas. Finally, it passed under British rule in 1803 AD. In the beginning the local rulers here had welcomed the British, for it meant redemption from the oppressive Maratha rule. For example, the Raja of Khurda had promised to provide a large contingent of his native troops, called Paiks, to the invading British against the Marathas. (For details see B. C. Ray, Orissa under the Marathas, Cuttack, 1963) However, soon after the coming of the British East India Company’s rule, both the local rulers and the people realized that it was harsher than the Maratha rule; land revenue was collected more stringently; land holdings of many people such as the priests and village headmen, which until then remained tax-free, were assessed for revenue payment; the local rulers were subordinated, which caused great resentment in the minds of people, who traditionally revered them. The consequence was large scale local civil rebellions under the leadership of traditional rulers and leaders. The beginning was made in Khurda. The ‘Raja’ of Khurda, on the advice of his Chief Minister cum Royal Preceptor- Jayi Rajguru, adopted a hostile attitude against the British in 1804 and inaugurated the tradition of anti-British resistance in the state. Since the ruler of Khurda Mukunda Dev II was a minor, Jayi Rajguru spearheaded the stir. He mobilized the paikas (local peasant militia) for fighting the British. He was later captured and hanged by the British in 1806. Since then a number of civil rebellions broke out against the British to resist the colonial changes. Despite being stamped out by the superiorly equipped opponent, they strengthened the tradition of defiance in the state.

Mention may be made of the revolts and rebellions in Paralakhemundi (1780), which then had been in the Madras Presidency and got occupied in 1768. Khurda rose again in 1817 and this time it was under the leadership of Bakshi...
Jagabandhu Vidyadhar Mohapatra, a local Zamindar and commander of the prince. The revolt was suppressed in 1822, but it made the Bukshi a valiant leader of the region. In Ghumsar (1835), the Khond Rebellion was initiated against the British by the local chieftains in the Ganjam district.

In the western parts, Surendra Sai (1809-1884), a claimant to the throne of Sambalpur, led a revolt against the British between 1827 and 1864. The great Revolt of 1857, which occurred during this time also, had an impact on Surendra Sai, for he escaped from the jail in Hajaribagh, when the rebel Sepoys attacked and opened the gate. On his return to Sambalpur, Surendra Sai re-kindled the revolt, which had temporarily collapsed after his arrest in 1840. His rebellion in Sambalpur was mainly a tribal and peasant rebellion, supported by the tribal Zamindars of Ghens, Kolabira, Paharsirgira, Machida, Laida, Loisingha, Lakhanpur, Bheden, Patkulanda, etc. Surendra Sai died in the Asirgarh jail in 1864. Other notable civil and tribal revolts of the 19th century included the revolt in Angul (1848), in Bamanghati, Mayurbhanj (1866), in Kendujhar (1867 and 1891-93), in Nayagarh, (1893), in Ranapur (1893), in Kalahandi (1881). Some of these revolts, like the one in Kendujhar, in the late 19th century targeted the local princes, for the later allied with the British and enthusiastically brought the colonial changes on British behalf. (See Fakir Mohun Senapati, Atmajivana Charita, Cuttack, 1986 (new edition).

Nationalism in its modern form arose in Odisha in the late 19th century as a strive for linguistic and cultural identity of the local people, especially the new intelligentsia. Since the Odia speaking regions were not under a single provincial administration and were attached to different Presidencies and provinces, (the Bengal Presidency and Madras Presidency and Central Provinces), the people as a language and cultural group felt ignored and neglected. The language controversy served as an enlightenment of the Odias. The Odia language and literature developed both quantitatively and qualitatively during the period. The main protagonists were Fakirmohan Senapati (1843-1918), Radhanath Ray (1848-1908), Madhusudan Rao(1853-1912) and Gangadhar Meher (1862-1924). The intelligentsia got united on the issue and demanded amalgamation of the Odia speaking tracts into one provincial administration and the formation of a separate province. The Utkal Sabha and the Utkal Union Conference, both led by Madhusudan Das (1848-1934), played an important role in organizing the people on socio-cultural and political issues. In 1903, the representatives of the Odia speaking tracts of Madras, Central Provinces and Bengal formed the Utkal Union Conference (UUC), locally called Utkal Sammilani, at Cuttack to spearhead the Odia movement for the formation of a separate province. In 1905, Sambalpur and the adjoining feudalatory states were amalgamated with the Odisha division. In 1912 the Bihar and Orissa state was carved out of Bengal. The UUC led the Odia movement up to 1920. In 1919, a group of young nationalists led by Gopabandhu Das (1877-1928) demanded its merger with the Indian National Congress (INC). A year after that it merged and inaugurated the non-cooperation stir in the state.

The Odia movement striving for a linguistic and cultural identity for the people had emerged in the post-famine period, i.e., after 1865-66. Quite a good number of socio-political organizations came up on the initiatives of modern intelligentsia for providing a common forum and a kind of common understanding on issues of
general concern. Notable among them were the National Society (1878), the Utkal Sabha (1882), and the Utkal Hiteishini Sabha of Paralakhemundi (1881). Till the formation of the UUC in 1903 these organizations worked as the nerve centres of the incessant socio-political activities in their respective localities in Odisha. Their association with the newspapers and journals like the Sambad Vahika, Utkal Dipika, Utkal Darpan and the Swadeshi gave them the added strength and recognition. Besides, there were a few other newspapers such as the Samskaraka, the Sevaka, the Oriya O Navasambada, Gadajat Basini and Sambalpur Hiteishini with a nationalist mission.

The nationalists in Odisha since then participated in the anti-colonial stir and vociferously demanded a separate province that would include, besides other Odia speaking tracts, the Ganjam Agency (district) of Madras Presidency. In order to gauge the public opinion in Ganjam the government appointed the Philip and Duff Commission in December, 1924, which did not yield any favorable results for the Odisha unionists.

Notwithstanding the stand of the Congress a group of Odisha leaders welcomed the Simon Commission in 1928 and the Report of the Attlee Sub-Committee, for they considered it to be a step towards achieving unification of Odia tracts into a separate province. The sub-committee recommended the creation of a separate Odisha province on 13 September, 1931 and the government announced the formation of the Odisha Boundary Committee under the chairmanship of Samuel O’Donnel to demarcate the boundaries of the proposed province. The new Province of Odisha came into being on 1 April, 1936 with Sir John Austin Hubback as the Governor.

**Freedom Movement**

The freedom struggle was gaining ground alongside the Odia linguistic and cultural movement, known as the Odia movement at the popular parlance. Leaders from Odisha had been regularly attending the annual sessions of the INC. They had also been disseminating the Congress resolutions in local meetings and through the local Press. In 1909, Gopabandhu Das, along with other leaders established the Satyavadi school in Puri district, which remained a hub of the freedom movement in Odisha. This was a unique and innovative experiment attempting to popularize nationalist education as an alternative to expansive western education as well as the insufficient traditional education. Its objective was to infuse scientific knowledge, human virtues, social qualities and patriotic feelings in the students there at a very minimum and affordable infrastructure.

The Non-Cooperation movement was spearheaded by Gopabandhu Das and other leaders in Odisha. ‘The Samaj’ (1919) brought out by Gopabandhu and his Satyavadi friends became an effective voice of the leaders to the people. Earlier Utkal Dipika (1866) brought out by Gouri Shankar Roy from Cuttack along with Sambad Vahika (1867) from Balasore and Sambalpur Hiteishini (1889), from Sambalpur had inaugurated the vernacular nationalist press in Odisha. Gandhi visited Odisha in March, 1921. His visit gave a tremendous fillip to the non-cooperation movement. He addressed mass meetings at Cuttack, Bhdrak, Satyabadi, Puri and Berhampur.

After the Lahore session of the National Congress in 1929, ‘Purna Swaraj’ through mass civil disobedience became the national demand. On 26 January, 1930 mass meetings were organized and Independence Day was celebrated
in various places of Odisha. Like Dandi in Gujarat, Inchudi on the Balasore coast was selected by the Utkal Provincial Congress Committee for breaking the ‘Salt-Laws’. On the same day (6th April, 1930) the volunteers, led by Gopabandhu Chowdhury, Rama Devi and Acharya Harirhar Das, began their march to Inchudi from Swaraj Ashram at Cuttack.

Gandhiji’s visit to Odisha, in May 1934, rejuvenated the Congress workers to invigorating activities. He visited Sambalpur, Angul, Puri, Cuttack, Jajpur and Bhadrak, holding meetings and discussions to uplift the depressed classes. In 1934, a powerful section of the Congress Party formed the ‘Socialist group’. Nabakrishna Choudhury led the group. The socialists and communists spearheaded the Utkal Provincial Kisan Sangha and championed the cause of peasants. The States People’s movement, locally known as Prajamandal movement, in Nilagiri, Dhenkanal, Ranapur, Gangapur, Talcher and Mayurbhanj in 1937-39 was a major development after the formation of the Congress ministry in the state in 1937. The Provincial Congress had earlier won the Assembly Elections in 1936 by highlighting the agrarian issues and the Zamindari misrule in the state.

The Quit India Movement was a great story in Odisha, as in other parts of the country. Early in the morning of 9 August, 1942, all prominent Congress leaders, such as Gopabandhu Choudhury, Nabakrisnha Choudhury, Biswanath Das, Pranakrishna Padhiary, Harekrishna Mahat, were arrested. The large scale arrest of the nationalist leaders backfired in the form of mass fury. There was student strike in Ravenshaw College, mass upsurge in the tribal belt of Koraput leading to police firing and parallel governments in many places such as Chhatra and Iram in Balasore and Talcher. In Dhenkanal a guerrilla squad was formed under the leadership of Baishnav Patnaik and looted the thana. Most of these places had witnessed police firing and killing of people.

In 1946, the Congress got an overwhelming victory in the provincial elections. Harekrishna Mahat was elected leader of the legislature party to form the government. Soon after the independence, Mahtab and Sardar Patel, the Home Minister of India, resolved to integrate all the 26 princely states, locally called Gadjats, into the province of Odisha. On 1st January, 1949, Mayurbhanj became the last princely state to merge with Odisha. With this formation and establishment of the state became apparently complete.

To conclude, like India, Odisha provides rich varieties in all spheres of life and society with Odia being the unifying tag. Probably, this has been the strength and vigor of the land and the people of the state.

Pritish Acharya, Professor in History, Regional Institute of Education, Bhubaneswar. Email- pritishacharya0123@yahoo.co.in.