Tribal Resistance Movement in Odisha

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Tribal resistance movement in Odisha, an integral part of Indian freedom struggle presents a wide spectrum. By temperament, tribals are simple, innocent and nature-loving people. In cultural complexities, economic backwardness and political primitiveness, they are differentiated from the rest of the people. They have their own social, cultural and religious identity, their own taboos, make beliefs and peculiar compulsion of lifestyle and therefore any attempt of the administration of an alien rule to make an inroad into the tribal society by way of reformative and correctional changes, however laudable, is bound to be resisted by the tribals with their individual and collective might.

Soon after the British occupation of Odisha in 1803, freedom struggle began in different parts of Odisha in form of armed resistance, protest and rebellion against the alien authorities. The defective land revenue system and administrative vagaries of the British rulers continued to cause discontent among the people and as a result, there broke out an armed rebellion by the masses in 1817, under the leadership of Buxi Jagabandhu Bidyadhara, the military Commander of the Raja of Khurda. The rebellion began when about 400 Kandhs from Ghumusar entered into Khurda and joined with the rebellious Dalbeheras and Paiks under Jagabandhu’s leadership. They plundered Banpur and adjoining areas, reducing the Government buildings and Police Stations into ashes. From Banpur the insurgents proceeded towards Khurda. On the way hundreds of Paiks joined them. Government offices at Khurda were taken by complete surprise. At Khurda official buildings were set on fire and treasury was looted.

In 1835 a rebellion broke out in Ghumusar under the leadership of the Kandh leader Kamal Lochan Dora Bisoyee who had tremendous loyalty to Raja Dhanurjaya Bhanja for restoration of Bhanja family to power. The Kandhs became violent. In an encounter they killed 13 sepoys and 2 European officers. A vigorous military operation was undertaken by the British to suppress the Kandh insurgents and most of them were either shot dead or hung upon the trees. The rebellion was suppressed for sometimes, but the British authorities could not catch hold of Dora Bisoyee inspite of having announced a reward of rupees 5000/- for his capture. He escaped from Ghumsur and took shelter in Angul. The Raja of Angul handed him over to the British authorities. Thereafter Dora Bisoyee was made a state-prisoner in Ooty near Madras. There he breathed his last in 1846 leaving behind a glorious legacy of brave and resolute struggle against the British. After his sad demise, his nephew Chakra Bisoyee continued the rebellion in Ghumusar for two decades from 1837 to 1856. All attempts to capture him failed. This valiant Kandh Chief never surrendered to the British inspite of the British offer of pardon. After all the Ghumusar rebellion provided the proper background to the rising of the subsequent freedom movements in and around Odisha.

Towards the end of April 1868 the Bhuyan Sardars revolted in Keonjhar. The town of Keonjhar was invaded and the oppressive
Dewan Nanda Dhal along with some of his associates was abducted. The rebellion was suppressed with a strong hand and most of the Bhuyan Sardars surrendered. Ratna Naik, the leader of the rebellion, was captured by the Paiks of Pallahara on the 15th August. Ravenshaw tried the case of the Bhuyan leaders at Keonjhar. The captured rebels, numbered 183, were sent for trial. Among them Ratna Naik and six others were sentenced to transportation for life, and the rest to different periods of imprisonment.

During the last part of the 19th century, the Bhuyans of Keonjhar again raised a revolt against the despotic rule of Raja Dhanunjay Bhanj and his officers. The immediate cause of the rebellion was the construction of a canal known as 'Machhakandana Jhara' from Bararaon Pahar (hillock) to Keonjhargarh which would flow the stream water to the capital. The cutting of stone was done completely by the 'bethi' system in which the Bhuyans were required to render inhuman physical labour. It was strongly repulsed by Dharanidhar who instigated the Bhuyans and other tribals like Bathudi, Kolha and Saunti to rise revolt against the tyrannical rule of the Raja. The Bhuyans looted the granaries and procured guns and cannons to wage war. The revolt of the Bhuyans took a violent turn. Later, the British Government arrested Dharani by hatching a conspiracy. Dharanidhar was detained in Cuttack for seven years. Later he was released in 1897 and led the life of a Saint.

The resistance movement of Sambalpur led by Surendra Sai against the British imperialism was mainly a tribal rebellion. Of course, the passion of the Gadi (throne) of Sambalpur was the cause of the origin of the Great Rising. But by and large it aimed at making Sambalpur free from British yoke and restoring native rule. The tribal Zamindars of Ghens, Kolabira, Paharasirgira, Machida, Kodabag had joined the rebellion espousing the cause of Surendra Sai. Some of them lost their estates, some were killed in the battle, some were arrested and hanged and many were imprisoned. Although the Great Rising was finally suppressed, it shook the very depth of the British rule in Sambalpur.

The Quit India movement assumed the character of a formidable mass uprising in the district of Koraput which is mostly inhabited by the Adivasis or aborigines. It was on August 21, 1942, under the leadership of Lakshman Naik tribals from different villages holding Congress flags and lathis reached the Mathili Police Station and tried to hoist the flag there. Lakshman Naik was not allowed to hoist the flag as the magistrate Mujibur Rahman ordered lathi charge on the demonstrators. Lakshman was mercilessly beaten. In this scuffle that followed, the local Forest Guard G.Rammaya was beaten to death and some police men sustained injuries. So the police opened fire on the mob and five people died on the spot and seventeen injured. Lakshman was falsely accused of beating the Forest Guard to death at the break of dawn on March 29, 1943 by 5.30 am. Lakshman Naik gallantly marched towards the Gallows in the Berhampur Central Jail. There ended his life and he was buried inside the Jail compound. He was not at all worried for this punishment. Rather he told his fellow convicts on the previous night of hanging “I know Swaraj will definitely come. But I feel sorry that I shall not be able to see Swaraj”. With his death passed away a great leader of the tribals and a true disciple of Mahatma Gandhi.

An analysis of the tribal resistance movement in Odisha reveals that it was mass oriented, wide spread and violent. In spite of the barbaric methods of repression by the British, the exemplary courage and spirit of nationalism displayed by the tribals in anti-colonial uprisings had its profound impact on India’s freedom struggle.

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