



The Role of Utkal Sabha in the Socio-Political Awakening of Odisha

Dr. Janmejay Choudhury

The 19th century reawakening in Odisha generated the desires for its territorial integrity as well as participation in the national struggle for independence. There are various factors leading to the growth of socio-political awareness in Odisha especially among the intelligentsia who formed several organizations to spearhead different movements. The political consciousness of the people in Odisha had been sufficiently roused by the last quarter of the 19th century. A big public meeting was organized at Cuttack on 30 June 1882 to celebrate the occasion of the adoption on new scheme of local self-government in India by Lord Ripon's Government. Madhusudan Das, Hariballabha Ghose, Priyanath Chatterjee, Madhusudan Rao, Bipin Bihari Mitra were among others who spoke on the occasion and they observed that the people were prepared to shoulder the responsibilities entrusted to them by the new scheme of local self-government. They desired that the people should be allowed to elect their representatives to the local bodies in order to make them more effective and popular.¹ A public meeting in this connection was also held at Puri in the first week of August 1882 and similar opinion were expressed.²

Incidentally, an association named '*Utkal Sabha*' was started at Cuttack in 1882 to spearhead the socio-political activities of the

people. Soon after its formation in 1882, the *Utkal Sabha* took keen interest in matters of national importance like Ilbert Bill. The *Utkal Sabha* was soon regarded as the most prominent political organization of the intelligentsia in the principal towns of the Odisha Division during last two decades of the 19th century. The first meeting which ushered the *Utkal Sabha* into existence was held in the premises of the Cuttack Printing Company on 16 August 1882. Many leading personalities of the town were present on that occasion and they decided to establish a permanent organization in order to champion the cause of the people and to help the institutions of Local self-government particularly in the district of Cuttack. The first office-bearers were also nominated in that meeting. Choudhury Kasinath Das and Gauri Sankar Ray were chosen as the first president and secretary of the organization respectively. Besides there were two vice-presidents and a few members of the executive committee.³ Madhusudan Das, who had come away from Calcutta and had joined the Bar at Cuttack, was associated with the *Utkal Sabha* from the beginning.⁴ Gauri Sankar Ray, the editor *Utkal Dipika*, the leading journal of Odisha, acted as the secretary of the organization for a very long time. In fact, most of the meeting of the Sabha were held in the premises of the *Utkal Dipika* itself and through this journal, Gauri



Sankar gave due publicity to the activities of the organization. Again the *Utkal Sabha* organized a special meeting on 21 May 1883 to discuss the Ilbert Bill. The members unanimously agreed to support it and they sent a petition to the Governor-General for acceptance of the bill.⁵ In 1886 petitions were sent to the government for reconstructing the legislative councils in order to give more representation to the Indian people in those bodies.⁶

The political consciousness was further aroused after the establishment of Indian National Congress in 1885. National Society of Baleswar and Utkal Hitaisini Samaj of Ganjam appeared in the scene. All those organizations associated themselves with Indian National Congress from 1886 to 1903. 72 participants from Odisha attended the first session of the Congress at Bombay. On March 3, 1886, the Utkal Sabha organized a public meeting under chairmanship of Madhusudan Das to discuss the resolutions of the first session of the Congress. All leading men attending the meeting and took part in the deliberations. The Congress activities were warmly received by the elites of Odisha. Those were popularized by the Utkal Dipika and the Sambad Vahika. Except the partial modification of the resolution, all other resolutions were accepted in that meeting.⁷ The modified resolution related to the examination for entering into Indian Civil Service it was felt that the candidates should not be asked to go to England due to apprehension for the loss of caste. Madhusudan Das, G.C. Ghose, H.B. Ghose and Kalipada Banerjee from Utkal Sabha; Baikuntha Nath De, B.C. Das and R.C. Mandal from National Society; besides a few other attended the second session of the Congress at Calcutta in December 1886. Thereafter delegates from Odisha, nominated these associations, attended the Congress sessions held at different places. Rev. Shem Sahu,

John Samson Rout, Munshi Muhammad Atahar, Bhagaban Chandra Das, Ramesh Chandra Mandal, Gauri Sankar Ray and Madhusudan Das took keen interest in the activities of the Congress in its early years. Madhusudan Das and Gauri Sankar Ray attended the third session at Madras. Thus, Odisha's delegates attended the sessions. They spread the messages of the Congress in Odisha. Gradually the Congress became more and more popular among people from various walks of life. Especially the leaders of the Utkal Sabha like Madhusudan Das, Gauri Sankar Ray acted as the pioneers in bringing the message of Congress and its liberal ideas to Odisha in the last two decades against the British authorities. However, the energy and enthusiasm of the leaders in Odisha was soon diverted to a different problem and that dissociated some of them from the national mainstream for about two decades from the beginning of the 20th century.

The first proposal for the unification of the scattered Odia-speaking tracts under single administration came from Raja Baikunth Nath De of Baleswar and Bichitra Nanda Pattanaik of Cuttack in 1875.⁸ They presented a memorandum to the Government in this regard. In November 1888 Sir S.C. Bayley, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, visited Odisha. He was presented a memorial by the Utkal Sabha of Cuttack and among other things, he was requested to give attention to the problem of uniting the Odia-speaking territories of Madras, C.P and Bengal under one administrative unit so that its all round development would be possible. On 20 June 1895, the Utkal Sabha sent a memorandum to Lord Elgin, the Governor-General, protesting against the unjust and arbitrary measures. It is curious to note that in July 1895, H.G. Cooks, the Commissioner of Odisha, supported the movement for amalgamation of the



Odia-speaking tracts. It was the first official support extended to the demands of the people.⁹

Early in 1903 a small group of enthusiastic Odias assembled in the town of Rambha on the shore of Chilika lake. Encouraged by the Raja of Khallikote they decided to establish the Ganjam Jatiya Samiti. Its first sitting was held in April 1903 in the town of Berhampur and was attended by many representatives from the Odia-speaking tracts in different provinces. Such a common gathering gave expression to the desire of the Odia-speaking people for amalgamation of their areas under a single administration. At the same time, the Utkal Sabha of Cuttack summoned a public meeting under the Presidentship of Madhusudan Das in which it was decided to send a memorial to the Governor-General praying him (1) "to transfer to the Odisha Division to the Odia-speaking portions of the districts of Ganjam, Vizagpatam, Sambalpur, Chhotanagpur and Midnapur so far as this can be done having regard to territorial contiguity" or (2) "to raise to Odisha Division to a Chief Commissionership like that of Assam, retaining the judicial supervision of the High Court at Calcutta and the educational connection with the Calcutta University, whichever of these two measures is in the opinion of the government better calculated to secure the advancement of the race".¹⁰ Finally, the representatives of the Odia speaking tracts of Madras, the Central Provinces and Bengal met in a conference at Cuttack on 30-31 December 1903. It was the historic gathering of Utkal Sammilani which met amidst unprecedented enthusiasm and spearheaded the Odia Movement till the formation of a separate province in 1936 and independence of India.

The socio-political awakening of the people in Odisha was quite evident from such a Sabha. The Odia Movement, which thus began

in 1903, was the first and pioneering attempt in India to achieve the freedom.

References :

1. Utkal Dipika, 8 July 1882
2. Ibid, 9 September 1882
3. Ibid, 19 August 1882
4. Madhu sudan Das had spent about long 16 years in Calcutta and with the highest university degree he returned to Cuttack to join the local Bar by the middle of 1881. He was the first Odia pleader and soon took the leading part in organizing and moulding public opinion in the province.

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5. Utkal Dipika, 26 May 1883
6. Ibid, 25 December 1886
7. Ibid, 6 March 1886

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Mishra D. Concise History of Odisha, New Delhi, 2009, P.166
8. Ibid, 27 February 1875
9. Administrative Report of Odisha (ARO), 1894-95, P.25
10. Two Bachelors of Arts, The Oriya Movement. pp. 27-28

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Dr. Janmejay Choudhury, Lecturer in History, Sri Jagannath College, Kaipadar, Khurda.