Tribal Leaders of Odisha and their Contribution in Political and Social Movements

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INTRODUCTION:

Odisha, the storehouse of natural beauty, the mine of precious metals and land of bumper crop, was not only famous for her trade and commerce, culture, art and architecture but also known for its revolutionary freedom movement, brave resistance and sacrifices.

It had attracted foreign rulers who occupied Odisha; ruled the people of Odisha forcibly; enforced their laws and regulations on them; implemented oppressive revenue system and interfered in their traditional privileges and imposed new socio-economic and political order. Above activities of the foreign rulers specially during the regime of the British Government grew unrest among the masses including the tribals who were deeply humiliated by the oppressors.

The British Government policies had disintegrated the tribal society, culture and politics. To protect their interest, the tribals launched relentless rebellions and movements against the oppressors under the tribal leaders who challenged the Zamindars; formed alliances against the kings; conspired to overthrow the British and demonstrated ample courage while fighting caste supremacism.

We can never forget the gems of the tribals who have glittered our politics, society and culture. Laxman Nayak, the tribal leader of Koraput sacrificed his life on the gallows. His name would remain alive for ages to come in the history of Indian freedom struggle. India and Odisha in particular is proud of Chakara Biso of Ganjam and others who fought tooth and nail against the British Raj. Bhima Bhoi, the Kondh genius, was a poet of the first order for his poems that proclaim of self sacrifice and human brotherhood. Thus we are highly indebted to the tribals of Odisha for their contribution to the Indian society, politics and culture.

Although the movements initially began on social and religious issues and against the oppression of the outsiders, in course of time, they merged with the national movement and with the non-tax campaign. However, most of the movements were ruthlessly suppressed by the government. The government forced the tribals to adopt British Policies and introduced protective administration in tribal areas.

In this paper, the role of tribal leaders who had participated in different movements and result of these movements are highlighted.

Tribal movements against British Administration:

The tribal movements which started against British in 19th and 20th Century, were very
significant in the history of modern Odisha. In the latter half of 19th Century they exhibited their active role in exposing socio-economic and political maladies of the Government. They directly challenged the authorities both on economic and political front in 20th Century. They rose into rebellion against the British Policies more violently than any other community.

Kandha Rebellion under Dora Besoyee and Chakara Besoyee:

The second decade of the 19th Century was very significant in the history of modern Odisha. Kandhas of the “Ghumsur Zamindar started a vigorous revolt under the leadership of “Dora Besoyee” and “Chakara Bisoyee” in 1835 which continued till 1866.

Annexation of Ghumsar, introduction of new administration; deprivia of the local feudal aristocracy from power and position; activities of Christian missionaries; introduction of new land revenue system; and the arbitrary dissolution of Bhanja ruling family from their estate were the most important cause which influenced the Kandhas to start resistance movement against the Govt. It was the first movement in India against British which continued for long time and in which both Rajas and ethnic tribals like the Kandhas fought together against the foreign rule. It also provided the proper background to the rising of other movements in Odisha, starting from 1885 and extending upto 1947.

The Ghumsar resistance movements which started under Dora Besoyee and Chakara Besoyee not only provided impetus and momentum to the national struggle for Independence, but also equally helped to foster a new kind of Odia nationalism in the region.

(1) Dora Besoyee:

“Kamala Lochan Dora Besoyee” popularly known as Dora Besoyee took the Commanding Charge of “Kandha Uprising in 1836, has left an unforgettable chapter in the history of modern Odisha.

He organized the Kandha rebellion in Ghumsur, geared up that uprising against British from 1935-1946; committed to save his motherland from the foreign rule and subjugation and urged upon the Govt. for re-establishment of Rajas administration in their territory.

Under his leadership, the Kandhas, the Paikas and other people of “Ghumsar” did whatever was possible for them to disturb and disrupt the normal functioning of the Government.

The chief aim of this movement was for restoration of native rule under “Dhananjaya Bhanja” and for protection of their socio-religious customs like the “Meriah Sacrifice”

Under his leadership, the Kandha uprising started in September, 1835 and continued till February, 1837.

Though the British authorities suppressed this rebellion; arrested Dora Besoyee in 1837 from Angul; destroyed many Kandha villages; Captured most of the rebel leaders and imposed martial law, they could not suppress it completely. He was arrested and sent to “Ooty” near Madras. There he died in 1846 as a state prisoner, leaving behind a glorious legacy of brave and resolute struggle against the British.

It may be said that, he was a unique figure in the history of modern Odisha. Though born in a Kandh family and lived in forest, Dora Besoyee showed his talent and mentality to the British authority and died as a state prisoner.
(2) Chakara Besoyee:

Among the freedom fighters of Odisha, who fought against the British to liberate their motherland from the foreign domination, “Chakara Besoyee” of Ghumsar was very notable. He took the commanding charge of Kandha rebellion in 1846 after death of his uncle “Dora Besoyee” and continued till 1866. He sacrificed his whole life for his motherland and did not surrender him near the British till his death in 1856. He was the brave son of Ghumsur estate who committed to restore the Bhanja family in this estate and fought for the cause of Kandhas of Ghumsur. He was a true successor of Dora Besoyee.

His contribution to the Kandha uprising, ranked him with Jagabandhu vidyadhar and Surendra Sai. He championed the cause of the Kandhas for their ancient rite named “the Mariah”. Though he failed in his effort to bring socio-economic remedies, still he was a torch bearer. He helped the peasants of Nayagarh in their struggle for political-economic rights from 1849 to 1851, acted a saviour of the Savaras of Paralakhemundi in 1855-56 and fought against British authorities severely for the restoration of the Bhanja family to power in Ghumsar.

However his long years of resistance (1846-56) against the British Government, in the hill tracts, is a landmark in the history or heroic struggle by an individual against the mighty British power. He fought a selfless war against the British authorities, which was very rare in the history of freedom movement of India. He will always be remembered as a great freedom fighter of Odisha in the heart of people of Odisha.

(3) Dayanidhi Dharua:

The Tribal uprising in Mayurbhanj tributary mahal in 1857 under the “Dharua tribal leader”, named “Dayanidhi Dharua” was another important movement in the history of modern Odisha. Dharua tribes rose in rebellion on account of their un-willingness to submit any form of exploitation and started movement against the Raja of Mayurbhanj and British authority. The oppressive revenue policy of Raja and Amalas influenced the tribal people to launch rebellion against Raja.

Though British Authority and Raja of Mayurbhanja suppressed the rebellion and captured the leaders, they could not suppress it completely which continued till 1866. After that the British authority changed their policies towards tribals and made complete settlement of land.

(4) Ratan Naik:

The second half of the 19th Century witnessed the Bhuinya revolt in Keonjhar under the leadership of “Ratan Naik” against the newly appointed King of Keonjhar “Dhanurjay Bhanja”, feudal Chief and the British. They were deprived of their political and traditional rights. This movement began in 1867 and continued till 1868. Though it was suppressed severely, it showed a path to the future generation who revived the movement two decades after.

Ratan Naik, the great tribal leader of Keonjhar who sacrificed his life for the people of Keonjhar, was captured by the paiks of Pallahara on August 15, 1868 and brought to Cuttack where he was hanged by the British authority. He was a progressive personality who dreamt of an advanced government and wanted all individuals in the society to get individual rights keeping aside old traditions. He stood for human rights and against the despotic will of the King and fought against the British super power. He wanted to make Keonjhar a democratic state where there will be no hereditary Kings and the people of
Keonjhar will enjoy all fundamental rights under a popular government. He was the brave son of Keonjhar and Odisha, who died for his motherland.

(5) **Dharanidhar Naik:**

The second phase of Keonjhar uprising was a unique event in the history of freedom struggle in Odisha. It began in 1890 and lasted for five years under the leadership of “Dharanidhar Naik”, a literate young Bhuyan.

Minor in age, but a boy of immense moral courage, Dharanidhar Naik kindled the fire of a new hope among the tribals in the dark Garajat region of Keonjhar and sown the seeds of liberty and freedom. His bravery and rebellious mind to stop the oppression and exploitation of the king and the British, has added a glorious chapter in the annals of Odisha. Though he had got his education with the assistance of king, he organized movement against king. He started revolt against “Bethi” and other forced labour in 1891 that continued till 1896. However, British suppressed the revolt; captured Dharanidhar Naik and awarded a simple punishment of 7 years imprisonment. After his release from Jail in 1897, he led the life of a saint; began to preach his philosophy and delivered sermons to the people how to free the country from the foreign rule.

Dharanidhar who sacrificed his life for the people was a lover of humanity and equality. He was a peace lover; protector of the poor and a true human being who saved the life of Fakirmohan Senapati, the champion of Odia literature.

His motto was “Service to humanity is service to God”. As a true patriot, he gave shelter to many freedom fighters in his Ashram at “Ali” in his last day. He saved the subjects of Kendujhar from the oppression, tyranny and humiliation of King. He would remain as a great revolutionary leader in the hearts of the people of Odisha.

(6) **Laxman Nayak:**

Laxman Nayak, popularly known as “the Gandhi of Malkangiri” was a tribal leader; a legendary figure and a celebrated freedom fighter of Odisha and India. Though he was born in a “Bhumiya family”, he took the commanding charge of tribal movement and the Quit India Movement of Koraput and Malkangiri.

Influenced by the Congress leaders of Koraput district like Radha Krishna Biswas, Sadasiba Tripathy and Radhamohan Sahu, he joined the Congress; followed the Congress Programmes and started spreading its message, plans and programmes. He injected the Congress ideology and the spirit of freedom into the minds of the people and attracted to the people towards Congress.

As a disciplined member of the Congress, he exhibited his brave attitude during the Quit India Movement; mobilized the people against the British authority and had incited people not to pay various taxes viz. forest tax, road tax, plough tax etc. He was a patriot in true sense and loved his country and its people. He always felt sorry at the plight of the innocent, hungry tribals. His sincere and indomitable effort could arise the tribal people with patriotism against the Britishers.

He was a great organizer who organized tribal people against British oppressive policies. He worked hard for the economic development of his tribal fellows and brought unity, solidarity among his people through cultural programmes like dance and singing. As a true tribal leader he was always trying to uplift the tribal people and opposed “Bethi, Goti and Gudem”. He also wanted to uproot the superstitions among the tribals like castesim in his own “Bhumia Tribe”.

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The ideals of Congress and Gandhiji like faith in god, non-violence, total prohibition, celibacy, physical labour, humility fearlessness using swadeshi goods, giving up sensuality and abolition of casteism made his personality more stronger.

This great man fought single-handed against the oppressive foreign rulers with consummate skill and a rare passion and fervour of a fighter. He stood up like a rock with only one supreme truth as his polestar, the freedom of his motherland.

He sacrificed all his creature comforts for the cause of national freedom and did not break or bend a bit before the wily machination of the foreign usurpers. He organized the tribal people to fight against old and inhuman practices like bonded labour and spearheaded the fight against oppression, suffering and exploitation.

However, greater things were in store for him. Responding to the call of Mahatma Gandhi Laxman Nayak took the commanding charge of Quit India Movement in Koraput; led a procession on 21st August 1942 and demonstrated peacefully in front of “mathili police station”. But the police fired at the demonstrator indiscriminately. This claimed 5 lives and more than two hundred were injured on this gruesome incident. The administration further falsely implicated Laxman Nayak in a case of murder and the death sentence was pronounced on him on 13th November, 1942. Finally he was hanged on 29 March, 1943, in Berhampur Jail at 5.30AM. As a brave freedom fighter he died a martyr’s death at the hands of the colonial administration and passed into a legend.

Like other freedom fighters of Odisha, he became a symbol of sacrifice for the cause of the people and accepted martyrdom so that millions of his fellow countrymen could see the light of freedom. He fought for truth, non-violence and justice. Though, he did not live to see free India he remained imprinted in the minds of millions of people of India as the leader of leaders.

(7) **Nabaghan Kanhar:**

Nabaghan Kanhar of Ratabira in Boudh-Kandhamal area rose in revolt against the King of Boudh and the British in 1835. As a tribal leader he took the commanding charge of Kandha uprising in Boudh from 1837 to 1846. Rebellion spread like wild-fire in the entire Boudh region. Under his leadership, the Kandhas opposed tax system of Raja of Baudha, began to resent the exploitative and oppressive behaviour of British authority and raised voice against the abolition of human sacrifice by British.

Nabaghan supported the Kondhas’, took the commanding charge of this rebellion and organised the Kandhas of Ghumsar, Dasapalla and Banpur against Raja and British. He received support and cooperation from the King of Angul. Though the British suppressed the rebellion and captured Madhaba Kanhar, brother of Nabaghan and his two sons named Bira and Maheswar, they could not capture Nabaghan and check the unrest completely. Nabaghan continued his rebellion with the help of “Raja of Angul”.

However, the British later suppressed it and captured the rebels and their leaders like Bira Kanhar and Nabaghan Kanhar. His leadership forced British authority to establish permanent peace in Baudh region. In spite of all development measures, the Kandhas of Baudh did not establish confidence on the British and continued their protest.

(8) **Madri Kalo:**

Gangapur, the 4th biggest princely state of Odisha, experienced a violent uprising of the tribal peasants in the year 1897 under the
leadership of “Madri Kalo”. The new revenue settlement was introduced by King Raghunath Sekhar Deo of Gangapur. Landlessness, depeasantization and land revenue policy of the colonial Government led a tribal uprising in Gangapur under the leadership of Madri Kalo.

Madri Kalo, a tribal Gaontia or village headman of Bhuyan community took the commanding charge of this movement and organized this movement against the King of Gangapur and British. This movement is known as “Gauntia Meli” in the history of Odisha. He will chiefly be remembered as one who through his selfless sacrifices prepared a solid frame work for a future tribal peasant agitation on massive scale led by “Nirmal Munda”.

As a popular, helpful and tribal Gaontia, he united his people against the King Raghunath Sekhar Deo who had tremendous lust for wealth and thus started armed agitation in 1897 against the Durbar administration.

He was a very popular leader and powerful organizer. He organized his movement from Mahabir Hill of Bargaon which was the nerve centre of his rebellion. Despite best efforts, it became difficult on the part of the Durbar administration to nab the rebels who sheltered in the hills. Finally the state administration with the assistance of his reliable friend the Gauntia of Kuranga arrested Madri Kalo in 1900. He was sentenced for 10 years of imprisonment of which he spent 6 years in Sundargarh Jail and the rest 4 years at Ranchi and was released from Jail in 1910. Four years after his release from the Jail, he breathed his last in 1914 in the village Lamboi near Raigangpur.

Though he died in critical condition, he left behind for the tribal tenants of Gangapur a rich tradition of popular resistance against hegemonic oppression of the state’s administration. He fought for Justice and generated a sense of courage and moral strength among his friends who violently waged war against Durbar administration. As a brave leader, he compelled the British to bring changes in their administration. Really he was a charismatic leader of Gangpur who through his movement exposed the evils of age old Durbar administration in traditional line and forced British Government to check the mal-administration in Gangpur state.

For his sacrifice he will remain in the heart of tribal peasants as the first tribal leader who rose a war against the oppressive policies of Gangpur King. In this way he has become a living legend in the history of peasant movement in the state of Gangpur.

9) Nirmal Munda:

The ‘Munda’ uprising in the last decade of the 19th century in the state of gangpur under the leadership of “Nirmal Munda” was very significant in the history of resistance movement in Odisha.

Nirmal Munda, a converted Christian and a brave tribal leader of Gangpur led the aggrieved tribals against land revenue system in 1934 and demanded a revision of the land settlement. His prime aim was to achieve economic freedom. Under his leadership the rebel Mundas openly revolted against the Queen of Gangpur and British and started “No-rent Campaign.” Dahijiri village became the nerve-centre of the agitation and non-Christian tribal leaders joined hand with Nirmal Munda.

To suppress this movement the British started operation on 25th April 1939 and attacked the rebellious people, fired on the public, killed 28 tribals and arrested Nirmal Munda and his associates. This incident is known as “Simko”
firing in the history of resistance movement in Odisha. He was sentenced for 6 years of imprisonment in Sundargarh and Sambalpur. After the arrest of the leaders, the movement collapsed. He was released from Jail on 15th August, 1947 the Independence day.

Though British Government suppressed this movement, this struggle did not end till independence. As a true tribal leader, he had demanded the tribal rights over forest. However, Nirmal Munda, a fearless freedom fighter well known in Chhota Nagpur and Bonei area sacrificed his life for the economic development and political freedom of tribal people of Gangpur state.

(10) Sadhu Jani and Dunai Jani:

The Kandhas along with other low caste people panas, organized their struggle in Banpur, under he leadership of Sadhu Jani and Dunai Jani. They united Kandhas and panas and waged war for social justice and economic improvements against both the British and feudal Kings.

(11) Tama Dora:

The tribal people of Malkangiri especially “the Koya tribe” rose in revolt in 1870 against the unjust and oppressive policies of Raja of Koraput and British under the Koya leadership of Tama Dora. Both the king of Koraput and British exploited the tribal people socially and economically.

Tama Dora took the commanding charge of this movement; waged war against mal-administration and exploitation and organized the Koya tribes against British administration and desired justice for his people from king and British.

However, the British authority took repressive measures against the Koya rebels; fired on them; killed Koya leader “Tama Dora” in 1872. Though, he died in firing, Tama Dora was a fearless leader of Malkangiri and real freedom fighter of Odisha, who sacrificed his life for the freedom of his motherland. He will remain in the heart of the tribal people as a brave Koya leader who resisted against the oppressive and exploitative policies of Koraput King and British authority.

(12) Bhima Bhoi:

Born at “Kankarapada” in Redhakhol, Bhima Bhoi, a blind Kondha Boy and a saint – Poet of Nineteenth Century played vital role to popularize “Mahima Dharma”. Attracted by “Mahima Goswami”, founder of Mahima Culture in Odisha, he embraced Mahima Culture; wielded his pen against the prevailing social injustice, religious bigotry and caste discrimination and played a very significant role in popularizing Mahima Cult by his immortal creations like “Stuti Chintamani, Brahma Nirupan Gita, Nirveda Sahana and Adhyatma Gita”. With his firm belief in one god, one society, one religion, he led this movement from “Khaliapali Ashrama” in Suvarnapur district. He prayed and preached, composed and sang for the liberation of entire world. He sought a synthesis between the life of the world and life of the spirit.

As a great successor of Mahima Goswami, Bhima Bhoi dedicated his whole life to the propagation of the Mahima culture in Odisha particularly in the western Odisha and appeared as a true revolutionary. He did not believe in idolatry, Brahmanical rituals and priesthood veneration. He raised a powerful protest against the distance between man and man; included the female folk into the fold and upheld radical and progressive views like female education and secularism in his works.

However, Bhima Bhoi, an eminent saint of Mahima Culture, has occupied a very significant place in the history of Mahima cult.
Though Mahima cult faced a great setback after the death of Mahima Goswami, Bhima Bhoi saved it from decline through his literature. The tone of social protest and anti-authoritarian feelings of Bhima Bhoi are clearly reflected in his writings. He cherished the religion which characterized the formlessness of god so perfectly that it was not probably revealed by any one. He is greatly responsible for the spread of Mahima Cult not only in the tribal belt of Odisha but also in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bengal and Assam.

**Conclusion:**

To conclude all the tribal leaders of Odisha who took the commanding charge of tribal resistance movements united tribals, non-tribals and peasants against the oppressive policies of the British and the Hindu Kings. These uprisings were the first organized assaults on the British, against their Kings as well as on the Caste Supremacists. They had no loyalty towards the kings and no interest in releasing the royal families from British domains.

They organized economic war against their oppressions. All the tribal leaders of these movements were the bravest and most courageous who had started struggle against land-grabbers both foreign and domestic and against socio-economic injustice. However the legendary heroes who fought selflessly for the sake of their tribes, for their homeland and for the country are always remembered for their heroism, sacrifice and devotion. They were the chief architects of the tribal movements in Odisha and tried their best to protect, their people from exploitation. Their contributions have been recorded in the annals of history.

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