

The Odia Identity Movement and Maharaja K. C. Gajapati Narayan Deo

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Odisha became a separate province independent of Bihar on 1st April, 1936 due to the untiring effort and endeavour of some great sons of the soil of Odisha. Among those great sons, one distinguishing figure, christen as one of the makers of 'Modern Odisha' and hailed for his selfless service to the people was the former *Maharaja* of Parlakhemundi, Sree Krushna Chandra Gajapati Narayan Deo. A champion of Odia identity, language and culture, he remained at the forefront of Odia identity movement and led the struggle to a successful conclusion. After the formation of the province, he assumed the reins of administration of the nascent province and working within the limits of colonial control endeavoured his best to serve the people. A life orientated for the good of the public, he was instrumental in the setting up of the Utkal University, the SCB Medical College, and the Rice Research Institute at Cuttack, all institutions of repute and reminiscent of his far-sighted personality.



Krushna Chandra Gajapati Narayan Deo was born on 26 April, 1892 at Parlakhemundi in the ruling family of Parlakhemundi estate, one of the prominent zamindari estate of the then Ganjam Agency. His early education was affected as at the tender age of 12, he lost his father Goura Chandra Gajapati Narayan Deo. However, he pursued his higher education in Newington College, Madras; a preferred college of the time for the education of the sons of the landed aristocrats of Madras Presidency. After completing education in the college, he returned to Parlakhemundi and assumed the charge of affairs of his zamindari estate on 26 April 1913; the day coincided with his birth day. Prior to this, the Parlakhemundi zamindari was under the Court of Wards owing to the death of his father.

To his utter dismay, the *Maharaja* found that the Odia territories had been dismembered and attached to different neighbouring provinces for administrative convenience. Deeply moved by the plight of the Odias in the outlying areas, he

realised the need of amalgamating the Odia-speaking territories. Encouraged by the enchanting idea of the creation of a province on linguistic basis, an idea espoused by Madhusudan Das and others, he joined the mainstream of Odia Movement spearheaded by *Utkal Sammilani*. With a crusading zeal, he worked for realising his cherished objective; the unification of Odia-speaking tracts especially transferring Ganjam from Madras Presidency to Odisha.

In 1913, he invited the Governor of Madras, Lord Pentland to Parlakhemundi and in a memorandum presented to him urged for the merger of Odia-speaking territories including Parlakhemundi with Odisha. The 10th annual session of the Utkal Union Conference was held at Parlakhemudi for two days in the last week of December 1914. This was organised under the personal care and supervision of the *Maharaja* with the intended objective of giving a lease of life to the Odia movement in the region. Some notable figures of the Odia movement including Madhusudan Das, Gopabandhu Das, Fakir Mohan Senapati, and others attended the Conference. It reiterated the demand for the creation of a separate province by unifying the Odia-speaking areas under one administration. The leaders also extolled Krushna Chandra Gajapati for extending all help and cooperation in organising the Conference.

During the First World War, like Mahatma Gandhi he helped the British in its war effort and for this, the British conferred on him the title of 'Raja Saheb'; this was made hereditary in 1922. On the demand for formation of provinces on linguistic lines, apparently stemmed from the Odia movement, the Montague-Chelmsford Committee nodded the idea in affirmative and Mahatma Gandhi too preferred

such arrangements. In 1924, a Committee consisting of C. L. Philip and A. C. Duff known as the Philip-Duff Committee was appointed to ascertain the views of Odia-speaking people in the Madras Presidency on the question of their merger with Odisha. At the behest of K.C. Gajapati Narayan Deo several delegations of Odia people met the Committee and pleaded that there was a genuine desire among Odia people in Madras for amalgamation with Odisha.

The visit of Simon Commission in 1928 created great controversy and uproar in the country as it was an 'all white Commission'. The Commission was appointed to review the working of the Government of India Act, 1919 but it was boycotted by the Indian National Congress. In line with the decision of the central organization, the Odisha unit of the Congress Party too maintained its distance from the Commission. However, to convince the commission regarding the genuine demands of the people Madhusudan Das and Krushna Chandra Gajapati Narayan Deo, the two front leaders working for the Odia movement met the Commission at Patna and Madras respectively, and appealed for the formation of a separate province. The *Maharaja* also appealed to the Odias to put up their case before the Commission and to cooperate with it.

On the basis of Simon Commission report, the British Government convened the first Round Table Conference at London in 1930 to solve the Indian problem. The Conference was boycotted by the Indian National Congress but unperturbed by the development; the *Maharaja* travelled to London and tried his best to impress the delegates, the British authorities on the need and rationality of a new province for the Odia people. In London, he met Sir Samuel Hoare,

the Secretary of States for India and convinced him about the genuineness of the demand of the Odias. The O' Donnell Boundary Committee appointed in September 1931 to demarcate the boundary of the proposed province was largely the fruition of his labour during the Round Table Conference. However, the report of the Committee was not to the liking of the *Maharaja* as it excluded Jeypore and Parlakhemundi from the proposed province.

In the aftermath of the O' Donnell Boundary Committee report, the Odia movement became more orientated towards amalgamation of Parlakhemundi and Jeypore with Odisha. The 23rd Session of Utkal Union Conference met at Berhampur under the presidentship of the *Maharaja* and demanded the integration of estates of Parlakhemundi and Jeypore with Odisha. A deputation of Odias under his leadership met the Viceroy Lord Wellington at Simla and drew his attention to the injustice done to the Odias in the O'Donnell Committee report. On the basis of discussions at the Round Table Conferences, the British Government published the 'White Paper' on 17th March 1933 containing the proposal for creation of two new provinces viz., Odisha and Sind. However, it excluded the estates of Jeypore and Parlakhemundi from the proposed Odisha Province. The 'White Paper' was referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee for consideration. Krushna Chandra Gajapati again travelled to England to plead for the inclusion of the estates of Parlakhemundi and Jeypore with Odisha. Heading a delegation of seven members, he met the Secretary of States on 3rd July 1933 and submitted a representation. The Joint Parliamentary Committee finally recommended the constitution of new province of Odisha, but

enlarged the boundaries with the addition of Jeypore and Parlakhemundi estates. On the basis of the report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee, the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act, 1935 and in this Act, Odisha was given an independent administrative status as a province. Thus, the new Odisha Province emerged comprising six districts viz., Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Sambalpur, Ganjam and Koraput. This was largely due to the ceaseless work of the *Maharaja* who reminded the Odias not to be complacent with the achievement but to work hard for the development of the state.

Following the formation of the province, the scheme of provincial autonomy as provided in the Government of India Act, 1935 was put in to practice. The *Maharaja* got elected to the provincial assembly and at the invitation of Governor of Odisha, Sir John Austin Hubback formed the ministry on 1st April 1937. His ministry resigned on 13th July 1937 after the Congress Party decided to allow Congressmen to accept offices in the provinces. The *Maharaja* heading a coalition ministry assumed office for the second time on 24th November, 1941 after the Congress ministry resigned in protest against the British decision of making India a party to the Second World War. He remained in office for more than two and half years but resigned on 30th June 1944 owing to internal differences within the ministry. During his short tenure in office, he adopted certain epoch making measures. The Utkal University established on 27th November 1943, later emerged as a premier institution in the field of higher education in the state. In fact, showing rare example, he donated his entire salary drawn as the Prime Minister to the Utkal University Fund. The fruits of his labour and initiative culminated in

the setting up of Odisha High Court on 26 July 1948.

Besides working for the unification of Odia-speaking tracts, he devoted his time and resources for the promotion of Odia language, literature and culture. He made generous contribution for the development of Sakhigopal School founded by *Pandit* Gopabandhu Das, and the Utkal Sahitya Samaj, an institution for promotion of Odia literature. He made monetary contribution for the publication of *Purna Chandra Odia Bhasa Kosha* of Gopal Chandra Praharaj. He also established a printing press named as Gajapati Press for disseminating awareness among the people. A champion of female education, he converted his palatial mansion into girl's school. He was not only an acclaimed leader and organiser in Odisha but had considerable clout in the politics of Madras Province. In 1930, he was elected to the Madras Legislative Assembly from the Ganjam Constituency. He was a member of the Royal Agriculture Commission which was appointed in 1927 under the chairmanship of Lord Linlithgow. Krushna Chandra Gajapati improved the irrigation system by planning and digging many water reservoirs such as Ramasagar, Sitasagar and Krishnasagar etc. Far-sighted and progressive in his outlook, he realised the necessity of improving communication facilities and constructed 57 mile long railway track from Nuapada to Gunupur. The Viceroy and Governor General of India, Lord Wellington as a mark of distinction awarded him the title of '*Maharaja*' in 1936.

Maharaja Krishna Chandra Gajapati Narayan Deo was one of the doyens of Odia movement who played a crucial role in the unification of Odia-speaking areas and the formation of the province. On many occasions, he travelled to England to convince the colonial authorities the genuineness of the demands of Odia people. In his eventful career, spanning from assumption of charge of Parlakhemundi zamindari in 1913 to his death in 1974, he dedicated himself in the service of the state and its people. In fact, his indomitable will, persuasive nature and leadership helped a great deal in giving a final shape to the dream and desire of people for a separate province. A path finder for the Odia people in many aspects in the crucial phase of nation building, he embodied the virtues of an organiser, an administrator, and a philanthropist.

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