

# Utkal Sammilani and Unification of Scattered Oriya-Speaking Tracts

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The territorial dismemberment of Orissa had begun before the fall of Hindu Kingdom. From the beginning of the 16th century external aggression became virulent and when the Suryavamsi Rule came to an end, Orissa entered into a confused period of internecine struggle. The last independent Hindu king of Orissa, Mukunda Deva was killed by his feudatory Chiefs while engaged in a prolonged struggle with the Afghan rulers of Bengal. In 1568, medieval Orissa lost her independence. It was one of the last Hindu kingdoms of India to fall to the Muslims. Before the Afghans could consolidate their power, the Mughals entered the field and in 1592 Mansingh annexed Orissa to Akbar's empire. By the time of Akbar, the territories of Orissa were apportioned into five Sarkars such as Jaleswar, Bhadrak, Cuttack, Kalinga Dandapat and Raj Mahendri. Those Sarkars, included in the Subah of Bengal were generally known as Mughalbandi. By the time of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, territories to the south of the lake Chilika had been separated from the Mughal dominion and as such from the rest of Orissa. Those areas were known as Northern Sarkars under the Muslim rulers of the South. Following the death of Aurangzeb when the Mughal Empire began to disintegrate, Orissa passed under the rule of the virtually independent Nawabs of Bengal. The Nawabs,

however, could not rule for long. In the meantime Lord Clive got the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765. At the same time the Emperor gave the Northern Sarkars as *inam* (free gift to the English). It was not, however, until another treaty had been concluded between the English and the Nizam in November 1766, that the former decided to take actual possession of the Northern Sarkars. The Southern territories of Orissa including Ganjam came under the British possession by the end of 1766. Thus in 1765-66, the East India Company was at both the ends of Orissa, but those territories remained under two different administrations - the southern areas under the Madras Presidency and the northern areas under the Bengal Presidency. Considerable attempts were made by the British administrator from Lord Clive to Lord Cornwallis to take possession of the coastal Orissa from the Marathas, but without any success. It was left for Lord Wellesley finally to conquer Orissa during the Second Maratha War. By the Treaty of Deogaon which was concluded on 17th December 1803, Raghuji Bhonsla II ceded to the East India Company in perpetual sovereignty, the province of Cuttack, including the port and district of Baleswar. Subsequently, 18 Garjat states also came under their control. Thus, only three districts of

Balaswar, Cuttack and Puri in coastal region and 18 Garjats in the hill tract constituted the British Orissa in the 19th century and were under the Bengal Presidency. The rest of Orissa Garjats including Sambalpur were placed under the Central Provinces. The dismembered Oriya-speaking tracts remained under different jurisdiction for a considerable period.

The problem which agitated the minds of enlightened Oriyas for a long time was the amalgamation of Oriya-speaking tracts into one administrative unit and then the formation of a separate province. It led to an organised movement - a sustained struggle for many years in a constitutional way to achieve the said objective. The agitation for amalgamation of Oriya-speaking tracts aroused and moulded public opinion in the province and helped much for the growth of political consciousness of the people in the early decades of the 20th century. The first proposal for the unification of the scattered Oriya-speaking tracts under single administration came from Raja Baikuntha Nath De of Baleswar and Bichitrananda Patnaik of Cuttack in 1875 (*Utkal Dipika*, 27 Feb 1875). They presented a memorandum to the Government in this regard. In November 1888 Sir S.C. Bayley, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal visited Orissa. He was presented with a Memorial by the '*Utkal Sabha*' of Cuttack and among other things, he was requested to give attention to the problem of uniting the Oriya-speaking territories of Madras, Central Provinces and Bengal in one administrative unit so that its all round development would be possible. However, the Lieutenant Governor rejected the proposal outright in his reply to the Memorial (*Utkal Dipika*, 24 November 1888).

In 1895 the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces decided to abolish the Oriya language from official use in the district of Sambalpur. Such a decision against the interest of the majority of Oriya population in the district raised a storm of protest not only in that district but also throughout Orissa. On 20 June 1895, the '*Utkal Sabha*' sent a Memorial to Lord Elgin, the Governor General, protesting against that unjust and arbitrary measure. They observed that the denial to the people of the use of their mother tongue was the worst form of gagging and was yet unknown even in the most despotic form of government. All protests were in vain, and by the end of 1895, Oriya was abolished in the courts of Sambalpur. Such a decision naturally wounded the sentiments of the Oriya-speaking people very much and efforts were made in all directions to reverse the step taken by the government. H.G. Cooke, the Commissioner of Orissa supported the movement for amalgamation of the Oriya-speaking tracts in July 1895. It was the first official support extended to the demands of the people. In his annual administrative report, H.G. Cooke suggested certain measures for consideration of the higher authorities. According to H.G. Cooke, the areas which could be united with the Orissa Division were : (a) Sambalpur district of the Chatisgarh Division of the Central Provinces, (b) Tributary States of Patna, Sonapur, Rairakol, Bamra and Kalahandi and (c) the whole or part of the Ganjam district with the States of Kimidi and Ghumsur (Administrative Report of Orissa, 1894-95, p-25). Although his arguments for amalgamation were based on "ethnological and philological" considerations, but such suggestions were completely ignored. The agitation in Sambalpur for the restoration of Oriya as the court language continued unabated.

In July 1901 some leading men of Sambalpur called on Sir Andrew Fraser, the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces and suggested that 'if it was thought impossible to have Oriya as the language of one Central Provinces' district, they would prefer to be transferred to Orissa' (Two Bachelors of Arts, The Oriya Movement, p-25). Such a proposal was appreciated by the Chief Commissioner who urged the Government of India to transfer Sambalpur to Orissa Division. Madhusudan Das, who was a member of the Bengal Legislative Council by that time, informed Lord Curzon, the Governor General that the people of Orissa fully supported the Memorial submitted to Sir Andrew Fraser, and it was their desire that the Oriya-speaking territories should be placed under a Chief Commissioner. A deputation from Sambalpur consisting of Madan Mohan Misra, Balabhadra Suar, Braja Mohan Patnaik, Bihari Das Mahant and Sripati Misra also met the Governor General at Simla to acquaint him with their problems (Utkal; Dipika, 16 November 1901). However, the Government of India did not consider it feasible to transfer Sambalpur to the Orissa Division or to create a Chief Commissionership for Orissa at that time, though they restored Oriya to its rightful place in the Sambalpur district from 1st January 1903. During the second half of 1902, the Oriyas of Ganjam sent a Memorial to Lord Curzon in which they spoke of themselves as dissociated from their Oriya brethren, and of Orissa as "a limb separated from the body," and they prayed that the Government of India will be graciously pleased" to bring together the scattered divisions inhabited by Oriya-speaking people, i.e., Ganjam in Madras, Sambalpur in the Central Provinces, and Orissa in Bengal under

the Government of Bengal or under one government.

Towards the end of the year, Raja Baikuntha Nath De of Balasore presented a Memorial to Lord Curzon in which he had urged the Governor General to constitute a separate administrative unit for all Oriya-speaking territories or to keep them under one provincial administration of either Bengal, Madras or the Central Provinces. Thus, by the beginning of the 20th century the constitutional agitation in different parts of the Oriya-speaking territories had started. It aroused political consciousness of the people to a great extent and that paved the way for the establishment of a new organisation in the province to spearhead their demands before the British authorities.

Early in 1903 a small group of enthusiastic Oriyas assembled in the town of Rambha on the shore of Chilka lake. Encouraged by the Raja of Khallikot they decided to establish the *Ganjam Jatiya Samiti*. Its first meeting was held in April 1903 in the town of Berhampur and was attended by many representatives from the Oriya-speaking tracts in different provinces. Such a common gathering gave expression to the desire of the Oriya-speaking people for amalgamation of their areas under a single administration. About 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 (i) to transfer to the Orissa Division the Oriya-speaking portions of the districts of Ganjam, Vizagpatnam, Sambalpur, Chhota Nagpur and Midnapur so far as this can be done having regard 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." Finally, the representatives of the Oriya-speaking tracts of Madras, the Central Provinces and Bengal met in a conference at Cuttack on 30th & 31st December 1903. It was the historic gathering of '*Utkal Sammilani*' which met amidst unprecedented enthusiasm and spearheaded the Oriya Movement till the formation of a separate Province on 1st April, 1936. The first Conference was presided by Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo, the Maharaja of Mayurbhanj, and was attended by a number of feudatory chiefs. Rajendra Narayan Bhanj Deo, the Raja of Kanika was the Chairman of the Reception Committee and Madhusudan Das was the Secretary and in fact, the moving spirit behind such an organisation. The Conference discussed many socio-cultural and political problems of the Oriya-speaking people, and adopted resolutions on all important matters pertaining to them (*Utkal Dipika*, 2 January

1904). Of course, the primary purpose of the conference was to build an organisation to fight for the amalgamation of the Oriya-speaking tracts. In this regard, the first resolution of the conference welcomed the proposal of the Government of India outlined in the famous Risley Circular regarding territorial adjustment. The socio-political awakening of the people of Orissa was quite evident from such a Conference held at Cuttack. The Oriya movement, which thus begun in 1903, was the first and pioneering attempt in India to create a province on the linguistic basis. The people made sustained efforts for long thirty years for acceptance of their demands by the alien rulers. Under the leadership of Utkalgaurav Madhusudan Das, the *Utkal Sammilani* continued to meet year after year in different places of Orissa and ultimately succeeded in making Orissa a separate province.

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*Hon'ble Chief Minister Shri Naveen Patnaik attending the Annual Function of Khallikote College on 19.2.2005. Shri Rabi Narayan Nanda, Minister, Water Resources, Science & Technology, Shri Prasanna Kumar Patasani, M.P. and other dignitaries are present.*