

A Peep into the History of Mayurbhanj

(FROM 15th AUGUST 1947 TO 2ND JANUARY 1949)

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During the period from 15th August 1947 when the country got freedom to 2nd January 1949, when Mayurbhanj merged with the province of Orissa, a very savage incident happened in Mayurbhanj in the Bamanghati Ghat road from Bangriposi to Bisoi which is now NH No 6. This was the time of turmoil when the Adivasis of two sub-divisions, Bamanghati (Rairangpur) and Karanjia (Panchpir Sub-division) were in total revolt against the decision of the Govt. to amalgamate Mayurbhanj with Orissa. They wanted to have a separate state to themselves with the similar tribal population of Bihar and Santhal Pargana.

The Santal rebels murdered the Forest Ranger Sri Prafulla Singh, when he was returning after finishing his work in Karanjia area with the forest contractor Sri Pran Kanai Chowdhuri. They killed him as a human sacrifice before the Thakurani in the Bamanghati hill road where the Thakurani's place is still there.

Long before Mayurbhanj state became a district of Orissa, three serious tribal uprisings happened before this revolt of 1947-48. First one occurred in 1821, second in 1831-36 and a very serious one in 1866 which was also the year of great famine otherwise known as "Naanka Durbhiksha". While the first three were all confined to Bamanghati estate of the ruler, now

known as Rairangpur Sub-Division of Mayurbhanj Dist. and were mostly organised by the most vulnerable Kolh tribals and joined by Santhals and Bhumijas. The main reason of these rebellions, specially that of 1866 was the inactive royal administration of Mayurbhanj Maharaja in the face of acute shortage of food to the common men and the oppressive rules and regulations in vogue.

The revolt of 1866 was sparked by a single incident when the administration of Maharaja arrested and brought five rebel leaders bound on an elephant all the way from Bamanghati (Rairangpur) to Baripada in full view of hundreds of people on the way. They are Mochiram Mahanto, Bir Singh, Ghano Sardar, Haroo Kol and Sulot Parmanik. They were bound on the elephant in the most rustic way because they refused to pay rent and supply Rasad and encouraged others to revolt. Rasad means commodities required by the camping officers during their stay which are mainly food articles and chicken /mutton/ fish as the case may be. Till recently there was a tradition that whenever an officer camps in a village the people of that village will give collectively the required articles for food which was also shared very often by the leading villagers. That revolt subsided after the royal administration made a conciliation with the tribal

residents which had far reaching effects. But that was almost 80 years back to the time of this episode which is 1947-48.

Some important facts are noted below before we go to what that happened in the live human sacrifice (Bali) of Sri Prafulla Chandra Singh, Forest Ranger, Baripada, Mayurbhanj by the santhal tribals before the thakurani (Goddess) on the Bamanghati Ghat road, between Bangriposhi and Bisoi.

1. India got freedom from the British on 15th August, 1947 but Mayurbhanj remained a princely state like many others in Orissa as well as India and did not become a part of Orissa on that day.

2. On 15th August, 1947 the sovereignty of the princely rulers like Mayurbhanj was lapsed. By popular demand of Praja Mandal the state became a self ruled entity by forming a ministry headed by Sri Sarat Chandra Das as the Chief Minister with three other ministers in his cabinet. During its sovereignty it had its own bank called State Bank of Mayurbhanj, which was taken over by the State Bank of India after 2nd January 1949.

3. Sardar Patel, the then Home Minister of India, called for a meeting of all the princely states of Orissa who were yet to merge with Orissa on 14th Dec. 1947 at Cuttack. But before that meeting Mayurbhanj Maharaja gave full powers to the State Legislative Assembly headed by Sri Sarat Ch. Das as the Chief Minister on 9th Dec. 1947 and did not attend the meeting with Sardar Patel on 14th Dec. 1947 at Cuttack as a result of which the merger of Mayurbhanj state with Orissa was stalled which was the desire of the Praja Mandal Party led by Sri Sarat Ch. Das.

4. The agitation of Tribal leaders for several months before this was in full swing. Tribal leaders of Chotanagpur, Santhal Pargana etc were getting

more and more consolidated with their demand for a separate tribal majority state. They got a boost in their movement when Saraikela and Kharsuan were merged with Singbhum district of Bihar on 18th May 1948.

5. Maharaja Pratap Ch. Bhanj Deo could understand that the administration has become chaotic under the Sarat Chandra Das Cabinet and he went to Delhi on 16th October 1948 with Sarat Ch. Das and after due deliberation signed an instrument of merger with the Govt. of India after which the state of Mayurbhanj merged with Orissa. The formal taking over of the power happened when Dr. D.V.Rage, an ICS officer was appointed as the Chief Commissioner of Mayurbhanj, in November 1948. During this period of Central Rule in Mayurbhanj Dr. Rage, Commissioner studied the situation very carefully and recommended for amalgamation of the Mayurbhanj state with Orissa province. V.P.Menon visited Baripada on 16th Dec. 1948 to announce before the Assembly about the overwhelming desire of all sections of the people to merge with Orissa except the Tribals who opposed to it.

6. The Tribal leaders Sonaram Soren and others started very strong movement against this decision in the Baman Ghati and Panchpir sub-divisions of Mayurbhanj now better known as Rairangpur and Karanjia sub-divisions. They expressed their belief that if Mayurbhanj is joined with Bihar the tribals will get a better deal in future which was totally not accepted by V.P.Menon. He declared that Mayurbhanj will merge with Orissa on 2nd January 1949.

7. The recently born Adivasi Mahasabha started gathering volunteers. About 15000 men and women became members and made strong rallies all over the district. They declared Rairangpur as their headquarter and thousands

of tribals armed with bow and arrows, axes and spears made rallies everywhere, even in the police ground at Baripada shouting that they will merge with Bihar and not with Orissa. People started getting panicked. They blocked many roads and school students were used to send information as they are least doubted by police. Life of Dikus (people who are other than Tribals) seemed to have been left at the mercy of the Adivasis.

8. Mr. V.S. Matthews was the collector of Mayurbhanj at that time and he suppressed the agitation mercilessly by using armed military police. Stenguns and rifles were used by the force and at the same time a punitive tax was imposed on the Adivasis which led to such pressure on them that not only a large number of Adivasis lost their lives but in some places almost whole villages were found empty as they all fled to jungle due to fear of their life against the military police with stenguns.

At that time, out of many historical incidents which took place, one was of the murder of the Forest Ranger Sri Prafulla Singh. Why the Santhal rebels targeted him alone is still a mystery except that he represented the administration as he wore the Khaki Uniform as a Forest Ranger on duty.

The Baman ghati, (also meaning fifty two ghats and curbs) is a very critical portion of the hill road from Bangriposi on Baripada side and Bisoi on the other side between which remains the hill section with high gradations as well as blind curbs. All drivers who cross the Ghat road pray to his satisfaction before driving into the Ghat so that nothing happens in crossing the Ghat. It is about 8 kms. When you go half way to the Ghat from Bangriposi and when most of the uphill road is over there is a place where there is a goddess which is specifically established to safeguard the travelers through that Ghat.

It is needless to say that the rebels have seen the jeep with Mr. Singh and Sri Prankanai Chowdhury, forest contractor which passed through the ghat road by around 10-11 A.M. under police guard and was to return by the afternoon and also to go back as expected in a convoy well guarded by the police by 5-5.30 PM. This was being declared by the SDO Bamanghati who was camping at Bisoi about twenty KM on the hill side from where he was sending guarded convoys of vehicles. Unguarded movement was very much discouraged. But unfortunately when this jeep carrying Mr Singh, Mr P K Choudhury and three others with driver Sri Chamanlal Chowhan reached from Karanjia area, after their work was over, just few minutes after 5PM they found that the police guarded convoy of vehicles have already left from Bisoi downwards to Bangriposhi. SDO Mr Swaran Singh asked them not to go alone without police escort. But they thought if only 10-15 minutes ago the convoy has left, they can catch up with the convoy by racing up in speed as it is sloppy road. Unfortunately their estimate was proved fatally wrong. By the time the convoy crossed the place of Thakurani the agitators lurking around at that place got enough time to block the road by cutting some trees on the road which blocked the jeep to go any further from that point near the Thakurani, A sharp arrow hit Chamanlal Chowhan, injuring the driver's right knee from the right side of the hill which crippled him totally to drive. The arrow came by tearing through the canvass hood. For that reason perhaps Chamanlal could not see the shooter, who were above the ground level on the hillock. When the jeep stopped it seems, the Santhals were fully prepared and came by beating their large drums called Dhumsha, used in very important ceremonies. While all the persons jumped out of the jeep and took shelter in the nearby ditch with

injured driver, the Adivasi agitators dragged away Mr Singh from near the vehicle. The Santhal rebels could not perhaps see anybody else and took away Mr Singh alone and gave a ceremonious *bali* by first giving a bath and then doing other rituals that is done before such sacrifices. The Thakurani's place and the well is still there as the witness to that gory and horrible cold blooded murder.

It was already dark when these things happened. The survivors were asked by the Chatias to remove their white clothes, tear them and use parts of it as loin cloth so that they are not seen from distance and they came with their guidance in very circuitous jungle road to Baripada Thana after one and a half day, only a distance of 22 kms. Police took their statements, and later on arrested the entire family of Sri PKChoudhury.

After about a month the jeep was brought to Baripada Police Station after recovering it from that gorge in the ghat road. It was an unprecedented situation in Baripada town, people were in full panic and lawlessness was spreading every where. The collector V S Mathews with the help of Military police took very severe action to control the situation. He ordered firing in Kuldiha, Gunduria, Gitilata, Rairangpur and in several other places of the disturbed areas of Mayurbhanj. There was heavy loss of life as the military police used stenguns and asked to shoot at sight methods to control the situation. Govt. imposed punitive taxes on the tribals and showed no leniency in realising the punitive tax. A large number tribals left their villages. Govt. initiated Judicial proceedings against the rebel leaders and many of their leaders were arrested.

At this time Dr. Mahtab came to Baripada and visited Baripada jail and many places of the affected area including Rairangpur, had detail talks

with the tribal leaders and ultimately truce was achieved. During his visit to Baripada jail he interacted with Sri P K Chowdhuri as well as with his brothers wife and was impressed that they are not culprits in the murder case in way. It was Dr. Mahtab's decision to withdraw all criminal proceedings initiated against the tribal leaders and all cases were dropped. Perhaps at that time this case of murder of Sri Prafulla Singh was also dropped. Sri PKChowdhury and his family members were all released from jail immediately. Then Mayurbhanj became a district of Orissa on 2nd January 1949. At what cost - they killed one Diku, non Adivasi Prafulla babu and the administration killed several Adivasis whose numbers have not been enumerated by any historian so far, it may be above 150 or more. How many villages have been deserted, it might have taken a generation to come to normalcy. This is the cost of making Mayurbhanj a part of Orissa.

Note: The incident relating to murder of Mr Singh was heard first hand by me from Mr P K Chowdhury who was a close family member of mine. I have heard it so many times that every thing appears to have happened just before my eyes. Later on I have gone by cycle to that spot to see it although I have passed that spot many times. I thought it will be my duty to write it down so that others can give proper justice to the sacrifice of many who have gone unseen, unsung and unnoticed in history.

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2. Untold stories of 1st responsible Govt. of Mayurbhanj – Dr. Kalpana Das
3. Merger of Princely States of Orissa with Indian Dominion and importance of 1st January By Dr. Janmejay Choudhury
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