

Confronting the Durbar and The Raj : Reflections on the Prajamandal Movement in the Garjat State of Talcher

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The Prajamandal Movement that started in an organized way in the *Garjat* states of Odisha in early 1930s, synchronizing with the climactic period of the freedom movement was an epoch-making struggle of the people of the states against their oppressive rulers. The movement too was awe-inspiring in the sense that unlike British Odisha where the struggle of the people was directed against colonial administration, in the *Garjats* the struggle was against two colluding powers, viz., the native rulers (Durbar) and the colonial administration (the British Raj). In fact, the movement in the first concern was directed against the exploitation and tyranny of the native rulers, and in a broader framework against colonial subjugation. Interestingly, agrarian discontent of the people, misrule and autocracy of the rulers were at the root of the people's unrest but with the passage of time and approach of independence the demand for responsible government and the merger of the states with Odisha, surfaced as rallying points in the movement. This study focuses on the prajamandal movement in the *Garjat* state of Talcher. In fact, the prajamandal struggle in Talcher was remarkable on many aspects; the people offered the toughest resistance to the Durbar administration, resorted to mass migration and endured the most brutal oppression of the administration.

The colonial rule in the *mughalbandi* (coastal region) and the *Garjat* regions (hilly areas) of Odisha brought in its wake many changes especially in the economic sphere and this in turn deeply affected the peasantry. The subordination of the native rulers to British Paramountcy in exchange for certain tributes brought havoc and hardship for the peasantry, the main productive class in agrarian economies. After the *Garjats* came under the control of imperial power, the peasants in the *Garjats* like British Odisha came to feel the heat and burden of arbitrary enhancement of revenue. In fact, the people were forced to oblige with various feudal obligations and the failure to provide them was met with severe oppression. There were various types of feudal dues exacted from the peasantry like *rasad*, *magan*, *bethi*, *beggar*, and other miscellaneous taxes. The exactions of such illegal dues which were at times often unbearable and burdensome led to popular uprisings and revolts. In fact, peasant unrest was witnessed in many *Garjat* states in the later part of 19th century. Ratan Meli of 1863 and Dharani Meli of 1891 in Keonjhar, Kondha Meli of 1882 in Kalahandi, the disturbances in Narsinghpur in 1878, in Daspalla in 1880-90, and the Nayagarh Meli in 1893 were a few tokens of the popular outburst

of the deep-seated discontent and malaise of the people.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, the tenants of Talcher raised their voice and showed resentment against the imposition of excessive rents and feudal dues at least on three different times in 1911, 1922 and 1932. However, the suppression of these unorganized risings convinced the people the need of an organization to channelize their discontent into a forceful movement. In this context, the Orissa States' Peoples' Conference formed on 20 June, 1931 gave a new perspective to the struggle of the people in the *Garjats*. The organization founded with the hope of giving a new lease of life and vigour to the dormant peasantry in the *Garjats*, however, got eclipsed for a couple of years but was revived again through the efforts of Sarangadhar Das in 1937. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, who presided over the second session of the Orissa States' Peoples' Conference at Cuttack on 23-24 June 1937, urged the necessity of awakening the people of the states and harnessing their innate power and cohesive strength. The formation of the Province of Odisha on 1st April, 1936 comprising of six districts viz., Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Sambalpur, Ganjam and Koraput, the experiment in 'provincial autonomy' following the formation of the province cast profound impact on the people of the *Garjats*. Moreover, the peasant struggle in the *Garjats* got a morale boosting after a popular Congress Ministry assumed the reins of administration in the new province in July 1937. Evidently, the Ministry showed its concern to the suffering people in the *Garjats* and extended its moral support to their struggle. The struggle of the people in Talcher entered into a new phase with the formation of Talcher Prajamandal under the presidentship of

Pabitra Mohan Pradhan on 6th September 1938. The Orissa States Enquiry Committee formed under the chairmanship of Harekrushna Mahtab to enquire into the condition of people in the *Garjats* gave its report in 1939. The report brought to the fore the grim and depressing state of affairs in the administration of the *Garjats*. In fact, the nature of administration was oppressive with no rule of law in vogue and many restrictions clamped on the subjects. Curiously, in the state of Talcher the ruler had employed a band of *Damas* (untouchables) to punish the outpouring unruly subjects defying the dictates of the Durbar. The Committee urged the necessity of well thought out plan for the radical solution of the problems afflicting the people in the Princely States.

The agrarian unrest in British Odisha which assumed serious proportion after the Congress ministry took office had its obvious and desired repercussion on the peasants in the *Garjats*. The Talcher Prajamandal presented a charter of demands to the Raja, in which it pleaded inter alia the right to form associations, hold meetings, granting of civil liberties and responsible government, abolition of obnoxious feudal taxes, modification in tenancy laws and forest laws, and utilization of half of the state's income in welfare works etc. However, the Durbar showed scant regard to these demands and declaring the prajamandal activities as unlawful, adopted repressive measures to dismantle the movement. The apathetic attitude of the ruler, large scale and indiscriminate arrest of the prajamandal activists, in turn prompted the people to take recourse to the path of Satyagraha. People offered Satyagraha in batches and commencing on 5 October, 1938, the programme continued for long two months. However, the state employed all means to terrorize the people in order to deter them from

such action by inflicting exemplary and inhuman punishments on the Satyagrahis. The repressive measure of the ruler compelled the people to make experiment in a new form of passive resistance and they left their homes en masse and moved to the neighbouring areas of Angul in British Odisha. The migration commenced on 8 November 1938. In the estimation of the prajamandal leaders by the end of December 1938, about 60 thousand people out of the total population of 86 thousand had left their homes and taken shelter in the temporary camps in Angul. This exodus of people, novel in approach was an unprecedented event in the annals of prajamandal movement. The mass migration of people, their plight in the camps, who stayed there for long 8 months, even tormented Gandhiji. The migrants returned to their homes in June 1939 after the Durbar conceded to some of their demands and gave assurance for the fulfilment of other demands in future. The outbreak of Second World War in 1939 and the Defence of India Rules armed the native rulers to suppress all popular agitations during the war and consequently there came a lull in the activities of the prajamandals.

The perceived tranquil situation prevailed in the state of Talcher in the wake of return of refugees to their homes took a tumult turn after the Durbar arrested some prajamandal leaders, while they were assessing the extent of crop loss in the drought affected areas of the state. However, a new and temporary prajamandal which came in place of the old one in January, 1941 continued its opposition to the Durbar. It strongly condemned the repressive policy of the Durbar and its puppet institutions like the 'Praja Parishad' and 'Byabastha Parishad'. These institutions were set up with the ulterior objective of promoting the selfish interest of the Durbar and to counteract the activities of the prajamandal. In

this circumstance, the Quit India resolution passed by the All India Congress Committee on 8 August, 1942 gave a new upsurge to the peasant movement in the country. The 'Direct Action' resorted to by the people in various parts of British India in response to the 'Do or Die' call of Gandhiji, found its echo in the *Garjats*. In Talcher, a rumour relating to the murder of Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, one of the prominent prajamandal leaders of the time made the people restive for action. The fact of the matter was that Pabitra Mohan Pradhan had escaped from the Talcher Jail on 31st August 1942, and a cash award was announced for his arrest. But rumour became strong that the authorities had killed him in the jail. In a retaliatory mood, the people in a meeting at Paniola on 2 September, 1942 decided to confront the Durbar en masse on 6 September, 1942 and to set up their own government. Just one day after the day fixed for the show off of strength, around 8000 agitators assembled at Hatatota with the intended objective of attacking the palace, to break-open the jail and inching for the avowed goal encircled the royal palace. They pressed for the urgent transfer of power from the Raja, reducing his role to a constitutional head and the establishment of a popular government. In fact, the people disobeyed the state rules and organized a parallel government called 'Chasi Mulia Raj' (Government of the farmers and labourers) which exercised authority over the entire state barring the headquarter town for a brief period and created anxiety for the Durbar and the British. However, the ruler who anticipated such developments and sought the help of British forces paid no heed to the people's demands. The British employed all modern means like the use of machine guns, dropping of bombs and firing on ground to disperse the crowd. The firing on the crowd in the afternoon of 7th

September, 1942 resulted in the death of four persons and injuries to more than 100 persons. The intensity of the rising and hysteria of the protestors was so strong that the British had to use aeroplane to drop bombs in order to disperse the agitators. In fact, the use of aeroplane to quell mass protestors during the 'Quit India' movement was witnessed only in five places in India including Talcher. The Durbar retaliation did not end there; empowered by an ordinance it imposed collective fines on villages which were party to the disorder and lawlessness. Large number of prajamandal workers and freedom fighters were taken to the prison and given brutal treatment in the jails. The parallel government also ceased to function in the face of the oppression of the Durbar. Thus, the commotion in Talcher associated with the launching of the Quit India Movement subsided owing to ruthless repression of the British. However, a few leaders and workers of the prajamandal succeeded in keeping themselves elusive of the police and continued their guerilla activities. But such activities received a blow after the state forces attacked the underground militia in May 1943 and killed two of its members. Added to this, some underground workers of the prajamandal surrendered in 1945 on the advice of Gandhiji. However, Pabitra Mohan Pradhan who was averse to the idea of surrender did not do so till his warrant was lifted on 29 August, 1947. Thus, the fervent rising in Talcher in 1942, nightmarish for the British was controlled by the use of sheer force but it brought for the ruler a title 'Raj Bahadur' an award bestowed by the British for effectively dealing with the situation. After Independence, 20,000 people under the aegis of prajamandal staged a demonstration

demanding the state's merger with Odisha and their desire became reality with the merger of the state with Odisha in December 1947.

Thus, the prajamandal movement in Talcher occupies a distinct place in the saga of *Garjat* people's struggle against the two entwined forces of feudalism and imperialism. No doubt, the struggle was put down with the use of brute force by the Durbar but it brought to public notice the sordid state of affairs in the state's administration. Moreover, people's grievance in the *Garjats* would have remained muted for long in the absence of such popular agitations. In fact, the movement was not an isolated struggle of the peasantry but a vital part of the broader struggle for freedom, an event no less historic and significant from the struggle of the people in British Odisha.

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