

Sketch on First Ministry in Odisha

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It was in the days of yore that our blessed India was a land of many wonders. And one such wonder was her fabulous wealth. Lured mostly by this wealth a number of foreigners appeared in different scenes of her history. They were the Greeks, the Sakas, the Arabs, the Turks and Mughals. Coming as invaders, they conquered lands and looted wealth. But ultimately they were all conquered by the superior culture of the Indians. In fact falling into the veritable reservoir of India, they lost their identities.

However with the advent of the eighteenth century there appeared on the Indian stage a band of foreigners who came across the seas not as invaders, but as mere traders. They were quite meek and mild in their behavior and action. They were the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danes, the English and the French. With the passage of time however, all of them except the English were removed from Indian scene. The English alone stayed on to build an empire in India. The traders assumed the role of rulers and ruled over the country as foreigners. The destiny of the Indians was decided for the first time not on its own soil, but in England. India thus passed under the dark shadow of the British rule. The company which later came to be known as the East India

Company was incorporated in London on December 31, 1600 under a charter of Queen Elizabeth.

The Battle of Plassey was milestone in the history of India. It was a signal that the Mughal empire was disintegrating. It was a greater signal that the foreign powers would impose their administration over this land. The victory of Clive opened a new chapter in the history of the nation. Like an octopus, the East India Company fought on many fronts. It fought the Mughals and the Marathas both in the North and the South. It also battled against the other European powers and the most important of them all- the French.

The East India Company got its first foothold in Odisha on the 12th November 1766. The Southern Odisha was a part of the Chicacole district which was in the Northern Circars under the control of Nizam of Hyderabad. For a brief period, the Chicacole district had come under the French, but it soon passed over to the British. The Nizam asked the Zamindars of Southern Odisha that they were in future to regard the English Company as their sovereign and to pay their rents and obedience to the said Company or deputies without raising any trouble. The French, who were the bitter rivals of the British

were at loss in 1759 when Masulipatanam was captured. They had a fort at Ganjam and Monseipur Moracin had become a known figure in the political circle of Southern Odisha. The sudden turn of events closed the chapter for the French. Now, it was for the East India Company and the English people to take the best possible opportunity. Then British created a class of landholders and offered them different titles. They were known as Rajas, Zamindars, Landholders and Proprietors. In certain cases, they were beyond the ordinary civil and criminal laws of the land. They could try their subjects and even punish them. This was the saddest aspect of the British administration of the Odisha.

In January 1937, election was held for the provincial assembly under the provision of provincial autonomy in the Government of India Act, 1935. Three parties- Congress, Odisha Nationalist Party and the United Party represented the Rajas and Zamindars and sought to safeguard their interests. Out of 56 elected seats (four being nominated seats), the Congress won 36 seats, the non-Congress parties won 10 seats, and independents won 10. Even though the Congress had won majority of seats in the Assembly, there was difference of opinion as to whether the Congress would form ministry or not. In a private meeting of the Congress Legislature Party held in March, 1937, Biswanath Das, a former member of the Madras Legislative Council was elected as the leader of the Congress Party in the Assembly. The All India Congress Committee gave the directive to the Congress Legislature parties in all provinces including Odisha not to form the ministry unless the Government gave the assurance that the special powers of the Governor would not be exercised to override the decisions of the provincial

ministries. In March 1937 the Governor invited Biswanath Das, the leader of the Congress Legislative Party, to form the ministry and be its head. But Biswanath Das refused to accept the invitation in pursuance of the direction of All India Congress Committee. The Governor then invited the Maharaja of Parlakhemundi to form the ministry. Maharaja formed the ministry along with two others - Mandhata Gorachanda Pattanaik and Maulavi Latifur Rahaman on 1 April 1937. The ministry of the Maharaja of Parlakhemundi was supported by a minority in the legislature, hence its formation was criticized as illegal and undemocratic in press and platform. The Governor clarified that in view of the refusal of the Congress to form ministry he had no other alternative than invite the leader of a minority party to form the ministry. The Governor further clarified that his offer to the Congress still stood valid. But the Congress members in the assembly demanded the resignation of the Maharaja of Parlakhemundi and sent a petition to the Governor expressing their lack of confidence in it.

Even though the Congress had decided to seek election to the legislatures under the Provincial Autonomy, its political agitation was going on unabated. On 26 January 1937, in spite of the Government's ban order, in all important towns of Odisha the independence day was observed. On that day, at Puri and Satyabadi, the police seized the copies of independence pledges from the Congress offices. The Deputy Commissioner of Police, Sambalpur banned a public meeting on that day. On 1 April 1937, the Congressmen of Odisha denounced the Government of India Act, 1935 as anti- national and reactionary. They demanded a constituent assembly on the basis of adult suffrage to frame a democratic constitution. The Viceroy assured the

Congress party that the Governor would exercise their powers according to the advice of the ministers. Thereafter with the permission of the Congress Working Committee, the Odisha Congress legislature party decided to form ministry. The Maharaja of Parlakhemundi resigned and the first Congress ministry in Odisha was formed. Biswanath Das became the Prime Minister on 19 July 1937. Besides the Prime Minister, the Ministry had two ministers- Nityananda Kanungo and Bodhram Dube, and four parliamentary secretaries- Jadumani Mangaraj, Jagannath Misra, Pyarisankar Roy and Radha Krushna Biswas Ray. Mukunda Prasad Das and Nanda Kishor Das were elected as the Speaker and deputy Speaker respectively. The new ministry, after its formation, found itself faced with the problem of peasant unrest. But the peasants under the leadership of socialists carried on their movement with greater vigour. In January 1938 Surendra Nath Dwibedy, the Congress socialist leader brought out a journal called Krushak to champion the interests of the peasants. The Raja of Puri, Raja of Khalikote and Raja of Kanika started a Odia weekly, titled Utkal Barta to champion the interests of landlords. On 22

September 1937, 300 Zamindars and landlords from various parts of Odisha assembled at Cuttack and voiced their resentment to the proposed amendments. The Zamindars and landlords were seriously perplexed over peasant unrest and opposed the Tenancy Amendment Bill. They once again met in January 1938 and asked the Government to curb the socialist activities.

Subhas Chandra Bose visited Odisha in August 1939 and presided over the Odisha Youth Conference. The students were very much impressed by the fiery speech of Bose. Bose succeeded in winning over a section of the Congress Socialists to his Forward Bloc Party. On this occasion the Odisha branch of the Forward Bloc Party was formed. In fact, the history of freedom movement in Odisha was as “expression of forces that constitute an integral part of the all-India struggle” against British imperialism.

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