

The Contribution of Sambalpur in the Formation of a Separate State of Orissa

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Among the many districts forming part of the Central Provinces in the beginning of the 20th century only the District of Sambalpur was an Oriya speaking tract. All the lowest personnel of the British Government were Non-Oriyas and mostly Hindi speaking people. The British rulers did not understand any language other than Hindi. The lowest personnel were instructed not to pay any importance to the Oriya language.

On this development the Late Sripati Mishra has chronicled in his writing '*Simla Yatra*' that :-

"In the Government offices of the Marhattas and the Britishers, the Hindusthanis had their importance but as there was no similarity of their languages with Oriya, they were simply unable to understand the Oriya language. This stood as an obstacle on their part to manage the affairs in government offices in Sambalpur district. Their main impediment was the Oriya language. They thought therefore in Sambalpur district introducing Hindi as the medium of office work, so that their importance as usual could be felt in the sphere of administration of courts and government offices in Sambalpur.

Sir John Woodburne, the then Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces passed an Order in 1895 directing that Hindi shall be the

language of Courts and Government Offices in Sambalpur and sought the opinion of the general public. At that time Mr. R.A. Chapman was the Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur. He was also in favour of introducing Hindi as the medium of administration.

In sharp reaction to this Order, on the 13th June, 1895 a meeting was held under the Presidentship of Late Dharanidhar Mishra and a resolution was passed opposing the introduction of Hindi as the language in courts and Government offices and a memorandum containing the same was forwarded to Lord Elgin, the then Viceroy .

Late poet Gangadhar Meher lamented on this issue in one of his poems, the gist of which reads thus :

"We are fated to remain in exile in our own home. We are simply unable to exchange in our mother-tongue with our brothers making our lives mostly miserable. Once we approach with any grievance before the Rulers they expel us out of anger. It is not their fault but sheer ignorance to understand our spoken language".

Any document not written in Hindi could not be presented for registration.

The difficulties experienced by the people in writing Hindi in various government

transactions through documents and otherwise has been described by Sir Andrew Fraser, the then Chief Commissioner as follows :

"I saw that the people were summoned from a distance of fortyfive miles to attend the Court. The people were simply unable to read the summon or could find out any other person who could read the same. The illiterate servants who used to serve these summons only told them that they were required to attend the Court. Being afraid of consequences in not attending the Court they used to go to the Court and enquired before the Court as to on what account they have been summoned".

On the 19th of January 1895, Hindi was introduced in Sambalpur by abolishing Oriya. On March 5, 1895 in the "Sambalpur Hiteisini" the great poet Gangadhar in his poem captioned "Appeal of Utkal Bharati" expressed :

"The mother is fated to remain in exile. We are also fated to become motherless. Whatever is going to happen is fated to happen. But we should not become cowards and keep up with our struggle".

The government servant had no difficulty in the introduction of Hindi as official language. But during 1901 Census, the Hindi-knowing Government servants experienced much difficulty which was not unusual. Conduct of Census among the Oriya knowing people was mostly an impossible task. One young Oriya, Late Baikunth Nath Pujhari was then working as Assistant Commissioner. The Census was carried out in Oriya with his help". The monthly Journal 'The Hirakhand' reports as follows:

`Cudos to this great hero and his moral courage. For the whole of the day he was engaged in government work but during the evening hours Baikunth Nath spent the night mostly on horse-back and travelled from village to village. During his journey he used to explain to the people the various questions the Collector might put to them in course of his visit through his simple arguments. He used to

remain present in distant villages during the night hours. He used to explain to the people that this will pave the way for the introduction of Oriya.

During the Census the entire population of Sambalpur was 7 lakhs 96 thousand and 413 and the population of Oriya-speaking people was 5 lakhs 95 thousand and 601.

The second phase of the language movement was started immediately after this Census. The people of Sambalpur then submitted a Memorial to the then Viceroy Lord Curzon and the then Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces Sir Andrew Fraser. The gist of this memorandum read thus:-

"Once it is considered impossible to introduce Oriya in only one district of Central Provinces our district should be returned to Orissa"

The Memorial containing the same was carried by four eminent persons of Sambalpur namely Balabhadra Suar, Mahant Behari Das, Madan Mohan Mishra and Braj Mohan Patnaik who handed over the same to Sir Andrew Fraser, Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces during July, 1901. Sir Andrew Fraser assured them to forward the Memorial to Viceroy Lord Curzon.

These four prominent citizens on their return from Nagpur wrote a letter to Utkal Gourav Madhusudan narrating their meeting with the then Chief Commissioner and requested him to visit Simla. But by mistake and misfortune the same was received by post by Madhusudan Rao. After getting this letter quite late Utkal Gaurav Madhusudan Das conveyed the protest through a telegram to the Viceroy.

Again in the month of September 1901, five prominent citizens of Sambalpur, namely

Mahant Behari Das, Balabhadra Suar, Brajmohan Patnaik, Madan Mohan Mishra and Sripati Mishra decided to proceed to Simla to represent before the Viceroy. Their journey to Simla and the activities has been narrated, by Sripati Mishra in his book entitled '*Simla Yatra*'. This book is a valuable asset of Orissa history.

They could not meet the Viceroy and returned finally being disappointed. But the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces came to Sambalpur to hear their complaints and enquired into their difficulties. The visit of the Chief Commissioner to a small town like Sambalpur was a historic event. Sripati Misra has highlighted the event in his Book *Simla Yatra* thus :

"On his arrival in Sambalpur, Hon'ble Fraser was received by thousands of people. The people had welcomed him like worshipping God by performing rituals. The Brahmins by inciting sacred mantras had offered him *Durbakshata* by lighting sacred lamps".

After completing his visit, the Hon'ble Chief Commissioner Sir Andrew Fraser invited all the representatives of the town and mufusil and elicited their views on the matter. All were unanimous in their views that Oriya should be introduced as the official language in Courts and Government Offices in the District of Sambalpur and Sambalpur be merged with Orissa. Hon'ble Mr. Fraser assured to make his recommendations to the Government of India. In due course Oriya was introduced in the Courts and government offices in Sambalpur.

Accordingly from 1903 onwards Oriya was introduced as the official language in Sambalpur with the abolition of Hindi. With the introduction of Oriya as official language in the Courts and Government Offices in place

of Hindi the people of Sambalpur usually placed their demand for the merger of Sambalpur in the Orissa Division.

But serious administrative problems might arise in the event of merger of Sambalpur with the Orissa Division. During this period ex-states of Patna, Kalahandi, Rairakhol, Bamra and Sonapur were forming parts of Sambalpur Revenue Division. With the merger of Sambalpur these ex-states should virtually be merged with the Orissa Division.

During that period, the Orissa Division formed a part of Bengal province and it was quite impossible to be managed by one Governor on the ground of administrative feasibility in view of its large size. The extent of the Province of Bengal accounted for one lakh and 89 thousand square miles with a population of 7 crores and 85 lakhs and its revenue amounted to 11 crores. In the event of merger of Sambalpur with Orissa Division, its area and population would naturally increase with the merger of the ex-states which eventually might prove to be a burden. From this angle emanated the idea of dividing the Province of Bengal.

Mr. Lovat Trasen in his book '*India under Curzon and After*' has put it thus :

"The movement which led to the Partition of Bengal began in the most artless manner possible. When Sir Andrew Fraser sat down in February 1901 to write an innocent letter about a linguistic question, he can never have dreamed that he was setting in motion a sequence of events, which was to lead several years later to a widespread agitation in the Province of Bengal - "Yet such was the case" Sir Andrew Fraser, who was then the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces, wrote in a letter about the substitution of Hindi for Oriya as the language of the Law Courts of the district of Sambalpur, then under his control. In the course of his observations, he appears to have suggested that if Oriya was to be the Court language of Sambalpur, that

district had later be joined to Orissa and that may be done either by placing Sambalpur under the control of the Bengal Government or his transferring the whole of Orissa from Bengal to the Central Provinces. Out of that casual suggestion, the whole great controversy arose".

With the merger of Sambalpur in the Division of Orissa, the issue arose whether Sambalpur should be part of Province of Bengal or Central Provinces. During this period the area of Orissa accounted for 24,000 square miles having a population of sixty-three lakhs.

In the Risley Circular published during the month of December 1903, the following remarks require special attention :

"The Central Provinces on the other hand has experienced such difficulties in the administration of Sambalpur that the Chief Commissioner asked in 1901 to be relieved of that district altogether and although the Government of India was then unable to comply with the request, they were compelled to rescind a previous decision of 1895, which had proved unworkable in practice and to restore Oriya as the Court language of Sambalpur".

With the Partition of Bengal Province, the issue of the merger of Sambalpur with Bengal was involved. In Sambalpur there were momentous celebrations of its merger with the Orissa Division. Sir Andrew Fraser received warm ovation from the people of Sambalpur on 15th October 1903. A letter of felicitation was presented to the Lt. Governor by the members of the Municipality and District Council in the newly constructed Victoria Town Hall.

Mr. Fraser has written about this event in his book entitled 'The Rajas and Ryots' as follows :

"When I was in the province of Madhya Pradesh these people had the same excitement as I see now. During

the division of Bengal, Sambalpur was merged with the province of Bengal. When I went to the province of Bengal these people maintained the same spirit. Their affection and attachment with their mother-tongue and their customs was so deep which can not be expressed in language. With my interaction with these people and my gradual acquaintance I could feel the propensity of their desire. Virtually with the merger of Sambalpur in the Orissa Division of Bengal Province, the language problem could be solved".

In the event of Sambalpur not being merged with the Orissa Division in 1905, it is doubtful to believe if Orissa could have realised the dream of having a separate State of its own on the linguistic basis. The British Government had rejected outright the proposal of merger of the Oriya-speaking tracts of Ganjam and Visakhapatnam with Orissa during 1905.

The memory of Sarvasri Dharnidhar Misra, Baikunth Nath Pujari, Balabhadra Suar, Mahant Behari Das, Braja Mohan Patnaik, Madan Mohan Mishra, Sripati Mishra and Chandra Sekhar Behera, our national leaders and patriots who built up the edifice and dreamt of a new State of Orissa might be part of history in due course of time. It is quite natural that people at large may forget these patriots in the present era of advertisement and publicity.

Let us therefore the people of our State offer our warm ovation and heart-felt reverence to these people's specially for their persistent struggle to lay the foundation for the formation of a separate state of Orissa.

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