

Life and Contribution of Raja Bahadur Ramachandra Mardaraj Deo

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In 1568, Gajapati Mukunda Harichandan lost his life in a battle at Gohira Tikiri and the Muslims of Bengal captured the hitherto invincible fort of Barabati. Their conquest of Orissa was complete.

In the kind of turmoil, as this, Ramachandra Deb of the Bhoi dynasty could manage to come from *Veeragotamu* in the south with the help of his supporters and took over as the Gajapati with his capital at Khurda. He could not free Barabati across the River Kathjori.

Misfortune never comes alone. Rufus Khan, the General of Sultan Ibrahim Kutub Sahi of Golkonda, dashed into South Orissa in 1571 and occupied the land upto Chilika Lake. During the next decade, Golkonda Generals Habib Mansoor and Saha Sukuruli established their hold on the whole of South Orissa. The Muslims of Golkonda built a fort and high wall at Chatragada on the Bhaleri pass separating South from the North.

Such was the condition of Orissa, which, during the reign of Gajapati Kapilendra Dev, was extended from Ganges in the north to Rameswaram in the south. During the close of

the 16th century, the country was divided into three separate parts. The Muslims of Bengal occupied the north of River Kathjori, the Bhois ruled over the small strip of land from Banapur to Khurda and the Shais of Golkonda snatched away the southern part from Khallikote to R. Godavari and beyond. There perhaps was a treaty which

recognised the influence of the Khurda Raja over the Ganjam Zamindars. But that treaty was never faithfully respected and the Rajas of South Orissa virtually acted as independent rulers after paying the *peskash* to Golkonda.

Although, Orissa was politically divided into small units, the fabric of Oriya nationalism was never lost. The Orissan soul was one, and alone with Lord Jagannath as the supreme ruler.

The flag at the top of the great Temple at Puri was and ever is the red thread of honour to bind Orissa into one from Ganges to Godavari. With the Lord seated in Sri Mandira, the people of Orissa take pride in asserting their close fraternity and solidarity.

The British entered Ganjam in July 1768 and occupied Orissa in September 1803. Ganjam remained under the Madras council and North of



Orissa under Fort Williams. The Western Orissa was attached to Central Provinces. Still, they could not vitiate the coherent cultural tie of the Oriya People. In the later part of the 19th century, Education and different Resistance Movements brought about the emergence of a purposeful and organised national consciousness among themselves.

The Rajas of Ganjam could never accept the British Raj. Edward Cotsford, the first resident of Ganjam had to encounter resistance offered by all the zemindars, big and small. He had to face the brave resistance of Khallikote, Athgarh and Khemundi before they could be subdued. The Rajas never reconciled themselves with the British and such a state of affairs made the early Residents to depend upon Officers brought with them from South India. Not only that, cultivators from Godavari districts were offered prime landed property and planted at different villages in Ganjam for earning support for the administration.

In 1803, the British introduced permanent Settlement in Ganjam district which, at the time, was comprised of all the territory north of R. Nagavali and extended from Mofazbunder on the sea coast in the south to Prayagi on the Chilka in Khallikote. It included four district Havelis and 21 zamindaris including Paralakhemundi.

The Oriya peasants and princes were very much dissatisfied and apprehensive of the British Rule. There was no justice for the common people. The collectors and other high officers remained surrounded with their clerks who invariably came from the south. In such an array of disorder, the Oriya people led by some elites wanted to assert themselves and out of this grew the Oriya nationalism, strong and stable.

The first to feel the pulse of the people and ignite their spirit was the pioneering soul of Raja Harihara Mardraj, the Rajasahib of Khallikote.

He was generosity of heart and rectitude of liberal ideals. The advantages of modern education and high principles have rendered him the friend of the people, the pride of Orissa and the glory of the age. He was above the average run of all the ruling Chiefs of that time.

He was married to Rani Kanakamanjari Devi, a princess of the House of Bhanjas of Mayurbhanja of which the illustrious Sriramchandra Bhanja Deo shone as a great and bright Ruler. Rani Kanakmanjari was an accomplished lady with liberal ideas and was in touch with the spirit of the times. To this celebrated couple was born Ramachandra Mardaraj Deo on 13th January 1900 endowed with all the virtues of his parents. In the days that came, this Prince was destined to sufficiently contribute to shape the fate of Orissa which he loved more than anything else in this world.

As a child, the prince was nick named Eric and was in the best of health and spirits. He was brought up under the care and guidance of Governess Mrs. F. Harvey Dunn.

On the second birth anniversary of the prince, Raja Harihara Mardaraj, with the sound counselling of Pandit Neelamani Vidyaratna, who was then at Khallikote and editing the paper Prajabandhu, invited some distinguished nationalists from all over Orissa to a conference at Snodgrass House, Rambha. They included Mr. Madhusudan Das, Sriramchandra Bhanja Deo, Fakirmohan Senapati, Gopalchandra Praharaj, Gopabandhu Das and many others who were at the time in the forefront of national and cultural life of Orissa.

It was in this conference and under the auspices of an occasion as this that the assembled leaders decided to give unto themselves an Oriya national body and work unitedly for formation of Orissa State. This grand move took a concrete

shape in the Ganjam National Conference which held its first session in April 1903 at Berhampur under the Presidentship of the great nationalist Syamasundar Rajguru. This conference paved the way for formation of Utkal Sammilani under the able leadership of Mr. Madhusudan Das which held its first session at Cuttack on 30th December 1903. Maharaja Sriramchandra Bhanja Deo presided over the Utkal Union Conference.

When the Oriya nationalist Movement was getting a boost, Raja Harihara Mardraj met with an untimely death on 20th July 1909 bereaving the people and the young prince of precious parental care and upbringing. The Prince being minor, the Estate of Khallikote was kept under the Madras Court of Wards.

Prince Ramachandra was sent for schooling at Newington, Madras. He studied at Christian College up to the age of his eligibility to take charge of his won Estate.

On 14th January 1921, Raja Ramachandra Mardraj Deo came to the throne with entry, gentry and poor peasantry. He was loved by the elites in all corners of Orissa and admired by the British at the helm of state affairs. The poor peasants knew him as their saviour. In the famine of 1919, the Prince moved around in the villages of his estate, met with stricken people, stood at their door steps as one of their own and worked hard in organising relief and other assistance. He worked for spread of education and joined with his mother for encouraging Girls' Education. He laid the foundation of the Secondary School at Khallikote. His experience was wide and deep. His benevolent activities created a niche for himself in the hearts of people in Khallikote and beyond.

He was married to Rani Chandrapriya Devi of Saraikala Raj family in 1918. The new Queen was pious and was a true partner in the

life of Raja Sahib during all the dilemmas and deliberations of his life. Their only child Sri Purnachandra Mardaraj was born in 1930.

In 1922, he was nominated as president of the Ganjam District Board. In the succeeding terms when elections for the post came up he won uncontested till the year 1937.

He was elected a Member of Madras Legislative Council in 1923 and continued there till 1936. He was nominated as a member of the National Defence Council of India in 1939 when the security of the country was at the top of the agenda and the world was amidst the horrors of the second World War. His services in the National Defence Council were highly commendable.

As President of Ganjam District Board, he laid stress on two very important items : the Communication and Education. Under his leadership, Bridges over all the Rivers and Rivulets of the district were constructed, Roads were upgraded. Ganjam was the only district where communication became smooth and remote corners became accessible. The District Board opened Primary, M.E., M.V. and High Schools in all corners for the education of the rural poor.

Hardly had he girded his loins, when came the challenge to meet with and convince the Philip-Duff Committee which was set up in 1924 to ascertain the attitude of the Oriyas under the Madras Presidency towards merger with Orissa. The appointment of the committee brought a ray of hope and Raja Ramachandra was sincerely seized with the work of organising people for meeting with the committee and registering their positive consent. Mr. C.L. Philip and Mr. A.C. Duff came to Rambha, stayed in the palace from 17th to 21st December 1924 as guests of the Rajasahib. A well attended public meeting was organised at Khallikotegarh and the Committee

was greatly impressed to observe the eagerness of the people for merger of Ganjam with Orissa.

The report of the Committee was in favour of amalgamation. In a significant opinion, the committee stated that Oriya influence prevailed to the north of Narsanpeta and Ganjam, and from Tekkali to Khallikote should go to Orissa. Before that, Mr. Lassen in his *Indische Alterthumschinde* had placed the linguistic boundary of Orissa at Chicacole while W.W. Hunter fixed the Oriya boundary line at Ichapur.

The movement for unification of Orissa was relentlessly carried on. Stalwarts like Sri Krishnachandra Gajapati, Raja Gourachandra Deb, Sashibhusan Rath, Niranjan Patnaik were at the fore front. In such an august galaxy, Raja Ramachandra Mardraj carved out a special place for him and was immediately recognised as the most resourceful leader.

The Simon Commission was appointed to review the functioning of India Act 1919. Sir John Simon came to India with an open mind. But the Congress decided to boycott the Royal Commission. The leaders of Utkal Union Conference saw in the Commission a golden opportunity. A high delegation of the body welcomed the Commission at Patna Railway Station when others were showing black flags. The delegation met the Commission and placed before them the just demands of the Oriyas. The Members of the Commission were well pleased and fully convinced and expressed favourable opinion for the formation of the new state of Orissa. As recommended by them a Boundary Commission under the Chairmanship of S.P.O' Donnel was constituted with T.R. Phukan of Assam and H.P. Meheta of Bombay as its Members. The Commission visited different places and came to Gopalpur on 15th December 1931. Raja Mardraj helped the Commission with

full support. But perhaps due to contrivance of forces at Madras, there came unfortunately a dismal report for the Oriyas. They, most unjudiciously, recommended for exclusion of areas south to Berhampur, Parlakhemundy and Jeypore Estates from the proposed Orissa State. At this, the hopes of the Oriyas were greatly shattered. The Maharaja of Paralakhemundy and Raja Ramachandra Mardraj were taken aback. There arose a strong public opinion against this senseless report throughout Orissa.

The Commission fixed the boundary in such a strange and impractical manner that the line passed through villages dividing streets, houses and water sources and even to-day, disputes over the boundary problem in 63 border villages are waiting disposal in the Supreme Court of India. The decisions of the Commission were so partial and superfluous and unwanted that one can never dream of.

When the O'Donnel Commission report was debated in the Madras Legislative Council, Raja Ramachandra Mardraj as a prominent member of the body strongly opposed to its recommendations placing figures and evidences. But nothing just was to be expected from the Government at Madras as they were known to be standing tooth and nail against the formation of Orissa from the days of Rishley.

On 21st August 1932 a Special meeting of Utkal Sammilani was held at Berhampur for discussion of the O'Donnel Report. Raja Ramachandra Mardraj while inaugurating the Conference forcefully emphasized on the merger of entire Oriya tracts in Madras Presidency with Orissa.

Earlier Maharaja Krishnachandra Gajapati gave a marked philip to the Oriya cause in the Round Table Conference at London and was able

enough to get the announcement for creation of a separate province for the Oriyas.

Raja Ramachandra Mardraj always held that the new province was to be formed as per the recommendations of Philip-Duff Committee and anything less was unacceptable. In December 1932 Raja Ramachandra Mardraj was invited to London as a representative of the zamindars of south India for the 3rd Round Table Conference. He snatched this opportunity and appropriated everything out of the same. In the Round Table Conference, his arguments were forceful, to the point and data based. He was listened to with attention and concern. To augment his approach for earning the sympathy of British Government he hosted the famous Orissa Banquet on 12th January 1933 and invited Sir Samuel Hoare, the Secretary of State for India to grace the same.

Sir Samuel Hoare, giving full support for the separate Orissa province, had declared in the Round Table Conference on 24th December 1932 "Basing our views upon the reports of those enquiries on what appears to be a very general agreement both in India and Britain, we have come definitely to the conclusion that Sindh and Orissa should both be separate provinces."

Sir Samuel was well pleased to be at the Banquet and there was all indication of his full support for Orissa in his short speech before the dignitaries and august participants. On receiving this grand news, the great Maharaja Krishnachandra Gajapati was overjoyed and cabled to Raja Ramachandra Mardraj from Orissa : "My dear Khallikote, Hearty congratulations on your most wonderful and historical achievements for the Oriyas."

After the deliberations in the Round Table Conferences, the British Government constituted the Joint Parliamentary Committee to initiate further

steps in the matter. Raja Ramachandra Mardraj appeared before the J.P.C. in 1933 and again placed the just cause before them.

The Government of India Act 1935 was adopted, in Clause 289 of which the formation of Orissa as a separate province was provided for.

The much awaited Orissa of our dreams was born on 1st April 1936 with six districts of Cuttack, Puri, Balesore, Sambalpur, Ganjam and Koraput. In the hall of Ravenshaw College, Sir Courtney Terrel, the Chief Justice of Patna High Court administered the oath of Office to Sir John Austin Hubback as the first Governor.

In spite of vigorous attempts at all levels and consistent movements, Oriya tracts like Takkali, Tarala, Manjusha, Jalantar, Budharsingi, Ichapur Udyan and 2/3rd of Paralakhemundy Zamindary could not come to Orissa. About six lakh disappointed Oriyas remained in the Madras Presidency. Their hopes and aspirations are still not understood and taken care of.

In the year 1937, the first Orissa Legislative Assembly was formed to which Raja Mardraj was elected as a member. He became a Member of Indian Central Legislature from 1945-51. He was elected to Orissa Assembly from Khallikote Constituency in 1951 and from Kodala in 1957. He was a member of the Orissa cabinet from 1957-61.

He earned the title of Raja in 1934, Raja Bahadur in 1937 and Sir in 1945 as a mark of distinction from the British Government.

The Raja Sahib was a very good host. The Grand Rambha Palace had the privilege of having Mahatma Gandhi in December, 1927; Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, U.N. Dhebar, Lalbahadur Sastri in May 1955 and Dr. Radhakrishnan in 1958. The British Governor Generals and Governors also paid visit to this palace. Here was

born the Utkal Sammilani which worked for formation of Orissa. The Snodgrass House is definitely a National Monument and a Centre of Pilgrimage for all Orissans.

The great Raja Sahib breathed his last on 23rd January 1963. His sad demise brought tears in the eyes of the people of Orissa. The loss has been irreparable -

To-day, he is no longer with us.
But, He shall always be amongst us,
In our hearts, in our thoughts
And in the legacies of the smiles of our children
For whom his love and care was unbounded.

Rajabhadur Ramachandra Mardaraj had significant contribution for the development of Education in Orissa. He was instrumental in the development of Khallikota College and in the establishment of Hinjilicut, R.C. M. College and

the College of Fine Arts. He was a dynamic leader with full of creative energy. His wide administrative and political experience and competence was a source of strength and inspiration for people who worked with him. He dedicated his life fully for the people of Orissa and worked for their welfare. It is for all of us to consecrate ourselves for the idea and ideal he stood for.

And where shall we find his likes; in faith, in patriotism, in trust, in patience, in honour and in resolute courage -- ???

Did such one once walk this Earth,
And did he in our land take birth ?
With pride the answer rings out loud,
But would he of us be as proud ?

Gourisankar Misra lives at Vanivihar (Aska).

STATE GOES TO PANCHAYAT POLLS

The State Election Commission (SEC) has issued notification on the election schedule to the three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions on December 26. As per the schedule, all direct elections will be held in five phases on February 13, 15, 17, 19 and 21. A total of 2.36 crore voters of the rural areas will elect as many as 87,542 ward members, 6234 Sarpanchs, 6233 Panchayat Samiti members and 854 Zilla Parishad members. After the declaration of results of the direct elections, indirect elections for the post of Naib Sarpanch, Chairperson of Panchayat Samiti and President of Zilla Parishad will be held. With this notification, the model code of conduct came into force in the state from December 26 and will be in force till February 21.

For the first time, the SEC has imposed ceiling on election expenditures of the candidates fixing at Rs.75,000 for each Zilla Parishad member. As for Sarpanch and member of Panchayat Samiti, the ceiling is maximum Rs.30,000. The observers appointed by the SEC would look into the expenditures of the candidates.

The SEC has also imposed restrictions on the use of vehicle for campaign purposes. The Zilla Parishad candidates can use maximum two jeeps or cars and four two-wheelers, where as the panchayat samiti member and sarpanch can make use of maximum one jeep or car and two two-wheelers. The candidates have to inform about the type of vehicle, registration numbers, name of the owners in written to sub-collector or B.D.O, as the case may be, before using them.