

## Nayagarh and Prajamandal Andolan

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Orissa could not stay isolated for long from the impact of non-cooperation movement. Just as the movement reverberated throughout India, its echoes were felt in Orissa too. A hitherto unknown excitement entered into the innermost feelings of the people of Orissa. The programme chalked out at the national level, was implemented and followed in Orissa too. Leaders like Gopabandhu Choudhury, Gopabandhu Das, Harekrishna Mahatab and other Prajamandal leaders made valiant efforts to make the movement successful in Orissa with the co-operation of all, the movement assumed great dynamics in Orissa. The Prajamandal movement was one of the most important milestones in India's freedom struggle. It created an overwhelming consciousness among the people of Orissa. In the field of prohibition and manufacturing of Swadeshi goods and their distribution, the Prajamandal movement was successful to a very large extent. The visit of Gandhiji to Orissa at this opportune moment helped Orissa in merging with the national mainstream.

In the closing part of 19<sup>th</sup> century, uprisings (meli) were organized in various states- Ratan Meli of 1863 and Dharani Meli of 1893 in Keonjhar, Kondh Meli of 1882 in Kalahandi, disturbances in Bamanghati (Mayurbhanj) in 1866 and Nayagarh Meli of 1893 etc. The first three decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed frequent uprisings- 5 in Bamra, 3 in Talcher, 1 in Mayurbhanj, 1 in Dhenkanal, 1 in Nilgiri and 1 dangerous Kondh uprising in Daspalla. All those

uprisings were suppressed brutally by the States being supported by the paramount British power.

In course of time, the sporadic uprisings took the shape of popular democratic movements with the formation of "All India States People" conference in December 1927. It had the objective of initiating "the necessary reforms" in the states with the collective opinion of the people. In 1929, Lahore Congress adopted a resolution, urging the princess to grant responsible government to people. In 1931, the Orissa States People's conference organized its first session at Cuttack under presidentship of Bhubanananda Das. The conference enquired about people's grievances and asked the Ruling Chiefs to consider the demand of representative governments. However, the chief resorted to repressive measures and suppressed the movement. The suppression and anti-people measures in turn, paved the path for more organized popular movements. The two years i.e. 1938 and 1939 witnessed culmination of the movement.

After the formation of the congress ministry, the Congress leaders encouraged the people of the Feudatory States and Prajamandals or People's Associations were formed in a number of Feudatory States of Orissa. But the Rajas were not prepared to recognize such organisations and have out- rightly rejected the demands of the people. As a result, wide-spread unrest took place in several states. The leaders of the Praja Mandals presented their charter of demands to

the ruling chiefs and claimed the abolition of forced labour, forced contributions and the collection of different abwabs (illegal taxes) from the poor people. They also demanded some civil liberties like the right to association, right to organize meetings, right to publish newspapers, right to use forest products and the right over their agricultural holdings.

The Prajamandal in Nayagarh was constituted on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1938 under the presidentship of Narayan Nanda. Actually in Nayagad, the fire of freedom movement was first started from village Odagaon and gradually spread to Bahadajhola village, which became the centre of all activities when the Ruling Chief of Nayagad introduced the monopoly of betel by giving permission to a trader to start betel business in Nayagad. As a protest, the people started quitting consuming betel. 99% of the whole population left this habit. They promised not to consume it until the chief withdrew the monopoly of betel trade. The leaders including Narayan Nanda were arrested arbitrarily and put in jail. This "Pana Barjana" Andolana gave a tremendous boost to the freedom struggle. Undoubtedly it made the ruling Chief think about their future course of action. The Ruler freed Narayana Nanda.

A meeting was held at Dangibandha village of Ganjam District, under the Congress worker, Sri Suryanarayan Pattanaik. The historic decision of formation of Prajamandal was undertaken here only. The Prajamandal in Nayagarh was constituted on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1938 under the Presidentship of Narayan Nanda. It submitted charter of demands to the Durbar securing political and civil liberties for the people and their involvement in responsible Government. On 27 December 1938, the Prajamandal convened a meeting in the headquarters of the State and resolved to agitate until the fulfillment of their demands. Thereupon, the Raja arrested the

Prajamandal workers, which resulted in the gather of thousands of people in front of the palace on 30 December demanding the release of their leaders. The Raja immediately released them and promised to fulfil their demands. But the insurgents were not satisfied with the promise and threatened to launch Satyagraha unless a proclamation conceding their demands was immediately made. Apprehending great tension, the Raja sought the assistance of the Political Agent, Major Bazelgette. Major Bazelgette immediately responded to the request of the Raja and reach Nayagarh to observe the situation. While he was dealing with the situation of Nayagarh, the ruler of Ranpur sought his help on 5 January 1939. Since the situation in Ranpur was more explosive than that of Nayagarh, Bazelgette had to make the fateful journey to Ranpur where he succumbed to the fury of the violent crowd in the same evening.

The murder of the Political Agent in Ranpur and the subsequent terrorization in the State, shocked and unnerved the Prajamandal workers of Nayagarh so much so that they voluntarily suspended their Satyagraha without awaiting the directives from the Orissa States Peoples' Conference. Sarangadhar Das, in his press statement reported that after the departure of the Military Intelligence Bureau the Durbar resorted to victimization of Prajamandal workers on false charges and the accused were either sent to prison or made to pay fines. The Raja also issued a circular prohibiting subscriptions to the Prajamandal. The Prajamandal protested against the circular but did not launch any movement. The members merely boycotted the Advisory Council set up by the Raja and devoted themselves to the constructive programmes of the National Congress like cotton planting, spinning and weaving.

Even this ghastly murder was condemned by top Congress leaders like Subhash Chandra

Bose, the Congress President, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Biswanath Das, the premier of Orissa. Gandhiji expressed his deep concern on the incident and desired for a thorough enquiry about the matter. The Congress Working Committee passed a resolution condemning the killing of the British Political Agent. However, the Working Committee welcomed the awakening among the people of the States.

On the other hand, the British authorities adopted very strong repressive measures against the people of Ranpur. Military force almost seized the State. Armed forces were brought from distant parts of India to suppress the movement for freedom. Many people were arrested in Ranpur. Raghu Nath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida, two ring leaders were hanged. The ruler of the State was deposed and the Political Department took over the administration. Such widespread movements and violent occurrences in the Feudatory States of Orissa roused the Congress leaders in the province to greater responsibilities. All Orissa Garjat Day was observed on 29<sup>th</sup> October, 1938. Some Congress leaders led by Naba Krishna Choudhury were arrested in Dhenkanal. Due to some legal restrictions the Congress workers could not help the movement in the states openly but extended only moral support to them.

It was not possible on the part of the Congress Government of Orissa to close its eyes completely to the atrocities committed by the princely rulers. The Premier Biswanath Dash issued an appeal to the rulers on 12 November, 1938 and urged upon them to accept the just demands of the people to restore peace and tranquility in the states. In reply to the appeal the Raja of Sarraikala, the President of the Association of the Ruling Chiefs of the Eastern States Agency alleged the Government of Orissa for such happenings.

The widespread agitation launched by the Praja Mandal created law and order situation. The Princess Protection Act conferred extraordinary powers on the police to arrest any one within the province of Orissa without a warrant. Besides this extraordinary powers, the rulers demanded for the extradition of Praja Mandal leaders who had taken shelter for their safety in the province so that they might be given exemplary punishment for their revolutionary activities. The British authorities supported this move but the Congress party could approve of it. Subsequently the Government of Orissa released a few prisoners of the States who were in the Provincial jail at Cuttack unconditionally and rejected the extradition warrants issued against them.

Thus Prajamandal Movement in Orissa had become virulent. The uniqueness of the movement in Orissa was that it not only exposed the mistake of the ruling chiefs but also at the same time exposed the British Rule in India and inspired the people to merge with the national mainstream to teach the British a lesson. The movement undoubtedly was yet another milestone in India's freedom struggle. It brought about a rejuvenation and determination among the people of Orissa which made them leap into the forefront of the struggle. It became apparent that glorious sun of the British Empire was indeed about to set in India. The welcome notes for the declining fortunes of Great Britain were truly sung by these moments.

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