

The Middle Class Intelligentsia and the Question of Peasant Leadership in Colonial Odisha: A Case Study of the Praja Pratinidhi Sabha (1912-13 AD)

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Abstract: To lead the peasants, often dubbed as exploited, politically segregated, economically unorganized class is not an easy task at all. It seems like a herculean task when we talk about the question of peasant mobilization within colonial framework due to numerous objective as well as subjective reasons. Colonial Odisha (Orissa) being a part of colonized Indian subcontinent bore identical symptoms of colonial exploitation and gradual pauperization of rural gentry in post 1803 period, the year of British occupation of Odisha. The faulty administrative policies of colonial masters, territorial dismemberment of Odisha as well as prolonged exploitation of masses gradually created indigestion. Failed with traditional methods of protest to snatch legitimate rights from a government based on western prototype of constitutionalism, the poor illiterate raiyats approached legal political avenue (representative government), the best instruments in the hands of educated intelligentsia, to get their right fulfilled. The formation of Bihar and Orissa presidency coupled with the beginning of the process of Tenancy legislation in 1913 brought forth the question of raiyat's interest within newly formed Legislative Assembly. Therefore this article has made an earnest effort to find out the answers of (i) why did raiyats of colonial Odisha want their representation within assembly? (ii) How was the Praja Pratinidhi sabha formed? (iii) Who were the leading figures behind peasants' mobilization and what were their social bases? (iv) How far did the Praja Pratinidhi sabha help alleviating the problems?

Keywords: Leadership, mobilization, Praja, Pratinidhi, raiyat, sabha, tenancy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a complex capitalistic farming system, the proletariats—the peasants and the workers—usually remains in the giving ends and receive the least and whatsoever they gain for their productivity, would only be possible by strong class mobilization or a prolonged struggle of the sufferer, albeit their heterogeneous organic compositions. Peasants, being an inseparable part in that complex capitalistic farming system, are destined to fulfill its legitimate rights, according to Karl Marx, through prolonged 'class struggle'. This prolonged class struggle of the peasantry usually needs a strong organization, able leadership and a clear cut class ideology. Despite the never ending controversies among different schools of historian as to peasants mobilization and their leadership¹, it seems somehow clear that the peasantry, due to numerous structural as well as psychological shortcomings i.e., its professional operation from the fellow mate on the

¹ The Nationalist historians hold the view that due to many organic shortcomings the peasant leaders are necessarily from nationalist ranks and of middle class intelligentsia during colonial period; The Marxist historians view that it was the Marxist/socialist leaders who organized the peasants in India along class line, so the peasant leaders were necessarily from socialist back ground during colonial period in India; The subaltern historians holds the view that leaders who mobilized peasants vertically were of elitist background and their means of mobilization were the adaption of British parliamentary Democracy or institutions, while the leaders who mobilized that subaltern class(peasants) horizontally were of non-elitist background and the means were traditional organization of kinship and territoriality.

basis of place or working and nature of labor engaged, its living in scattered villages in a dispersed way, its complex and heterogeneous composition as a class lacks self-mobilization, objectivity in aims and clear cut class consciousness. In the words of Marx, they 'cannot represent themselves and must be represented' (Mukharjee 2004: 422). Eric wolf contends that the peasants often requires outside leaders for their struggle because of certain characteristics of peasants – first, a peasants' work is activated alone on his land, secondly, the tyranny of work weights heavily upon them (Wolf 1970: 294). Besides it, they were mostly illiterate, ignorant, back-ward looking and were chained in caste-ridden norms. The struggle of peasantry is not individualistic, rather collective because of complexity and homogeneity of issues of the struggle. That is why a class-based organization, which could provide the platform, leadership, ideology and the line of action, is practically indispensable for the peasantry to fight for their interests.

The occupation of Odisha² (then Orissa) in 1803 by the British East India Company symbolized the introduction of the colonial sponsored capitalistic economic system by dint of numerous administrative policies it adopted in the field of society, economy, and polity in general and of land revenue in particular. The process was hastened and being complicated in post-1857 period as it entered era of financial capitalism. The colonial government subsequently brought about a complete transformation of the pre-existing feudal economy (Asiatic Mode of production) and social relationship (Desai 2008: 25). Of all those policies directed to establish a controlled capitalistic system, the British land revenue administration proved to be the most obnoxious one to Odisha economy and society as it negatively affected her poor agriculturists and led to the complete crippling down of agrarian backbone. The major issues that emerged as the resultant forces of this gradual transformation were sufficient to create adequate space for the subordinated class to play important role in different parts of Odisha. The frequent land revenue settlements, rigid collection procedures, frequent rent hikes, oppression of the landlords by means of collecting illegal dues (*abwabs*), existence of so many intermediaries between the actual tiller and the state, high interest rate (*sudha*) charged by the local moneylenders (*Mahajanas, Shahukars*), coupled with a faulty as well as expensive judicial system led the agrarian community to rally round the local or native leadership from time to time in the form of *meli, bidroha or andolan* etc (Nanda 2008: 272).

Throughout the 19th century there were numerous instances of peasants' risings all over India. Odisha, being a part of it, also witnessed the same phenomena. However, like the all-Indian trends, these peasants' movements were regionally confined; lacked well organized leadership and a class ideology up to the period when modern educated intelligentsia took up the peasants' issues. As a matter of fact that these movements nearly failed to achieve their aims and objectives due to the absence of any exclusive peasants' organization as well as a band of dedicated peasants' leaders. Surprisingly, Odisha excelled other provinces of India in respect of peasant mobilization and peasants' understanding of the strength of the bourgeoisie leadership.

Numerous questions that comes spontaneously here are like, why did peasants start relying on the middle class intelligentsia for their struggle? And, why did the intelligentsia afford their help to the peasant? In order to find the answer of these questions, it seems desirable to have a rudimentary idea on the context and timeframe of the peasant struggle in Odisha. The peasant, due to a radical change in the process of agrarian production and land relationship which marked the replacement of semi feudal economy by hybrid type of capitalism (Desai 2008: 30-35) failed to snatch their legitimate rights by applying the 'first resorts'--- foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats traditional techniques of struggle of the subjugated class (Scott 2008: 34) from a state built by sheered force along western prototype of rule of law. On the other hand the colonial government introduced a series of reformative measures to ally and quench the newly emerged educated intelligentsia in the form of legislature and other state apparatuses, where they would be given opportunity to practise their imbibed knowledge of western liberalism and rule of law. The whole colonial legal mechanism stood outside of the peasants' autonomous domain (Guha 1983: 4-12). With those few changes, the nature and scope of peasant struggle came to a loggerhead leading to the creation of space for intelligentsia to intervene. Now the poor peasants came to realise the futility of their application of traditional techniques of struggle and to understand the efficacy of redressing their difficulties within colonial legal framework with the help of educated intelligentsia. Secondly, with the introduction of popular representation in the legislative-cum-executive bodies---central as well as provincial level---the support and concurrence of majority seemed to be inevitable for leaders to entry into them. Thus a situation of

² The territory that the then Odisha (Orissa) comprised were the coastal districts of Cuttack, Balesore, Puri, Anugul and Sambalpur, while other regions of Orissa were under either Madras Presidency or Bengal presidency. However, the regions of Odisha that this study narrates comprised only the three coastal districts—Cuttack, Balesore and Puri.

'bounded reciprocity' came to dominate the socio-economic and political life of the subjugated and the elevated class/community. Again, It was not surprising at all that the educated intelligentsia of India/Odisha, hitherto independent of class issues while actively involving in the regional and national politics, started taking part in the proletariat struggle, because the proletariats, especially, peasant, Marx argues, could not win over their enemy in their struggle in a capitalised state of economy unless and until the bourgeoisie involved in it³.

The awakening among the mass as to the real picture or exploitive mentality were set in with the coming of those numerous subjective and objective transformations. The social basis of the leaders involved in this noble mission were the bourgeois/modern educated intelligentsia whose involvements in peasants cause were substantiated by Indigo, Pabna, Deccan peasant movements of 19th century (Chandra et al. 1989: 50-57). The second aspects of peasants mobilization vis-à-vis then educated intelligentsia were the peculiar methods they adopted to redress the raiyat grievances. The situation of the active intervention of the intelligentsias of heterogeneous economic bases in the peasants' cause spontaneously came with some changes occurred in Odisha politics. Alike all Indian scenario, the annulment of partition plan of Bengal by the Viceroy had a propound effect in Odisha, especially in the three undivided Districts of Cuttack, Balesore and Puri which were under the administrative control of then Bengal presidency since 1803. But the creation of the Province of Bihar and Orissa (Odisha) through dismemberment of the province of Bengal on 1 April 1912 created a political as well as administrative vacuum. Secondly, the possibility of legislations on tenancy connected with the vital interests of millions of poor raiyats seemed to be feasible and inevitable as that legislation was stalled half-way in the former united Bengal presidency (Mishra 2007: 160). Thirdly, the dominance of landed gentry within the legislative body and strong bases of Zamindars and landlords and their lobby outside the legislature compelled the educated intelligentsia to think of raiyat interests. It would, they realised soon, only be possible if any of the pro-raiyat leaders entered the lawmaking body and would support the raiyat cause within it. In that way, the intervention of educated intelligentsia became inevitable on the question of raiyat's representation in the assembly (*Utkal Dipika*, 28 December 1912). By that time, the Oriya movement was at its offing stage and was more vigorous in three costal districts of Odisha. The impact of that growing awareness too crept into the mofussalies (agrarian communities), which created the notion that the major issues of the peasants were to be dealt with legally through reforms to be steered by their political representatives. But it was not so easy task as it seems today as the ugly nexus of Zamindar-Shahukar -Sarakar was heavy and influencing. That legal avenue, being alien to the peasants, needed the active participation of the newly educated intelligentsias of the time, who could, they believed, give timely and required efforts for their cause. In nutshell, the peasant community of Odisha, then, needed a strong leadership and an organization to redress their grievances.

2. FORMATION OF THE PRAJA⁴ PRATINIDHI SABHA

Here questions comes was not there any organizations to ventilate the peasants (raiylats) cause in colonial Odisha at that time? What was the role of Utkal Union Conference (UUC) in the raiylats cause? Why peasants' mobilization was at its ebb during that period? , how did the situation lead to the formation of Praja Pratinidhi Sabha? There had hardly been any specific organization to demand peasants' rights or fair-play in terms of peasant perspectives in colonial Odisha due to low level of mass mobilization and unstructured middle class intelligentsia. Again due to narrow social basis of the UUC, its tilt towards the Congress—a non-interferer of class struggles then—,coincided with liberals' realization that the British gave priority to people's pressure rather than to reason ,the leaders of UUC wanted to solve all the emerging problems through mass movements (Achary 2008: 43).

In such an atmosphere surrounded by numerous peasants' difficulties, government's attitudes to the proprietor class, strong hold of landlords and the emerging controversies as to Tenancy Reform in Odisha, the educated intelligentsias of the time took up the peasants' cause and tried to provide a strong leadership to the half-fed peasants organizationally and in person. The net result of those efforts of leaders was the formation of democratically graded organization i.e., the Praja

³ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto> (Accessed on 17 February, 2015)

⁴ The term *Paraja* is a local Oriya term sometimes pronounced as *Paraja*, *Praja* or *Poroja*. It appears to be derived from the Sanskrit word *Praja*, which literally means the common people, i.e. subjects as distinct from the rulers called the Raja. The term *Paraja* also has another meaning in the Oriya language, namely the tenant (peasant) or *Raiyat*. Again Pritish Achary holds the view that *Praja* here refers to ryots (Achary 2008: 43), while Amal Mishra too gives identical nomenclature (Mishra 2007: 161).

Pratinidhi Sabha. The 'Issue' that compelled these leaders to organize the *raiyats* (peasants) along class line was who would represent the voices of poor *raiyats* lived in *moffusalties*, in the newly created Bihar and Odisha Legislative Assembly in the passage of the much debated Orissa Tenancy Legislation in 1913, a comprehensive measure on tenancy reforms whose objects were mainly to consolidate, simplify, and rearrange the greater part of the statute law relating to landlord and tenant, with efforts of giving greater benefits to the poor ryots (*PLCB&O* 1913: 9-10). It being anti-landlord to some extent was vigorously opposed by the *Zamindars* and their representatives. To find out answer to this question, the Praja Pratinidhi Sabha was founded at Cuttack on Sunday on 10th July 1912 by the leaders like Madhusudan Das, Nilakantha Das, Radhanath Roy, Gopabandhu Das and leaders of more than hundred and fifty villages or *Mahals*. The Association would consist of members elected by the villages and assemble at Cuttack to hear the opinion of political leaders and communicate their grievances. It would be a sort of political school where the political view of the leaders of the country would be explained to them in the language they understood (*The Star of Utkal* 20 July, 1912).

The inaugural meeting of the Praja Pratinidhi Sabha was held on 14th July 1912 in the Cuttack library Hall at 4 p.m. It was attended by about seven hundred men, of who two hundred and fifty one were elected representatives from *mofussil* villages of Cuttack and Puri districts. This Assembly sat in Indian fashion on carpets spread on the floor. The proceeding was commenced by reciting the Sanskrit hymns by Radhanath Roy. By proposal introduced by Shyamsundar Sathia, the representative at Alam Chand Bazar of Cuttack and seconded by the members present, Madhusudan Das became the president. The following resolutions were passed in the inaugural meeting viz., (i) Madhusudan Das was to be appointed as Secretary-cum-Treasurer of the Association whereas Gopabandhu Das and Nilakantha Das were to be Assistance Secretary respectively (ii) Seven active sensible modest men having sound notion of loyalty to Government were to be employed under the guidance and supervision of the Secretary to disseminate the objectives of the Association among the people in *moffusalties* (*The Star of Utkal* 1912). The early leaders tried tooth and nail to arouse the people and politicize the mass through various means. In an advertisement published in the *Star of Utkal* dated 7th September 1912 Madhusudan Das, in the capacity of Secretary of PPS requested the villages "to appoint their representatives having intention to serve the country without any pay". By the end of September the total members of PPS were 633 who were elected by 173 *samities*.

On 16th September 1912, the Praja Pratinidhi Sabha discussed in long and breadth how officials showed callousness and became unsympathetic towards those *raiyats* who were starving and facing shortage of food. As a result of which they were caused to death while the cause for death diverted elsewhere by greedy officials (*The Utkal Dipika* 7 September 1912).

On 29 September 1912, the second meeting of Praja Pratinidhi Sabha was held at *Kanika* Royal palace with 450 representatives and 700 people in total. In that meeting Madhusudan Das explained the present members that it was a matter of great sorrow that no representatives from the 2 lacks poor *raiyats* who were the real strength of society was in the Legislative Assembly despite the presence of the representatives of *Zamindari*, Municipality and District Boards". He also uttered that "the poor *raiyats* would get their justice if the real grievances of the poor were really communicated to the government". The meeting was presided over by Pundits Vasudeva Kabyatirtha, a representative from Vingarpur of Puri districts (*The Star of Utkal* 2 October 1912).

The second meeting of PPS passed many resolutions as to sending PPS representatives to the Bihar-Orissa Legislative Assembly who would advocate from *raiyat's* part in the course of debate and passing of the Orissa Tenancy Legislation Bill, which could not be passed in the former Bengal Legislative Council. Apart from it, the members of PPS requested "his majesty Lt. Governor of Bihar and Orissa to give permission to PPS to nominate a non-official raiyat member to the Assembly (*Utkal Dipika* 2 October 1912).

Accordingly Madhusudan Das was nominated to the newly formed Bihar-Orissa Legislative Assembly as a representative of the poor *raiyats* of Odisha. On 20 January 1913 the government caused to present the Orissa Tenancy Bill, a comprehensive measure on tenancy reforms. When the debate was on in the Assembly as to the proposed Bill among the official and non-official members of Landlords' Society of Orissa and others, the PPS presented a memorandum to the authorities in which much stress was given on the following 'issues' e.g., (a) to ban forthwith the illegal fees collected by the *zamindars* regarding reclamation of waste and deserted lands (b) not to give consideration money to the *zamindars* at the time of transfer of an occupancy holding which the peasants had every rights to do, (c) to restrain the *zamindars* from

indulging in extra-impositions or *abwabs*, and (d) to treat as abominable the provision on commutation of kind rent to cash rent (Mishra 2007: 161).

Madhusudan Das, as a representatives of the PPS as well as poor *raiyyats* of Odisha, mobilized public opinion as to the loopholes of proposed Orissa Tenancy Bill 1912 through sending memorandum to various authority connected with the Bill, personally visiting and meeting the Lt. Governor of Bihar and Orissa as well as writing on various newspapers like *Utkal Dipika*, *Star of Utkal* etc (Mohanty 1972: 48). Many fore front leaders including Madhusudan Das were sharply opposed to the move of Raja of Kanika regarding the clause of transferring occupancy holdings while debate was going on within the Assembly (Patra 1979: 23). As a result of the tireless efforts of Madhusudan Das, Orissa Tenancy Legislation Bill became an Act on 29 May 1913 giving the *raiyyats* a good deal of benefits--the Act clearly defined the who the tenants were; rights to occupancy were granted to all those who remained who remained under big *Zamindars* for 12 years; an occupancy *raiyyat* was to pay rent at fair and equitable cost to the zamindars, who had the power to bring a legal suit for realization of arrears of rent; the right of the occupancy-*raiyyat* to transfer his holding was acknowledged; enabled the *raiyyat* to approach the collector for settling a fair rent on the reclaimed land; illegalized the right of *Zamindars* to recover more than half of the produce of land at the time of harvest from the tenants, and many more (*The Orissa Tenancy Act, 1913*). With the passage of much awaited Tenancy Legislation Bill, the activities of the Sabha came to an end and with that a memorable episode of Orissa history witnessing the *raiyyat* mobilization under middle class intelligentsia too came to end.

3. CONCLUSION

The middle class intelligentsia was the eye-opener of modern age as being educated, exposed to outer world and had wider ramification for their ability and capacity. It was they who brought a radical change in the socio-economic and political scenario of the then Odisha badly victimized by British colonial policies, in short span of time. Alike other parts of Indian subcontinents middle class intelligentsias provided their valuable support to the poor *raiyyats* in the time when neither did the *raiyyats* have any exclusive organizational forum to redress their grievances nor did they have the required expertise, coincided with the ambiguous stance of the UUC and congress leaders to *raiyyats* cause. The leadership provided to the *raiyyats* through the Praja Pratinidhi Sabha in the question of representation of *raiyyats* in newly formed assembly had its origin from well-to-do families, but not among the *raiyyats* itself. For examples, Madhusudan Das belonged to a socially and economically elevated family of Satyabhamapur with higher education from Cuttack and Calcutta, besides being a practitioner of Law. Gopabandhu Das from Puri was educated in Puri and Cuttack, lawyer by profession, and actively took part in swadeshi movement. On the other hand, Nilakantha Das was too educated in Puri and Calcutta, and a teacher by profession. Following the toes of their Bengali and United Province counterparts in the matter of peasant struggle, the educated intelligentsia rose to the time and objectified the pro-poor trait in a remarkable way. Of all those efforts of middle class intelligentsia towards mass mobilization against colonial segregation, the formation of PPS was one of the remarkable episodes. In nutshell, the performances of the PPS as a forum of the *raiyyats* and the leadership provided to the peasants or people of mofussil by Madhusudan Das, Gopabandhu Das, Nilakantha Das and many others could well be assessed from various angles--first, they aroused the *raiyyats* residing in country side (*mofussil*) regarding their rights and along that line mobilized them; secondly, the leaders created PPS as a common platform for *raiyyats* to disseminate the ideas and way for redressing their grievances, Thirdly, the leaders opened the way to fight against the *zamindars* and government authority as could be seen in the constant conflicts between the PPS and Landlord's society during the passage of Orissa Tenancy Legislation of 1913; fourthly, the mobilization of *raiyyats* by PPS and concerned leaders proved the thesis that "docile and passive peasantry could well be organized and mobilized by the outsider many a occasions".

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