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THE ROLE OF INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS IN ORISSA POLITICS 1937-1950

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Abstract:

The history of freedom struggle in India is a unique, long and complex story. The main battles were fought through mass movement but the formation of Indian National Congress and to counteract some imperialistic policies and programmes through it has help to arouse national consciousness in all hearts of Indian peoples along with it also greatly impacted to regional states, among which Orissa was one of them. After introduction of Government Indian Act 1935 Indian leaders were fully utilized this act to expose the evil designs of the colonial power and to present our demands for constitution advancement and self-rule. Through this act the first congress ministry was formed in Orissa and it lasted for about 28 months. After coalition ministry that again congress brought to power in Orissan politics from 1946 and it was in power when the goal of independence was reached. This kind of national consciousness help to the Orissan leaders to integration of the feudatory states in a "United Utkal". As a result, the current work examines the Indian National Congress's position in Orissan politics from a wider perspective and shows how the role and accomplishments of the provincial congress ministry helped the Orissan speaking people to unite in a one territory and free themselves from the foreign yoke.

Keywords: Congress, Coalition, Portfolios, Ministry, Election, Descendant, Factionalism, Manifesto.

Introduction

The study of the Orissa politics cannot be complete without studying the role of Indian National Congress in the politics of the state. The party which was founded by Allan Octavian Hume in December 28, 1885 had a great importance in shaping the politics of the Indian sub-continent and that of the state of Orissa. It was under this organisation that the Indian National freedom Movement was carried out against the British colonialism. Its first session was held on December 25, 1885 at Bombay. Womesh Chandra Banerjee was elected its first president. The first session of Congress was attended by 72 representatives representing different parts of India. However, its operation remained mainly confined to the areas that were directly under the British control known as the British India. It considered it politically inexpedient to get into the princely states till the beginning of the State People's Conference in 1927. The Indian National Congress was not prepared to give up its official policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the native states on the grounds that the states were independent entities under the British law. It thought that its interference could damage the causes of the states. Under this policy, Congress had debarred the peoples of the states to organise

and establish the congress units in the states, though they were free to become the members of the Congress and its committees. However the Congress began to change its policy in 1935 following the birth of All India States People's Conference in 1927. In its annual session at Calcutta in 1935 Congress announced to extend full support to the princely states and finally in the Haripur session of February 1938 Congress deleted the policy of non-interference from its programme and decided to support the states people's Liberation movements which had been going on for the attainment of their legitimate objectives and goals.

The First Election of Orissa 1937

Orissa became a separate province on the 1st day of April 1936 by Government of India (Constitution of Orissa) Order, 1936. It comprised portions of the then Bihar and Orissa Province, Madras Presidency and the Central Provinces. The province of Orissa was placed under the personal rule of the Governor till the end of March 1937. An Advisory Council consisting of 20 persons was formed to advise the Governor on the administration of the province. The first election of Orissa was held for the provincial assembly in January 1937. The net result was that the congress organisation which banked on the popular support of the masses could develop a keen sense of political awareness among them. The elections to the Assembly commenced from 18 January and continued up to 23 January 1937; the days of polling being declared as holidays. Although there were 60 seats in the new Legislature yet only 56 seats were open to elections as the rest 4 were to be filled up by nomination. Due to the system of narrow franchise about 5 to 6 lakhs of people out of a population of nearly 82 lakhs could cast their votes and the rest were just debarred. The elections were first of all held here and the entire country was anxious to know the outcome. The political parties also attached considerable importance to Orissa polls. It was however a resounding victory for the Indian National Congress in Orissa whose results were declared first of all in entire India.

The first election Orissa participated following party position in the first legislative assembly of Orissa in 1937. Congress -37, United Party - 05, National Party - 04, Independents -10, Nominated -04. The congress won 36 seats out of 37, whereas the other two could only muster about 9 seats. The independent candidates came in 10 seats. The Christian, merchant and labour constituencies returned one each. The Governor nominated 4 members. In a bye-election held later on, the congress got another seat and its total was 37. Thus, when the U.P.C.C could conduct itself so well under the leadership felt happy and the congress high command including Pandit Nehru the president of A.I.C.C and Sardar Patel, the chairman C.P.B, congratulated the people of Orissa on their grand victory sending wires. Orissa would show the way to the rest of India, they held.

The Congress won majority of seats in the Assembly. In the fitness of things Nilakantha Das should have been chosen the leader of the Congress Legislature Party to form the first popular Government of Orissa. But since he was not a member of the new legislature, other aspirants coveted for the post. In a shrewd game at political manoeuvre Harekrushna Mahatab assumed the President ship of the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee in 1937 defeating Nilakantha Das by 13,12 votes. As the Congress Committee debarred a non-member of the Legislature to assume the leadership of the proposed Government, eliminating Nilakantha Das from the prize post, the Legislature party elected Biswanath Das as its leader to form the Government. Under the behest of the All-India Congress Committee when Biswanath Das sought the assurance from the Governor that he should allow the popular government to function without interference, the Governor expressed his inability to give such assurance. Therefore, the Congress Ministry could not be formed and the Governor invited Maharaja Krishna Chandra Gajapati, the raja of Paralakhemundi (the leader of the United Party) to form the Government. The raja was sworn in as the first Premier of Orissa with a Ministry consisting of 2 Members. The Ministry did not have a majority support in the Legislature. It could survive in office because during its tenure the Legislature never met. The Raja tendered his resignation on 19 July 1937 when the congress party agreed to form the Government apropos the congress Committee decision taken at Wardha on 7 July.

After the election, the issue of acceptance of office overshadowed all other political matters. The Indian National Congress had rejected the Government of India Act of 1935 and had taken part in the elections with the declared aim of wrecking the Act. In Orissa Congress circle, majority of the Congressmen were in favour of office acceptance. But due to all India character of the issue in question, they had to stand

socially behind the Congress High Command. The Congress resolution of 18th March 1937 permitted Congress men to accept office in the provinces provided the leader of the Congress Party was satisfied and could announce publicly that the Governor would not use his special powers of interference or set at naught the advice of the ministers in their constitutional activities. Biswanath Das, the elected leader of the Congress Legislative Party in Orissa was invited by the Governor to form the Ministry on 24th and 26th March 1937. He demanded the assurance as set out by the Congress. The Governor in a press communiqué expressed his inability to give any such assurance under the provision of the Act, as a result of which Biswanath Das declined to accept office. After the refusal of the Congress to form the ministry, the Governor set out to find alternative solution to carry on the administration without dissolution of the Assembly. He invited the leader of the opposition group Krushna Chandra Gajapati Narayan Deva Raja of Paralakhemundi to form the ministry. There upon on 1st April 1937, a Council of Ministers was sworn in under the leadership of Krushna Chandra Gajapati Narayan Deva. The other ministers were Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik and Maulavi Mohammad Latifur Rahman.

The first Pre-Independent Assembly, 1937 witnessed the changes in the Ministry at certain intervals, the details of which are discussed here: On invitation of Governor, Sir John Austin Hubback, and Maharaja Krushna Chandra Gajapati sworn in as Prime Minister holding another portfolio for the ministry of Finance and law on 1st April, 1937. He was followed by Sri Gorachand Patnaik (Minister of Revenue & Education) and Maulavi Latifur Rahman (Minister of Health, Local self Government and Public works) along with Sri Mukunda Prasad Das and Nanda Kishore Das as Speaker and Deputy Speaker. First Pre-Independent Assembly Assumed charge of office on 1st April 1937 and the Ministry resigned on the 19th July 1937.

Formation of the First Congress Ministry: 1937-39

But severe criticism and protest led by the Congress enforced the first ministry to resign on 19th July, 1937, after which the Congress assumed the office on the same day. Biswanath Das was unanimously elected leader of the Orissa Congress Legislature Party. After the meeting with the Governor on 24 March, 1937 he was invited to form the Ministry. Biswanath Das became the Prime Minister holding additional portfolio like Ministry of Finance, Home, and Education. His other associates were Nityananda Kanungo (Minister of Revenue and Public works), and Bodharam Dube (Minister of Law, Commerce, Health, & Local self Government). As the first popular Ministry of Orissa, it was carrying with it the burden of high expectations and hopes. The minister of Biswantha Das consisted of Nityanand Kanungo and Bodhram Dubey as ministers of Revenue and Education, respectively. Their monthly salary was fixed at rupees 500 only. A controversy raised its head concerning the selection of a suitable site for the Provincial capital. Apart from their criticism the growing indiscipline in the Congress party made the position of Biswanath Das quite unenviable. The immediate problems demanding solution were mostly agrarian and economic. Orissa was one of the poorest provinces in the country and its annual budget was hardly two cores of rupees. This Ministry had to bear the brunt of imitating the task of uplift of Orissa in Several directions.

The agricultural tenancy stood thoroughly exploited by the landlords and Zamindars and was subjected to the incessant ravages of famine, flood and pestilence. The state of the Industries was in an absolutely disorganised condition. The rich mineral resources of Orissa were still to be exploited and harnessed. As a consequence of which there was wide spread unemployment there was unrest throughout the province and the law and order situation was at state. During the short period in office this ministry took some remarkable measures for the welfare of the people. In the field of agriculture the tenants were greatly relieved of the clutches of landlords and moneylenders by a number of legislations such as the Orissa Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1937, the Orissa Land Development and Mortgage Bank Act, the Orissa Moneylenders Act. Attempts were made to give the peasants their rightful share in the harvest of the land.

H.K Mahatab was in full charge of the organisation wing and a member of the All-India Congress Committee. Under such circumstances the Ministry of Biswanth Das got involved in a constitutional crisis over the question of John Daine's appointment as the acting Governor of Orissa vice Sir John Austin Hubback who was to proceed on long leave. Since John Daine the revenue Divisional commissioner had served as a

subordinate to the government Biswanath Das was quite satisfied to express his unwillingness to accept him as the acting governor. He was prepared to resign on his issue; to avert the crisis Hubback cancelled his leave.

On the eve of the World War II, the Congress feared that India would be dragged into war and her resources would be exploited for imperialistic purposes. Time and again, the Congress had made it clear that while it was opposed to Nazism, Fascism and all other forms of totalitarianism, it was equally opposed to giving any help in a war which was intended to consolidate and further the interests of the British imperialism on 3 September, 1939 England declare war against Germany with the usual plea that they had done so to make the world safe for democracy. But when the Congress Working Committee demanded to make clear the war aim of the British as regards to India the question was evaded. On 10, October, 1939, the All India Congress Committee met and asked the British Government to declare categorically that India would be free after the war. The British authorities showed no sign of acceptance and the Governor General confused the whole issue by declaring that the dominion status was the goal of India. There was a wide gulf between what was demanded by the Congress and what the Government was prepared to concede. The Ministry of Biswanath Das resigned on 4 November, 1939 in protest against the decision of the British Government to make India a participant in the war between Great Britain and Germany without the consent of the people of India. Thereafter Governor's rule under section 93 of the Government of India Act, 1935 was promulgated in Orissa. She remained so under the direct rule of Governor till 24 November, 1941 when a coalition Ministry headed by the Maharaja of Paralakhemundi was sworn in. The other members of this Ministry were Pandit Godavarish Mishra and Maulavi Abdul Sobhan Khan. This Ministry continued for about two and half years in the office.

Spilt in Congress and Coalition Ministry: 1941-44

The Coalitional politics is not a new phenomenon for the citizens of parliamentary democracy like India. Its practices are very often found in different successive governments in independent India. There was no separate Assembly Secretariat and its administration was put in charge of Law Department of the State Government. Further the Congress Ministry resigned on 6th November, 1939, after which the Governor rule was proclaimed. Once again, The Non-Congress Ministry headed by Maharaja Krishna Chandra Gajapati as Prime Minister was sworn in 24th November, and this cabinet continued up to 30th June 1944. This time, Pandit Godavarish Mishra (Minister of Home Affairs, Finance, Education, and Development) and Maulavi Abdus Sobhan Khan (Minister of Revenue, Health, Law and Commerce) also sworn in with the Maharaja. The very principle and nature of coalition ministry was also responsible for its failure. The leaders became more and more self-cantered and power-loving. There was no policy or programme except that of forming government by securing more members for having a ministry no matter to which group or faith they belonged. It was political manoeuvres and manipulation, not ideals or principles that determined the path to power.

Another important factor responsible for the fall of the Coalition Ministry was its vulnerable position in the assembly. The ministry formed by K.C. Gajapati did not have majority support in the assembly. The congress had majority in the assembly having 31 MLAs, while the non-congress coalition had 26 MLAs. There were two independent MLAs with one seat vacant. Thus, the Coalition Ministry was further tarnished when in a by election held in Balliguda constituency on 17th March 1942, the candidate of the coalition S.N Bhanja Deo, the powerful Zamindar of Kanika was defeated by the congress candidate Uma Charan Patnaik. Referring to this defeat of the Coalition Ministry in the bye election, Biswanath Das said on the floor of the assembly that S.N. Bhanja Deo was the candidate of Premier K.C Gajapati himself and 'his defeat is the defeat of the party and the defeat of the Ministry.

The position of the Parala Ministry set up in a hurry only to implement the provision of 'provincial autonomy' thus remained shaky and anomalous from the very day of its installation. It was a tight rope walking for them since they faced imminent danger of fall from power once the assembly was called into session commenting on it Biswanath Das, the leader of C.L.P held 'This most illegal and flagrant act of constitutional impropriety has been brought about by the very people who held the government of India Act, 1935 sacred to themselves. Assumed charge of Office on 24th November, 1941 and resigned on 30th June, 1944. The Provincial Congress Committee took a stringent action by expelling Godabarish Mishra from the

Primary membership of the party for his move to form a ministry which was contrary to the policy of the Congress Party and this led to Pandit Nilakantha Das to resign from the Congress Party. He was followed by his supporters. This resulted in the first great political defection on the province. Pandit Godabarish Mishra formed an association called Orissa Congress Swaraj Dal (The Orissa Congress Swarajist Party) in October 1940, with himself as president, Dibakar Pattanaik as secretary and Sri Nrusinha Samanta Singhar as an office bearer. The members of Parlakhemundi took a hand in the affair and his intervention was welcomed by most of the old opposition party who were strongly opposed to Pandit Godabarish Mishra becoming Prime minister and to allow the Congress too much power on the proposed Government.

Due to difference among the partners in the Coalition Government the Prime Minister resigned on the 20th June 1944. However, the resignation of the Prime Minister and other Ministers were accepted on the 29th June 1944 and from the 30th June 1944, Odisha was placed under Governor's Rule. The Assembly had altogether 10 Sessions with 188 sitting days in all till it was dissolved on the 14th September 1945. There was no separate Assembly Secretariat and its administration was put in charge of Law Department of the State Government.

Inauguration of Second Congress Ministry: 1946-50

The election for the Second Provincial Assembly in Orissa was held from 4th to 9th April, 1946. The Orissa Legislative Assembly had sixty seats, out of which four seats earmarked for nomination by the Governor. Universal Adult Suffrage was not in practice then. The limited franchise was based on qualification fixed by the payees of land revenue, Chaukidari tax and income tax. The constituencies were divided into 7 categories. While there were 45 general seats, 4 seats were reserved for Muhammedan candidates. Besides there were four Women constituencies, one constituency for the Christians, 2 seats for landholders, one seat for commerce and industry and the other was a labour constituency. Congress -47, Muslim League - 04, Communist -01, Independents -04, Nominated -04.

The newly elected Members were administered oath on the 27th May 1946 and the Assembly met for its First Session on the same day in the Ravenshaw College Hall, Cuttack. The Congress Party won 47 seats including 36 seats uncontested. The Nominated Members were appointed on the advice of the Prime Minister. Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab was elected leader of the Congress Party and formed the Ministry on the 23rd April 1946. Shri Nabakrushna Choudhury, Pandit Lingaraj Mishra, Shri Nityananda Kanungo and Radhakrushna Biswasray were the other members of the Council of Ministers. Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab resigned on the 12th May 1950 as he was to join the Cabinet at the Centre and Shri Nabakrushna Choudhury took over as the Chief Minister on the same day. Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab(Prime Minister, Home, Finance, Planning and Reconstruction), Sri Dinabandhu Sahu(Minister Of Law & Development &Health), Sri Kishore Chandra Bhanja Deo(Minister of Industries, Transport), Sri Sun Ram Soren(Minister of Tribal and rural Welfare, labour and commerce).Deputy Ministers-Smt. Basant Manjari Devi(Minister of Health), Sri Bhairav Chandra Mohanty(Minister of works), Sri Nilamani Routray(Minister of Home), Sri Anup Singh Deo(Minister of Public relations, Relief &Rehabilitation, Animal Husbandry), Sri Santanu Ku. Das (Minister of Local Government, co-operation and Fisheries).

Mr. Lal Mohan Patnaik and Smt. A. Laxmibai were elected as Speaker and Deputy Speaker, respectively on the 29th May 1946. Shri Lakshminarayan Sahu, a member of the Assembly conducted the election of the Speaker. The outstanding victory of the Congress was happened due to the following favourable causes. Biswanath Das, the ex-Prime Minister and sole organizer of the election had made a prophecy before election that the Congress would win at least in 48 seats. His prophecy came to be true though Congress won by one vote less. The opposition was no match to Congress's unity and integrity. The opposition had already lost public sympathy and support due to their extreme self-designs in the one hand and on the other, they were torn by themselves for their power craze. The Congress emerged as a hero for its untold suffering during Quit India movement.⁹¹

As a whole the Second Congress Ministry assumed office altogether in a different situation. The First Congress Ministry was sworn in as an experiment in 'Provincial Autonomy and was under the complete hegemony of the British. The political scenario was bleak then there was no hope of immediate political

solution of the Indian problems. But in 1946 a great change was noticed. The Post War World had unleashed an era of democratic advancement and the fate of Imperialism and doomed forever Churchill with his ambitious imperial designs was pushed back to the political achieves and Clement Attlee with his Liberal spirit categorically stated that India was going to be Independent soon. Preparations were on in India for a smooth departure of the British and a respectable transfer of power. The Second Congress Ministry came to the office amidst this new wave of hopes and democratic aspirations. There were numerous demands for reconstruction and developments and the Ministry had a testing time. It had to prove its speciality from the Colonial Rule. This Ministry saw major political events like the Partition of India, Indian Independence, the making of the Indian Constitution and the Integration of the Indian States and had to endure the reactions emerging out of them. A backward society and a ravaged economy was waiting for a leap forward. There was the need for an overhaul of the administrative set-up which was traditionally colonial and was on the verge of collapse. But the significant position it inherited and the assets it commanded provided it with hopeful prospects for all round developments of Orissa.

Conclusion:

We have analysed different aspects of the Congress activities in Orissa during the period from 1885 to 1950 in the general background of the Indian National Movement. With the foundation of the Utkal Sabha, 1882 socio-political life began in Orissa in her urban centres. The formation of the Utkal Union Conference in 1903 accelerated it. In its initial phase the Congress movement hastened the growth of political consciousness in Orissa as elsewhere in India. The philosophy of political mendicancy liberalism moderation faith in justice and fair play of the British people were the tenets of the early Congresses which deeply influenced the political thinking of the leaders of Orissa. The most towering personality of Orissa Madhusudan Das was a convinced moderate who believed in peaceful presentation of grievances to the authorities. He was an indefatigable memorialise who brought all problems of Orissa to the notice of the higher authorities and sought the redress of the grievances of the people through their goodwill.

On the eve of the elections of 1946 the Socioeconomic, scenario of Orissa was bleak, the political leadership was discredited and there prevailed a situation of anxiety, confusion and frustration throughout the Province. The forceful National and International situation of the time kept the future of the Indian Subcontinent almost in a fluid State .In Orissa the people at the helm of the affairs lacked foresight, drive and imagination to lead the province in the right direction the bureaucracy was overcome with selfish motives and was showing dangerous inaction in this period of transition. In this situation of fatigue and stagnation, the declaration of election came as a spectacular relief for the people and now they had an opportunity in hand to alter the existing situation. The Indian National Congress decided to fight this election as an instrument to mobilize mass opinion for Indian Independence. A forecast was made by all leading Congressmen that a revolution, would follow in case the British authority failed to give India the promised freedom. The Congress Manifesto stood for equal rights and opportunities for every citizen of India.

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