



Prajamandal Movement In Sonapur Estate Of Western Odisha

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Abstract:

The *Prajamandal* Movement in Sonapur Estate of Western Odisha emerged as a powerful expression of popular resistance against the autocratic rule of the *Garjat* princely states under British paramountcy. In Sonapur, the peasantry suffered under oppressive land revenue systems, arbitrary taxation, and forced labour practices such as *Bethi*, *Rasad*, and *Salami*. Civil liberties were absent, and the rulers exercised unchecked authority in internal administration. The situation worsened during the reign of Maharaja Sudhansu Sekhar Singh Deo (1937–1947), when illegal exactions and administrative repression intensified. Inspired by the spread of nationalist ideas and the activities of the States Peoples' Conference, local leaders like Dolamani Dash of Turum village mobilized the rural population to organize resistance against feudal oppression.

In October 1938, the Sonapur *Prajamandal* was formally established to demand responsible government, abolition of forced labour, reduction of unjust taxes, and the recognition of basic civil rights. The movement quickly gained momentum through public meetings, delegations, and mass participation. However, the state authorities responded with arrests, false prosecutions, bans, and intimidation to suppress the agitation. Despite severe repression, the *Prajamandal* workers continued their struggle with determination. The renewed phase of agitation in 1947 further weakened princely authority, ultimately leading to the merger of Sonapur with the Province of Orissa in December 1947. The movement thus marked a decisive step toward the end of feudal rule and the establishment of democratic governance in the region.

Keyword: Prajamandal Movement, Sonapur Estate, Garjat States, Maharaja Sudhansu Sekhar Singh Deo, Political Awakening in Princely States.

Introduction:

Since the days of the Mughals, Odisha was divided into two distinct regions for the efficient revenue administration, viz. (1) the *Mughalbandi* comprising the plain and fertile lands in the coastal region and (2) the *Garjats* or the Feudatory States comprising the hilly regions under the Oriya chiefs who used to pay fixed annual tributes to the Emperors and in return were recognized as the feudatories of the Imperial Mughals.¹ The same administrative setup continued under the Marathas who ruled Orissa from 1751 AD to 1803 AD. The English East India Company, who succeeded the Marathas in 1803 AD, also brought no change in the said system and continued with the same administrative setup till 1947.

The *Garjat* states of Orissa consisted of a group of twenty-six dependent territories, which comprised Athamallik, Athagarh, Angul, Bamanda, Barambha, Baud, Bonai, Banki, Daspalla, Dhenkanal, Gangpur, Hindol, Kalahandi, Keonjhar, Khandapara, Mayurbhanja, Narasinghpur, Nayagarh, Nilagiri, Pal-Lahara, Patna, Rairakhhol, Ranapur, Sonepur, Talcher and Tigriria.² Out of these 26 *Garjat* states, seven states belonged to Western Orissa which was popularly known as Sambalpur group of states. Of these states, Bamanda, Kalahandi, Patna, Rairakhhol and Sonepur were attached to the Chhatisgarh Division of the Central Province while Bonai and Gangpur were attached to the Chotanagpur Division till 1905.³

Due to political contrivance and economic considerations, the British Government decided to keep the *Mughalbandi* area separate from the *Garjats*. The British Government with a view to conciliating the *Garjat* Chiefs adopted a very liberal policy to satisfy them.⁴ The *Rajas* were exempted from the operation of the General Regulation system prevailing in the Bengal presidency. The *Rajas* bound themselves to the British authorities in loyal submission and used to pay an annual tribute or peshkas fixed by the Government.⁵ They enjoyed full freedom in their internal administration. The Government made it a principle not to interfere in the internal administration of the *Garjat* states and allowed the Chiefs to rule freely and independently according to their sweet will. The only relationship the *Garjat* Chiefs had with the British Government was the payment of tribute in due installments.

The Chiefs were nothing but the Agents of the British Government. Under the aegis of the Political Department, they were safe from external invasion and internal problems. In the absence of any effective challenge to their authority from any quarter the *Garjat* states continued to be unbridled autocracies wherein democratic institutions even in an elementary form did not exist. Exactions and repression were the standard norms of the administration. The Chiefs of the *Garjat* states were nothing but feudal relics and anachronistic beings propped up by the Political Department.⁶ They were the worst type of reactionaries. The Chiefs were not only content to play the role merely of tax collector and Magistrate, but also they were proprietors in chief, autocratic and tyrannical.

Western Orissa was a land of peasants who mainly depended upon agriculture as the only source of their income. It was this peasantry in the *Garjats* which became the immediate and sole victim of the feudal oppressions exercised by the Chiefs therein. The peasantry of the *Garjats* suffered untold miseries. The peasants had no occupancy right over the land they cultivated. A peasant was liable to ejection in spite of long possession and enjoyments for generations.⁷ Lands were heavily taxed without any regard to the capacity of the peasants to pay. Insecurity of tenure and arbitrary increase in rents were the two great obstacles in the way of sound agriculture. Apart from this, there were no rules for remission and suspension of arrears in the land rent. If a peasant failed to pay the rent in due time, his land was confiscated and later on was sold to the highest bidder.⁸ In addition to these, there were the feudal obligations like *Bheti*, *Salami*, *Rasad* etc. failure to oblige was met with inhuman oppressions like flogging, Molestation and raids by the State police.⁹ The officials of the *Rajas* used to collect money for ear boring of the Prince and such other royal ceremonies and paid the amount to the *Rajas*. This was called *Bethi*. The most inhuman was *Bethi* system. In the construction of the palaces of the *Rajas*, roads in the states and such other works the peasants were required to work without wages.¹⁰ When the *Raja* would go on hunting, the peasants would go along with him and arrange food for him and his officials. This was called *Rasad*. Similarly, *Salami* was a free gift made by way of compliment or in return for a favour.¹¹ On the whole, due to excessive burden of taxes

and other impositions the peasants of the *Garjat* states used to lead very miserable lives.¹² There were no civil liberties. Detention without trial, deportation and confiscation of property were fairly frequent. The peasantry was on the highway to utter ruin and destruction. Prostitution of justice and corruption of the public services were bound to follow. People began to fret at restrictions and burdens. Unrest began to spread among the hard -pressed peasantry. To get rid of the tyrannical rule of the *Rajas* and have some liberty and freedom, the peasants started a movement in 1938 which was called the *Prajamandal* Movement or the People's Movement.¹³

Origin and Development of *Prajamandal* Movement:

In the later part of the 19th Century and in the first three decades of the 20th Century, there were peasant uprisings in a number of princely states against the corrupt administration of the Rulers. But in all cases these uprisings had been suppressed by the rulers with ruthless severity with the help of the State police and the British force whenever necessary.¹⁴ However, with the spread of education among the people of the Princely states and progress of the Gandhian nationalist movement in the country, the unrest in the Princely states assumed a new dimension. The educated people of the Princely states did not remain unaffected by the activities of the Congress leaders and volunteers in the *Mughalbandi* districts. Some young men of Princely states left their schools and colleges to join the Non-Cooperation movement launched by Gandhiji in 1920. These educated young men assumed the leadership of the tenant uprisings in the Princely states.¹⁵

After the formation of the All-India States Peoples Conference in December 1927, the Orissa States Peoples Conference was formed in June 1931 with a view to providing all sorts of help and cooperation to the people of states in achieving their goal. The formation of the Orissa States Peoples Conference kindled a new hope among the people of the states to present their demands in an organised way. The first Orissa States Peoples Conference was held at Cuttack on 20 June 1931. However, this organization remained dormant for a petty long time without achieving any tangible results. In 1937 fresh attempts were made to reorganize this organization. The second session of the Orissa States Peoples Conference was held at Cuttack on 23-24 June 1937 under the Presidentship of Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramaya, who was also at that time the President of the All-India States Peoples Conference.¹⁷ The Conference was largely attended by the delegates from the states of Orissa. In this session the Conference adopted the establishment of responsible Government in states as its goal and called upon the states peoples life, property and honour by carrying on the Rulers to ensure security administration according to declared and published laws, codes and acts of the Indian Legislature. The Conference also urged the Rulers to grant to their subjects right of occupancy on holdings and fundamental rights of citizenship and stop collection of illegal exactions like *Rasad*, *Magan*, *Bhethi*, *Bethi* and *Beggari*.¹⁸ In this Conference, the Orissa State Enquiry Committee was formed with Sarangadhara Das as the Secretary with a view to enquiring into various kind of illegalities and the acts of repressions prevalent in the Princely states of Orissa.¹⁹

Meanwhile *Prajamandals* or Peoples Association were formed in the Princely states of Orissa as well as in Western Orissa also to ventilate the grievances of the people before the respective rulers. The *Prajamandals* put forth various demands before the *Durbars* such as abolition of illegal financial exactions and forced labor, grant of civil rights, right to fight cases with the help of the lawyers and introduction of responsible Governments based on adult franchise. They also wanted just laws for their agricultural holdings, certain privileges to utilize the forest products, abolition of monopoly trade practices etc.²⁰

However, the rulers of the Princely states were neither prepared to recognize the *Prajamandals* nor to accept the just demands of the people rather they tried their best to curb the growing tendency of alleged lawlessness among their subjects. Consequently the problem took a serious turn and widespread unrest took place in several Princely states and with this the *Prajamandal* Movement started.

The people of the Princely states of Western Orissa were also not left untouched by this movement. They also actively came forward to raise their voice against the tyrannical rule of their Rulers. *Prajamandals* or Peoples Associations were formed by the people in the different *Garjat* states of Western Orissa to carry out the movement for their own cause against their oppressive and autocratic Rulers. A detail note of the *Prajamandal* Movements in the Princely states of Western Orissa is given below.

The village Turum situated under Bheden police station of Bargarh district. The said village located in the bank of river Mahanadi and Jira. In the past of its village was under Sonepur Estate (*Garjat*). Dolamani Dash was the *Gauntia* of Turum village. It was under his leadership and guidance that the Sonepur *Prajamandal* Movement had started which later on converted to a powerful people's movement in the region.

As we know the rulers or chief of the feudatory states were very autocratic and oppressive in nature. They ruled their states according to their own rules and regulations, which suit them. They imposed different types of taxes on their subjects accordingly to their wish to increase their resources. They used to collect taxes from the people through their officials mercilessly without worried their capability. Even during the time of draught or famine or flood they never hesitated to collect tax. Part from regular taxes the chiefs used to impose some lavish taxes on their subjects. Taxes like *Rasad*, *Bethi*, *Salami* etc. were imposed on the peasants of the *Garjat* states. *Rasad* means when the *Raja* would go on hunting, the peasants of the concerned area would go along with him and arranged food for him and his officials.²¹ *Salami* means the officials of the *Rajas* collected money for ear boring of the prince and other royal ceremonies and paid the same amount to the *Rajas*. It was a free gift made by them of compliment or in return for a favor.²² However the most in human as the *Bethi* system. In the construction of the royal palaces other buildings, construction of roads in the states, canals, ponds etc. The Peasants were required to work without wages.²³ On the whole, due to excessive burden of taxes and other impositions, the Peasants of the *Garjat* states led very miserable lives than the people of British administrated territories. They ever knew the charm of freedom and liberty. To get rid of the tyrarical and autocratic rule of the feudatory chiefs and have some political rights and freedom the peasants started a mass movement in June 1938 and it was famous as *Prajamandal* Movement.

The rulers of Sonepur state were also very autocratic and oppressive in nature. They ruled the state according to their own will without caring the welfare of the people. The rulers of Sonepur surpassed the other feudatory rulers in injustice oppression and in collecting unjust tax from the people. Maharaja Sudhansu Sekhar Singdeo ascended throne on 29th April 1937. He was very autocratic and oppressive in nature and created terror among the people. Injustice, oppression, unjust tax collection increased to a great extent during his reign which made the life of the people very miserable.

Taking advantage of the weakness of the king, officers like Amarendra nath Sardar, the Head of the Rajkarmachari, Secretary Jivan singh, Deputy Secretary Lal Mohan Chatterji, Private Secretary Gopinath Panigrahi, another Deputy Secretary Prasanna Mishra, police officer Tripurari Bohidar, Sub-inspector Gauri Shankar Mishra, Balaram Tripathy, Lakshmana Bohidar, Rashbihari Panda and some others by influencing the king created terror in the state.²⁴ They collected money from the people through illegal way and even oppressed the people to great extent. The people became so afraid that they didn't raise their voice against the king nor against the oppressive officers. Even the people of the locality didn't try to publish all these injustice and illegal work of the king in the news papers.

However it is believed that once The Seva, the newspaper published from Sambalpur published all these things of Sonepur Estate. Consequently, the authority of Sonepur gave severe punishment by Lodging a case against the publisher.²⁵ Before the creation of separate Orissa Province being fed up with the atrocities of the feudatory rulers the people of *Garjat* states decided to raise their voice against their rulers by forming *Prajamandals* or Peoples Associations all over Orissa, particularly in the feudatory states. The people of Sonepur states were also didn't leg behind and they also came forward to from the *Prajamandal* through which they could fight against the ruler for justice.

Some remained personalities of the locality like the *Gauntia* of Kalapathar, his brothers Judhistir Mahatab, Khageswar Pradhan, Mahajan Jagadala, Balaram Nanda, Laxmana sahu, Kela Bagarti and others took the initiative in this regard and organized meetings where they discussed about the *Rajas* atrocities and about the formation of *Prajamandal*.²⁶ The political awakening also spread to the other parts of states. The people of Sukda and Rangpur also actively participated in the *Praja* movement without caring their authenticity.²⁷ When the *Raja* and his officials came to know about the movement of the *Prajas* they tried their best to suppress it with strong hands. They impose various ban on the movement of the people. The authority introduced a new type of register inquiry village known as *Kunia* Register through which they tried to know the news-in comings to the villages and outgoings from the villages.²⁸ The village *Chawkidars* remained in charge of Register. If they failed in their duty severe punishment are given to them by the authority.²⁹ Even the authority lodged false cases on the people particularly on the people who were playing leading role in the movement probably with a view to discourage them. The authority of Sonepur Raj arrested Damodar Rath of Bad Nuapali by lodging a false theft case on him and sent them to the jail for one month according to rule 180.³⁰ Besides Durga Charan sahu of Sukda and Gangaram Agrawal of Sunamati were also arrested on the charge of same theft case and they suffered one year imprisonment.³¹ People like Satyananda Hota, Dhanabanta Mallick and Daitari Sahu, all from Sonepur were also became the victim of the atrocities of the *Raja* and remained seven days inside the jail, On the charge of secretly working for *Praja* movement. The authorities of *Raja* trying their best to create terror in the minds of the people by adopting such harsh massacres so that in future the people would not have to raise their voice the ruler.

When Dolamani Dash the *Gauntia* of Turum came to know about all these things, he called upon Ramchandra Sathpathy, Laxman Sathpathy and Mohan Mishra of the village Kalapathar to discuss about the meeting Turum. There after elaborates discussion a *Prajamandal* Committee was established at the advice of Dolamani Dash on 7th October 1938.³² Laxman Sathpathy became the President, Chaturbhujia became the Secretary, Bhimsen Bhoi the treasurer, Dolamani Dash became the Convenor and Ramchandra sathpathy, Madan Mishra, Pitambar Bhoi, Makardhwaj Purohit, Rebati Madam, Umakanta Padhi and Swami Vivekananda Saraswati all became the members of the newly organized *Prajamandal* Committee.³³ For membership fee they fixed two Ana or each member for admission to *Prajamandal* Committee. The house of Dolamani dash worked as officer of the *Prajamandal* Committee.

After the decision of the members to the committee a meeting was organized at Turum on 12th December 1938.³⁴ Leaders like Dayananda Sathpathy, Congress District Secretary of Sambalpur, Chandra Sekhar Panigrahi, another Congress leader of Sambalpur, Giridhari Barai of Rusuda, Mangalu Pradhan of Remanda, Rajaram Gauntia of Salepali and many other congress leaders attend the meeting. Gaurishankar Rajguru presided over the meeting.³⁵ In the meeting the speakers vehemently criticized the unjust policy of the *Raja*, they spoke about the atrocities extortion of the king and demanded justice. After the end of the meeting the leaders elected their office bearers of the newly formed Sonepur *Prajamandal* Association. Accordingly, Bhimsen Bhoi was elected as President of the Sonepur *Prajamandal*.³⁶ Chaturbhujia Mishra and Ramachandra Sathpathy both elected as the Deputy Secretary, Dolamani Dash as Treasurer and Convenor of the *Prajamandal*. Laxmana Sathpathy, Mohan Mishra, Makardhvaj Purohit and Pitambar Bhoi remained as the members of the Sonepur *Prajamandal*.³⁷

The Sonepur *Prajamandal* Committee later on decided to depute a delegation consisting of three members Lakshmana Sathpathy, Mohan Mishra, Pitambara Bhoi to meet the Maharaja to present their demands. It was after the approval of the working committee of the Sonepur *Prajamandal* that the delegation proceeded to Sonepur to meet the Maharaja on 22 March 1939.³⁸ Thousands of people bid farewell to the delegation with great enthusiasm.

However, the delegation failed to reach Sonepur. On the way near Binka police authority of the *Raja* obstructed the way other delegation and forcefully arrested them and kept them in the Binka police station for two days. Thousands of people from nearby area assembled before the Binka Police station to sue the

members of the delegation. After two days members were shifted to Sonepur by the police authority. There the police superintendent Triphararj Bohidar refused the members of the regulation and forced them to beg apology from the *Raja*. But when the members didn't obey the orders of the police authority file false cases against them and put them behind the bans.³⁹

When the members of the delegation didn't return by 27th March then the working committee of the Sonepur *Prajamandal* held a meeting at Saalepali and there they decided to go *Raj Darbars* to collect information about their delegation.⁴⁰ On 28 March 1939, 15 workers of the *Prajamandal* set out for Sonepur Raj darbar through Rampur.⁴¹ At the investigation of the *Raja* authority the Rampur police obstructed the *Prajamandal* workers and arrested them and on the next day the police took them to Arjunpur which was a Khamar village of the Sonepur Raja. The *Prajamandal* Committee then sent another group to the royal palace on 1 April 1939. The group removed the Sonepur through Sindhol, Kotsamalei and Jaloei. At that time the jaloei police again arrested he workers and unfired them in the Kotsamlei police out post.⁴¹ On 3rd April 1939 the Binka police arrested Banchhabata Pujhari, damnghosa Pradhan, hara behera, Daitari Patra, Kunja Bhoi, Jayaram Sahu while they were canvassing for *Prajamandal* Movement.⁴² On the 4th April 1939 the Binka and Sonepur police arrested another group of *Prajamandal* workers at Ranibandha of Sradhapali and detained they at Jamukhol.⁴³ The police also arrested Swami Vivekananda saraswati at Sradhapali and kept him at Pratapur. The police sent Lakshmana sathpathy, Mohan Mishra, Bhimsen Bhoi, Banchhabata Pujhari, Hari Sahu, Mohan Panda and Brajakishore Panda to the jail and released other workers of the *Prajamandal* by signing bond with them and even taking bribe from them.⁴⁴

The Sonepur *Prajamandal* working committee started the movement against the ruler on the voice of Gandhiji in June 1939.⁴⁵ However Raja Sudhansu Sekhar Singh Deo of Sonepur didn't concerned the demands of the Sonepur *Prajamandal*. Rather the authorities imposed ban on *Prajamandal* of Sonepur. During the period of Quit India Movement the State Authorities arrested the leaders of Sonepur *Prajamandal* and thrown them behind the laws.

Towards the beginning of 1947 the *Prajamandal* of Sonepur once again started their movement against the Raja under the leadership of Muralidhar Mishra, the President of Binks Primary *Prajamandal*.⁴⁶ The state authorities arrested Muralidhar Mishra and his associates. In spite of that the people never issue their hearts. They arrested before the Royal Palace of Sonepur and its associates in large members and demanded the immediate release of their leaders. The *Raja* ultimately finalizing no other alternative, against his will released the arrested leaders from the Jail. Finally, the Sonepur Feudatory State merged with Orissa Division in December 1947 and became a part of Modern Orissa.⁴⁷

Conclusion:

The *Prajamandal* Movement in Sonepur, spearheaded by local leaders like Dolamani Dash and resilient peasants from villages such as Turum, Kalapathar, and Salepali, marked a pivotal chapter in the struggle against the autocratic Garjat rulers. The peasants suffered from heavy taxation, forced labour systems like Bethi and Rasad, and denial of basic civil rights. Inspired by the nationalist movement and encouraged by the Orissa States Peoples' Conference, local leaders organized the Sonepur *Prajamandal* in 1938 to demand justice, responsible government, and fundamental rights. Despite severe repression, arrests, and bans imposed by the state authorities, the movement continued with determination. Ultimately, sustained public pressure weakened princely authority, and in December 1947 Sonepur merged with Orissa, marking the end of feudal rule and the beginning of democratic governance in the region.

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