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Popular Uprising In Mayurbhanj And The Role Of Bansidhar Behera.

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Mayurbhanj was a premier Garjat state of Odisha having a largest area of 4243 square miles and highest population (8, 46,745 in 1931) than the other 25 states during the colonial rule¹. The kings of Bhanja dynasty were ruling over the state since the Gupta period up to the merger with the union government². It was predominantly a tribal state. The tribes were generally simple, innocent and peace loving in nature. They work hard in the field and forests for their livelihood. Most of them were less than the marginal farmers who lived from hand to mouth unless supplemented by wages earned as daily labor. They were reasonably treated well by the state where the stringent exploitation was absent³. The people of Mayurbhanj had no ideas about the outside world nor had the political awareness or about the National events. They only love and respect their Maharaja to whom they considered as their protector. They did not have the ideas on colonial administration and exploitation in the state. Then gradually the news about the Gandhian movements of noncooperation and civil disobedience mild ripples in their mind⁴. The people's movement led by Banamali Das at Nilgiri had tremendous impact on the people of Mayurbhanj. Then the people of Mayurbhanj joined in the congress movement only after the advent of Gandhi in politics.

The visit of Gandhi with his family to Odisha on 23rd March 1921 was a turning point in the freedom movement in India⁵. During his visit Gandhi addressed the people of Bhadrakh, Cuttack, Puri and Berhampur to join in the non cooperation movement. With the call of Gandhi the young leaders of Odisha like Harekrushna Mahatab, Nabakrushna Chaudhury, Nityananda Kanungo and Nanda Kishore Das joined in the National congress. They were greatly inspired by the Gandhian thought and ideology. They propagated the message of Gandhi and convinced the people about the aim and objectives of the National movement in Odisha. In the year 1921, 127 delegates from Odisha attended the Allahabad session of Indian National congress⁶.

The people of different Garjats openly participated in the congress movement, but the participation of Mayurbhanj was not visible due to various reasons. According to the Regulation ii of 1908, the state had the power to expel any undesirable person from Mayurbhanj within 24 hours. Again the circular order No-3 of 25th April 1925 was issued which restricted the freedom of speech and banned the public meetings in the state⁷. The king appointed the educated coastal people as Sardars who exercised judicial and police power in the state. The general people had no right to redress their grievances. The rigorous punishment to the revolutionary leaders of the *Meli* of 1917 in Mayurbhanj was not vanished in their mind. As a result of the

above reasons the people of Mayurbhanj dared not to join in the congress movement or to invite the leaders of the other state⁸. The All India States People Conference largely aware the people of Mayurbhanj to come to the mainstream of the congress movement.

The border district of Balasore and Midnapur in West Bengal had a saluting effect on the people of Mayurbhanj who could not escape the fire of Nationalism. They came to know about Gandhi, the salt Satyagraha of Inchudi where thousands of congress volunteers had been arrested for breaking of salt law and the prohibition order of the police. The leaders like Gourmohan Pradhan of Belanpur, Panchanan Raisingh of Kundapali, Manmohan Dibedi of Patisari, Sanatan Pradhan of Khiripada, Suryamohan Das of Bhaliadiha village of Mayurbhanj participated and arrested in the salt Satyagraha at Inchudi⁹. During that critical situation Bansidhar Behera a dynamic and dedicated young leader appeared in the political horizon as a meteor with an aim to end the rule of the Raja in Mayurbhanj and the British rule from India.

Bansidhar Behera, the young man of Dhadangri village of Mayurbhanj state was greatly influenced by the congress movement¹⁰. Though he was born in a peasant family, he rose to prominence by dint of his merit, confidence and courage. He did not tolerate the injustice done by the royal court or any royal authority. Defying the royal order he raised voice against the Durbar administration and organized public meetings¹¹. He was not a man of compromising nature like Sharat Chandra Das and other leaders. He toured from village to village to unite the people creating awareness among them for the freedom of the country. During his tour he brought to notice about the public grievance at Panchpirh and Bamanghati subdivision where he was greeted with love and respect as the son of the soil¹².

The village Dhadangri is near about 20 kilometer from Baripada. River Kutra flows near the village. His father Sitaram Behera was a skilled cultivator of that village having herds of cattle wealth. His mother Ratnamani Devi was a pious and hospitable lady. At that time the use of chemical manure was not popular among the peasants. So they kept good number of cattle heads to get sufficient amount of composts from the dung which helped them to grow huge amount of crops and vegetables. The peasants made a spacious shed in the particular side of the house and taking proper care of them whole the year¹³.

The village name '*Dhadangri*' is associated with *Santali* language. *Dangri* means cattle and '*Dha*' or '*Daha*' means to keep tied¹⁴. That means the villagers were keeping herds of cattle for manure, milk and other agricultural activities. There was extensive *Gochar* land or grazing field near the village. A big pond near the village fulfill the need water. The road from Baripada to Bamanghati and Panchpir was passing through the village. Maharaja Krushna Chandra Bhanj constructed the road and Bamanghati was formed as a sub division for the benefit of his subjects. The subdivisional court, resident of the judge, police station and other offices were constructed¹⁵. By this welfare measure the people of the newly created sub division got quick service.

In the year 1930, the Lt. Governor H.L. Stephenson of Bihar- Odisha province visited Baripada, the capital city of Mayurbhanj state. He was highly greeted by Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanj with the *Zamindars* and his courtiers. For his honor special hunting arrangements in the Similipal forests and *Chhow* dance performances were displayed in the Durbar to please the guests. The British officials posted in different offices in different area come to visit the Governor at Baripada. Sitaram Behera was returning to his home on the street with the herds of cattle in the dust. In the meanwhile a lorry of the British officer was passing through the Dhadangri village with the escort of the police personal. Unfortunately the road was blocked by the herds of the cattle and interrupted the journey of the officer for a while. The Sahib became angry. The police personal come out and severely beaten Sitaram by which he was wounded¹⁶.

During the British rule there was no civil liberty. Nor was any convenient means to present their grievances. The common people were tortured, fined, arrested and imprisoned on minor issues. It was also noticed that the English walk with their pet dogs on the street where as the common man has no right to go near them in the same street. The same incident happened in the life of Sitaram Behera. Bansidhar Behera his son was a courageous young man. He took the event seriously. He strongly opposed the activities of the police and the British officer. He appealed in the royal court for justice but resulted nothing¹⁷. The king was acting on the advice of the British officers, courtiers, *Pradhans* and *Zamindars*. He was not practical or impartial. So Behera changed his mind and promised to fight against the injustice in the royal court and the mal administration of the British.

At that time Dhananjay Kar of Nayabasan *Zamindari* of Mayurbhanj state started his career as a revolutionary leader in 1924. He united the people of Khandamauda and propagated the message of the freedom struggle in the border area of Mayurbhanj. Bansidhar Behera was educated at Midnapur and there was matrimonial relation of his family members with Nayabasan. So Behera was greatly influenced by the revolutionary ideas of Dhananjay and joined in congress socialist party in a very early age¹⁸.

In the year 1934, Gandhi visited again to Odisha. During his visit Bansidhar with his family members went to Cuttack to see Gandhi. The magnetic personality of Gandhi and address to boycott the foreign goods to the people of Odisha and the self dedicated service of the congress volunteers encouraged them to jump into the main stream of the freedom struggle¹⁹. Ratnamani Devi the wife of Behera met Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Arnapurna Maharana and other women leaders during her visit.

Bansidhar Behera then went to Alaka Ashram of Jagatsinghpur which was an influential institution during the freedom movement in Odisha. The Ashram was established in 1930 by the revolutionary leaders like Gopabandhu Chaudhury, Bhagirathi Mohapatra, Pandit Pranakrushna Padihari, Babaji Ram Das and others²⁰. The Ashram trained the volunteers for the freedom struggle, provided shelter to them and educated the people on Gandhian principles. The Ashram was established with the beautiful environment beside the river Alaka, from where the name of Ashram as Alaka was derived. The shrine of Somanath Mahadev located near the Ashrama which was surrounded by a big mango grove on the outskirts of Jagatsinghpur city.

Besides theoretical training, the volunteers were given practical training in the art of spinning and weaving Khadi clothes. Bansidhar Behera stayed there six months and came out as a successful volunteer²¹. During his stay he came in contact with the prominent congress leaders of Odisha. There he met Ramadevi, the great woman freedom fighter of Odisha. After his training he came back to his native place. Then he encouraged the people of Mayurbhanj to boycott the foreign goods and to use *Khadi*. He was in favor of commercialization of agriculture in the rural villages. He supplied *Copa* or cotton seeds to the cultivators and encouraged them for extensive *Copa* cultivation. After harvesting he trained them in spinning. In this way he popularized the use of *Khadi* and to boycott the foreign clothes in Mayurbhanj²².

Bansidhar Behera organized the first public meeting at *Nilkothi*. It was situated on the bank of river Budhabalanga near Digar Astia²³. During the colonial rule the people of Kuliana and periphery area were compelled to cultivate indigo plant for commercial purpose to import England. The plants were stored at *Nilkothi*. The ruined *Kothi* is still remained there. The cultivation of indigo was less profitable to the cultivators. So they were reluctant to sow *Nil* seeds in their field as a result of which there was mass public discontent in that area. Bansidhar Behera took this situation as a golden opportunity and holds the meeting at Nilkothi. Nityananda Rout of the village Jamda near Digar Astia was Bansidhar Behera's father in law. He was an influential person of that locality. Nityananda immensely helped him to organize the public to the meeting. So a large number of people from Khuntapal, Kantapal, Bhaliadiha, Goudrama, Dangarsahi, Kulipal,

Kanialuka and other villages gathered in the meeting. Behera vehemently criticized the policy of public exploitation by the royal administration in Mayurbhanj and the British raj in the state. He addressed the people to follow the Gandhian principles and to join in the freedom struggle. The activities of Behera were noticed and the police issued warrant against him. He returned back to the village in disguise at night and stayed on the *Machan* built near the corn field with a lantern. Prasanna Kumar Dash a contemporary freedom fighter of Kendumundi village near Bangriposi joined with him. Every night they read *Bhagabat Gita* which was the source of inspiration for both the leaders²⁴.

Bansidhar Behera called for another public meeting in front of the Simileswar Shiva temple near Bangriposi²⁵. Before the meeting he travelled village to village and convinced the people to join in the meeting at Simla. After getting proper information a royal order was issued to arrest Behera. The police of Bangriposi tried their best to arrest him but failed. Sri Behera was travelling in disguise. On 3rd October 1938 more than 3000 people gathered at Simla by the call of their leaders. But the absence of their leader made them disappointed. They eagerly wait for him. Suddenly Behera appeared beside the river Budhabalanga with a turban of *Gamuchha* on his head and a net on his hand as a fisherman²⁶. Some people say that he was staying the night in the hall of a big *Kuchila* tree. His presence in the meeting ground created new hopes and aspirations among the participants. He addressed the gatherings to come forward with new spirit and vigor to fight for the sake of mother land as well as to end the feudatory rule of Bhanjbum.

The prajamandal movement was not organized at that time. So the meeting was called as the meeting of Congress Socialist Party like that of west Bengal and other parts of Odisha. After the meeting Behera with his friend Gosthabihari Das were arrested and severely punished by the royal police²⁷. But they did not lose their courage and confidence. Then they became more active and toured in different part of the state to unite the people.

In the year 1910, Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanjdeo granted mining lease of Gorumahisani to Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO), Jamshedpur which provided essential raw materials for its smooth functioning. Promoth Nath Bose the Geologist helped Maharaja to negotiate with the Company. Then the Company worked at Badampahar in the year 1919²⁸. Maharaja Purna Chandra Bhanjdeo extended the railway line from Tatanagar- Gorumahisani to Badampahar for the transportation of raw material. Mining was open-cast type. The ore was transported by loco and also by aerial rope way and endless gravity inclines. The production was 3 lakhs ton per year. Rising of ore was mostly done by the manual labor drawn from the neighboring villages. A good number of person employed daily in the mine with a less or minimum wages. As per the provision of the settlement the Company would not pay any royalty for the first three or four years²⁹. The labors worked hard day and night. There was no time table or working hours. Their wages were not paid weekly or in time.

During his Bamanghati tour he was informed about the miserable condition of the labors in Badampahar mine. He personally visited and talked with them and raised voice against the mining policy of the Maharaja. He argued that Mayurbhanj was one of the richest states in mineral wealth and had extensive valuable natural forest, but no heavy or medium scale of industry developed. He then carefully identified the leader of the workers and convinced them secretly to fight against injustice. Behera took the leadership of the mining workers of Badampahar demanding the enhancement of daily wages, fixation of working hours and weekly payment of their wages. The labors movement continued for several days. The Tata Company bound to increase the wages and also fulfill the other demands of the laborers³⁰. All the activities of Behera were secretly watching and time to time information were given to the Durbar by Rairangpur police.

For administration convenience, the Bamanghati subdivision was split into two in the year 1884³¹. The newly formed subdivision was called as Panchpir with six Pragana and eleven Pirs. Soon after its formation the boundary of both the subdivisions were surveyed and made settlement for twenty years. In the Panchpir subdivision the total increase of revenue was 40 percent over the old *jama* of Rs. 1,26,862. Karanjia the headquarters of Panchpir was 125 kilometer from the state capital Baripada. The communication was scanty and inviolable. As Panchpir was distantly located from the royal capital the degree of exploitation was more. The Sardari system of revenue collection was prevailed in Panchpir. The *Sardars* were outsiders who settled temporarily there. They amassed a huge landed property of high quality and irrigated lands by illegal ways from the poor peasants. They forced the rural laborers to work free for them. They were also engaged as coolies on various occasions to serve the *Sardars*³².

Though Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanjdeo abolished *bethi* system, it was vague in Panchpir subdivision. The unscrupulous officers took advantage of it during the excavation of irrigation projects like *Pratap Sagar* of Karanjia³³. The *Sardars* also compelled the village folks and the tribal drummers to participate in royal hunting. During such chase many beaters and village folks got injured or murdered by wild animals for which there was no adequate compensation from the state. Sometimes the hunting operation continued for a week or more when the participants were not engaged in any domestic work or earn as they were away from the house. The villagers obeyed all the order of the *Sardar* unwillingly which caused mass dissatisfaction among them.

In the Jashipur area of Panchpir subdivision the people had to pay *payika pancha* in kind during special occasion. The tribes had to pay taxes for using various forest products like *lac*, *Mahua* flower, *Sal* leaves, *Sal* seeds and honey etc. They sold these forest products in the local market to the agent of merchants coming from either Calcutta or Ranchi³⁴. The Muslim money lenders coming from Tata, Chainbasa and Ranchi exploited the people of Panchpir.

Bansidhar Behera' uncle house was at Gadsahi on the suburb of Karanjia. His father in law was Sadananda Nayak, a well known figure of that locality. In the year 1939, when he visited his uncle house he was shocked to know the feudatory rule and the activities of the *Sardars* in Panchpir subdivision. He toured different villages of Panchpir like Jashipur, Bhanjkia, Raruan, Sukruli and other places. During his tour with two Bengali friends he met with Krushna Chandra Mrugaraj, a prominent leader of Jashipur. Both of them were educated and took part in the National movement at Midnapore. They fixed a date for meeting at Jashipur in the year 1938 and circulated the message beating drum in the local Hats. It was the first public meeting of Panchpir subdivision. On the fixed date a huge number common people as well as the local tribes participated in the meeting. He urged the revenue policy and the collection of *Payikas* in Panchpir. He requested the common people to come out from their slumbers to raise voice against injustice. Lastly he said them to join in the congress movement led by Gandhi. Behera and the other congress leaders became happy for the success of the meeting. They formed the congress committee at Jashipur and Krushna Chandra Mrugaraj was nominated as the President³⁵.

Bansidhar Behera and other two congress leaders went to Rasamtala village near Karanjia with Krushna Chandra Mrugaraj to meet Kantharam Das. Kantharam was a renowned personality of Panchpir who was highly inspired to see them. A public meeting was organized under the President ship Sri Das at Gadsahi on 25th March 1939. The meeting was organized by Dharitri Das, Tankadhar Tripathy, Kalindi Prasad Mohanta, Khusal Chandra Arya, Rasananda Mohanta, Balaram Bindhani, Purusottam Mohanta and others³⁶. More than ten thousand people attended the meeting. As a devotee of Vaishnavism, his four hundred disciples join with them. They made a procession through the *Kacheri Bazar* and police station then reached the

meeting ground. Behera strongly criticized the mal administration of the *Bhanjas* and addressed the people to join in the freedom movement.

Bhaktabandhu Mohanta a school teacher, Shyamsingh Tigria and Krushna Chandra Mrugaraj organized a public meeting at Bhanjakaia³⁷. Tigria was nominated as the President of the meeting where Sri Behera focused on the mal administration of the *Bhanjas* and requested the people to participate in the Gandhian movement launched for the freedom of the country. His chief aim was to end the feudatory rule of the *Bhanjas* who ruled as the agent of the British authority in Mayurbhanj. Another important meeting was organized at Bhanjkai by Shiva Prasad Mohanta. He united the people of different villages for the meeting.

After the completion of village level organizations, Behera come again in 1940 to call the final mass meeting at Karanjia. They met Kantharam Das and decided to hold the meeting. But the previous situation had been changed. Suddenly the police appeared and drove them. No one was able to give shelter to them. Lastly they reached in the house of Bhakta Bandhu at night 10 p.m. who gave shelter and treated as guest in spite of the fear of police. The very next day when they tried to hold the meeting the royal supporters burnt the straw bed and damage the cooking utensils. The leaders present in the spot were tortured and drove them up to the boarder of Keonjhar. Behera tried to organize a meeting at Sukruli but failed due to the oppressive measures of the police. Lastly he came back to Bhanjakaia and addressed the gatherings under the banner of National congress. A large number of people from all parts of the subdivision present in the meeting. He addressed the people to follow the principles of Satyagraha and Ahimsa to fight against the mighty British Empire. He advised them to boycott the foreign goods. He strongly criticized the *Sardari* system and the imposition of various taxes on the village folk. Above all he requested the people to prepare themselves for the end of feudatory rule in Mayurbhanj. Unfortunately the royal police arrested Behera from the meeting ground and decided to bring him to Baripada on bare foot. From Manda he was quite unable to walk. So he was brought by a cot carrying by the people and presented before the royal court³⁸.

K.C.Niyogi was the *Diwan* and political adviser of Mayurbhanj state from 1935 to 1942. He tried to convince Behera to change his mind and not to work against the Monarchy in Mayurbhanj. He also assured him to provide the *Zamindari* consisting of a few *Mauza* and handed over the agreement paper for his signature. But Behera as a selfless and fearless freedom fighter, toured and thrown away the paper in front of the *Diwan*. Then the police severely punished and sent him to Baripada jail on 26th March 1941³⁹.

During the quiet India movement of 1942, Kantharam Das organised another huge public meeting in the mango grave of Rasamtala. The leaders like Bansidhar Behera and Girish Chandra Roy addressed the gatherings to emancipate the mother India from the bondage of slavery. Bhakta Bandhu resigned from his service and joined with them. As the movement broke out throughout the country the Maharaja ordered the police to be liberal towards the leaders of the congress. Then the police tried to convince the chief of the villages not to participate in meetings against the British. But the people were not in a mode to respond them. They organized meetings one after another without any fear of police and Durbar administration.

After his release from jail he was not sitting idle. As a dedicated freedom fighter he again travelled from village to village and created awareness against the rule of the *Bhanjas* and to fight for mother India. He did not like the liberal policy of other leaders of Mayurbhanj. He took active part in Prajamandal movement of Panchpr. He was fighting and organizing the people in his own way. He did not like to place the king as the constitutional head of Mayurbhanj state. He wanted total abolition of Monarchy and to establish Democratic form of government. He did not support Sunaram Soren or other leaders for the merger of Mayurbhanj with Bihar or any other states. He formed labor union and started the labor movement in the state. Bhima Naik took the leadership and did not allow the labor to work in the manual work or in the field of the *Zamindar* of

Rajaloka. Similarly the labor did not work in the corn field of the Dighi *Zamindar* and made obstacle in cultivation. So they bound to bring labor from other villages. Bansidhar Behera and Prasanna Kumar Dash united the labor for the congress movement in Uparbhag *Pragana* of Mayurbhanj⁴⁰.

In the year 1946 Bansidhar Behera seriously suffered from fever which continued for several weeks. He was taking *Ayurvedic* medicine from the local *Kaviraj*. But the *Ayurvedic* treatment was not successful. Though he was reluctant to go to the general hospital at Baripada, his elder brother Hrushikesh Behera along with his wife compelled and brought by a bullock cart to the hospital. When Sri Behera admitted in the hospital the people from far and wide come to visit him. To avoid the rush of the people the police force watched him. The doctors also knew that the leader of the congress party and the anti royal movement was under their treatment. The doctor started his treatment and gave injections. But the patient was not cured and declared dead on 29th November 1946⁴¹. Without doing postmortem the doctor handed over the dead body to the police. His family members requested police to take the dead body to his native place. But the police feared that the people might gather there and again unite against the Monarchy. So they burnt the dead body at Barunighat near Baripada. The real cause of his death remained in obscurity. His son claimed that his father was treacherously murdered in hospital⁴². After Independence of India his widow wife Ratnamani received freedom fighter pension from the government.

Lastly it may rightly be said that Bansidhar Behera contributed a lot to aware and unite the people for the freedom struggle of India though Mayurbhanj was a Garjat state. He was greatly inspired by the civil disobedience movement of Gandhi and joined as an active worker of the congress for the greater interest of the nation. He followed the foot print of Gandhi and propagated his ideology even in rural villages. He gave importance for the cultivation of *Copa* to prepare clothes by which the people able to boycott the foreign clothes. He was arrested and harassed several times by the royal police and British authority. The philosophy of Gandhi raised his confidence to such an extent that he did not fear the repressive policy of the Raja and the British Raj. When Sharat Chandra Das organized periodical meetings of Prajamandal in Sadar and Kaptipada subdivision, Behera took the leadership and organized the people of Bamanghati and Panchpir subdivision. By the call of Behera the laborers and rural folks of Bamanghati come forward without fearing the hatred repressive and rigorous measures adopted by the Raja. In Panchpir subdivision he was a popular leader and able to mobilize the public for the movement holding a good number of meetings. As the first freedom fighter of Gandhian era, when the people of Mayurbhanj dared not raise voice against the Durbar administration, he stood at the front line and fought for the nation. He should be given tribute as the son of the soil for his self sacrifices and uncompromising endeavor for the larger interest of the country.

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