



The Student Movement of 1980 in Odisha: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT

A movement is a collective attempt by a group of people to change social values and government policy. Student movement is not a new phenomenon in India. The freedom movement in India had an electrifying impact on the students of India as well as Odisha. There has been a transformation of the student movement since Independence in Odisha. The platonic objective of achieving national independence and broader objective of tackling enormous socio-economic maladies have generally been replaced by sporadic and unorganized movements based mainly on local issues and aimed at specific grievances. This paper attempts to explore the origin, impact, role of student leaders and role of student organizations in 1980 Student Movement in Odisha. The Student Movement of 1980 was the result of aggravating act of a section of the businessmen community against a group of student and youth volunteers making collection of funds for the flood relief.

Key Words: Movement, Government, Independence, Leader, Organization

Introduction:

Students constitute the most dynamic and progressive components of all modern societies. By the virtue of their concentration in educational centers and homogeneity, unbounded energy and youthful idealism, training and education, comparative freedom from family responsibility and job and active political awareness, they present an easily mobilizable compact mass. At times being harnessed, students generated considerable force or power that usually produce immediate impact on society and influence the pace of social change. Student movement has become a global phenomenon. Despite their fickle and transient character, student movements have basically affected the history of contemporary world. Social revolutions have sprung for student movements while the governments in a number of countries have failed in recent years mainly due to massive student protests. The emergence of massive student movements has been one of the crucial social phenomena during the decade after 1960s.

After the Independence, one of the major developments in the national life has been the prevailing of student agitation throughout India. The spirit of student unrest running rampant in Odisha from time to time is not only confined to the campuses of colleges but also seen in the universities also. From the high-level officials down to the most illiterate almost all are concerned with it. It manifests in various forms, such as; demonstrations, strikes, vandalism, hunger-strikes, breaking of laws etc. While student protest politics of different kinds and

intensity, related mostly to campus-oriented issues eventuate in Odisha, some of them have been affected by major student movements concerning broader economic, political, educational and social issues.

The student movement of 1980 in the Western part of Odisha owes its origin to the collection of money for the purpose of flood affected people. Surya Bohidar, a student leader of Gangadhar Meher College of Sambalpur and an activist of the Bharatiya Lok Dal organized the student activists to collect funds at Sambalpur on instruction of the state leadership of his political party. On 21 September 1980, Surya Bohidar and his associates set out for the Khetrajpur area of Sambalpur where most of the town's Marwari traders were concentrated. A section of Marwari traders refused to give any contribution for the flood relief saying that they have already contributed enough. An exchange of words between Surya Bohidar and a local trader named Maniraj Jogiram followed. After this controversy, at the instigation of the traders, Surya Bohidar was assaulted by some anti-socials. With a fractured leg and deep injuries in the body, Surya Bohidar was admitted to the local hospital at Sambalpur city. That led to a conflagration and immediately took a communal color.¹

All over the districts of western Odisha, the local people had always resented the money-power, clout and prosperity of the Marwaris. There was already envy and anger and the incident of 21 September of assault against Surya Bohidar resulted in the inevitable explosion. The Students whole over the western Odisha launched a movement against the Marwaris. The incident of Sambalpur was considered as a challenge by the entire student masses of the state. On 21 September, two trucks load of students armed with stones and lathis went to the Khetrajpur area by breaking the police cordon and started pelting stones at the shops of the Marwari businessmen. To bring the situation under the control, the police had to fire a couple of rounds.² 42 students were injured in police action.

On 22 September 1980, the local students of Sambalpur took out a procession. They pelted stones to the town police station. Some students also pelted stones from inside the Gangadhar Meher College campus. There was a four-hour battle between the police and the students. Within a few days, rioting spread to other neighboring towns and the districts of Sambalpur. For weeks, thousands of students in different parts of the western Odisha marched on the streets venting their anger. The students raised the slogans for containing price rise in essential commodities and to punish the black-marketers. Students in many places, clashed with the police and looted and burnt shops and houses of numerous Marwari People at different places. The Marwari businessmen also retaliated wherever they could, but some of them fled to the then Madhya Pradesh, especially to Raipur and other cities.³

Following such violence, the State Government of Odisha sent in heavy police force to Sambalpur town. The students simply spread out to other parts of the district to keep their movement alive. Processions were taken out in Bargarh, Deogarh, Burla, Jharsuguda and other places of the then Sambalpur district. Even the school students participated in the procession. Soon the violence had spread over to the nearer districts of Dhenkanal, Sundargarh and Phulbani as students went on strike and organized protest marches. Bolangir town was worst affected by the rioting.⁴

A group of students from Sambalpur arrived at Bolangir to plead with the local students to join with them in a common cause on 24 September. But the students of Bolangir were preoccupied with the elections to the Students' Union there. They neither had the time to go on strike or hold protests at that time. It was on 27 September, the newly elected president of the Students' Union of Rajendra College of Bolangir, Ratan Moharana having his affiliation with the ruling political party brought out a procession shouting slogans against Marwari Businessmen. The law and order authorities of the district of Bolangir were following the procession to watch the situation. Previously, the students assured that there would be no violence. But when the procession of the students dispersed, groups of students including non-students went on rampage. The situation

came under the control after clamping a 24 hours curfew. Group of students at the same time resorted to violence in the Binka town of the then Bolangir district. It was the same story in towns like Patnagarh, Titlagarh, Kantabanji, Birmaharipur, Sonapur and Dunguripalli. From those towns, violence spread to rural areas.⁵

It was politics that really escalated the communal war, the worst of its kind in the history of modern Odisha. Never before had the Marwari businessmen were the victim of Communal insanity anywhere in Odisha. As violence started in Sambalpur, the people were led to believe that the ruling Congress (I) Party was supporting the Marwari Businessmen. So the Congress (I) party activists, just to counter the allegation that they were pro-Marwari, took leading part in the Students' agitation in Bolangir. They wanted to display that they were more active and committed to the anti-Marwari movement than their counterparts in Sambalpur.⁶

As a result of that movement trade came to a stop off in the districts of western Odisha. There was a popular public support for the anti-Marwari movement as the local people felt exploited and neglected. The public did insist that it had been brewing for a long time; all it needed was enthusiasm. Since the days of the British raj, the entire western Odisha has been neglected. The people of Sambalpur, mostly cultivators felt that most of their earnings were surrendered to Maharajas and *Gauntias* (landlords). The other communities which were rich besides the Marwari were the Gujaratis. These communities were combined to form formidable elite in western Odisha. There was a strong feeling in that area that Odias were exploited. Not a single Odia in the town of Sambalpur was a wholesaler dealing with the essential commodities. The Gujarati businessmen were dominant in the Timber trade and Kendu leaves. The feudal lords of western Odisha gradually started investing their money in business and which initially resulted a rift with the Marwaris.⁷

An appeal was made by the frontline leaders of all political parties to maintain communal harmony and to preserve the traditional friendship among the different communities. This joint appeal was issued in the Odisha State Legislative Assembly by the leaders of different political parties. They appealed to the public to maintain social traditions, communal harmony and the amity in the in the greater interest of the all-round development of the state of Odisha and the country. The signatories were the Chief Minister, Janaki Ballav Patnaik, the Speaker of the Odisha Assembly, Somanath Rath, the former Chief Minister, Nandini Satpathy, Sarat Kumar Deb (Lok Dal), R.K. Pati (C.P.I.), Gadadhar Giri (Janata Dal), Balgopal Mishra, Basudev Mohapatra, Upendra Dixit, Bipin Das and Matlub Ali.⁸

The anti-Marwari movement of the students of Sambalpur could not be confined to the districts of Western Odisha only. It became a state-wide movement on a 8-point Charter of demands put-forth by the All Odisha Students' Action Committee. The demands included the action against the black marketers, profiteers and hoarders, containing of price rise, to stop neglecting the flood victims, to stop the proposed bus fare hike and granting other concessions to the students of the state. The State Government took all measures to face the student strikes organized on 21 November. The President of All Odisha Students' Action Committee, Suresh Pujari gave a call for a State-wide Bandh on 5 December 1980. The State Government made all preparations to deal with the proposed Band by the State Students' Action Committee. The State government finally appointed a Committee of the Educationists headed by the former Chief Minister Harekrushna Mahatab to go through the demands of the students and give suitable recommendations.⁹

The political parties of the state appealed for maintaining communal harmony irrespective of party-affiliation. The students' strike became a state-wide movement with the 8-point Charter of Demands which included some non-academic demands. The ruling Congress (I) Party accused that the opposition political parties were encouraging the students to protest against the state government. The Union Home Minister of State, Yogendra Makwana stated in the Parliament that "there is a hand of some political persons who have played a major role",

in inciting students both outside and inside the campuses leading to strikes and altercations between the students and the local people. It was regrettable that the fall out of the Assam Movement had its impact in several parts of the country giving rise to narrow, regional and jingo tendencies.¹⁰

Besides the strike in Odisha, in the state of Bihar the wall writings had appeared in Bhagalpur and Patna against the Marwari Businessmen. The people from various walks of life as well as the political parties extended their support to the students. The ruling Congress (I) Government found itself in an uncomfortable position. To counter the movement a parallel Students' Leaders Action Committee was formed with the blessings of the State leadership of Congress (I) Party. They summoned a meeting and adopted a 14-point Charter of Demands, which described by the Chief Minister, Janaki Ballav Patnaik as "Constructive Demands".¹¹ The opposition political parties like the Janata Party, the Congress (U), the Communist Party of India, the Communist Party of India (Marxists), the Lok Dal, the Forward Block Supported the demands of the Students' Action Committee led by Suresh Pujari. The Trade Unions and other organizations extended their support to the students' movement. The Akhila Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), however, tried to function independently during the Movement. The left wing student organizations like D.S.O., A.I.S.F. and S.F.I. were very active during the Bandh that was organized on 5 December 1980. The Akhila Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) gave a separate call for 'Bandh' to be organized on 3 December, which was later withdrawn due to opposition of the students in general and other student organizations in particular. The state government took it as a challenge and wanted to face it at the political level. The state government mobilized political influence to subvert the Bandh call and contain the student movement.¹² The proposed "Odisha Bandh" on 5 December was by the students all over the state. The strength of the Bandh was so enormous that there was curfew in Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Phulbani. Students of the state without caring to the police atrocity and cruelty of the government made the Bandh successful. Six students and youths were killed during the movement.¹³

The movement of 1980 was the result of the aggravating act of a section of the businessmen community against a group of public workers making collection of fund for the flood relief. That prompted in the direct action against the Marwari community. However, the student leaders and the State Students' Action Committee had repeatedly declared that the agitation was not against any particular community, but black-marketers and hoarders.

Conclusion:

The movement of 1980 was not confined only in Sambalpur, the place where it started but spread to other parts of the state like the Students' Movement of 1964. The impact of the 1980 Students' Movement was more intense in the districts of Western Odisha. The movement of 1980 turned to be violent. Of course various student organizations were active with their active cadres but there was destruction of public and private property. Like the movement of 1964, the movement of 1980 was politicized by the support of the different opposition parties because of their political affiliation and commitment to the different issues of the movement. The movement of 1980 could not have that impact like the movement of 1964 because of the overwhelming majority of the ruling Congress (I) on the floors of the State Assembly and the solidarity among the Congress (I) leaders of state in facing the agitation and fighting it out at the political level.

The agitation of 1980 gave the state many political leaders who subsequently have chosen various political parties according to their ideologies and commitments. Some of them are now political leaders of standing in the state. They are Suresh Pujari, Ranendra Pratap Swain, Radharani Panda, Bishnu Das, Utkal Keshari Parida, Debi Prasad Mishra, Amar Prasad Satapathy, Pradeep Maharathy, Janardana Pati, Naba Kishore Das, Kishore Mohanty and Bhabani Hota etc.¹⁴

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