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The Ganatantra Parishad- Assessing Origin & Nature of the first Odia Nationalist Party

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In the early years of independence, "the Congress because of its historic role was a national force to be reckoned with. From 1948 onwards, the Congress supremacy was challenged by the emergence of a strong regional party, the "Gantantra Parishad"¹ National movement was the main platform around which the process of party building started in pre-independence Odisha. Later, these parties reorganized themselves to fight the congress in 1952 General election. But the major opposition and challenge which the Congress faced was from the Ganatantra Parishad. It was a party which emerged partly out of the regionalist feelings among the people and partly out of the anti-Congress attitude of the feudal sections of the society in Western Odisha.

The Ganatantra Parishad was born as a right wing, conservative party towards the year 1948. It has been branded as "reactionary", dominated by feudal interests and medieval traditions, party of disgruntled princely, etc. In those days, there were other national and regional parties, but these parties had played a secondary role to the Indian National Congress. But the Ganatantra Parishad seldom gets a good press. It is 'reactionary ' or dominated by feudal interests and medieval traditions' or it was a party of 'disgruntled princelings'². It's rank and file are supposed to be illiterate tribals, hoodwinked by the Rajas, and incapable of realising that they are in the twentieth century and not knowing that there is a world of difference in democratic content between a vote given on the instructions of a local party boss and one given on the instructions of a Raja's henchman.



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This article will discuss the role of Ganatantra for ex-rulers and other things as well. It is more than a party of 'disgruntled princelings' and if it were only that, it would not have grown successively stronger in the two elections since its formation. Secondly, for the 'blatantly reactionary policies' which, the Ganatantra try to be 'a party which believed sincerely in Parliamentary democracy and accepted the socio-economic programmes of the Congress'.

Background and formation of the Party

India in 1948 was lighting a desperate struggle against anarchy. There was the crisis in Kashmir there were refugee problems, there was the struggle over the Princely States. The Odisha Government had won its battle against the rulers of the Feudatory States and it took over the administration of these areas on January 1st 1948. The rulers were granted a privy purse based on the state's income, and an allowance to meet their religious obligations, and certain tax concessions. At the higher level of policy making there is discernible a distinct effort to be conciliatory, or at least to avoid vindictiveness. But at the same time the climate of 1948 was not suited to gentle and subtle handling of opponents who showed the least sign of recalcitrance. Disorders were suppressed with a heavy hand.

At the height of partition and subsequent violence, there was an urgent need of peace. It was at this time that the Odisha State lost their identity and merged in Odisha. The Rulers of these States who were dreaming dreams of sovereignty after the withdrawal of the British awoke from the helplessness which had led them to agree to the merger. Some of them misused the privileges guaranteed to them by the Government of India and like the traditional Bhasmasur' attempted to use these privileges to weaken the power that had granted them the same. The rulers were joined by self-seekers whose ambition could not be fulfilled with the assumption of power by the Congress. Many of those Congressmen who had outlived the patriotic fervour of the thirties and those, whose political ambition had got the better of their good sense, cut themselves from the Congress as Socialists and Communists, to preach discontent and disaffection. The big plans of development which the Government launched upon at the very beginning of their regime afforded the Socialists, the Communists, and the feudal rulers an opportunity to launch their attacks against Government at Hirakud and among the Adibasis of Bamra and Mayurbhanj. The Government of Odisha faced the attack boldly and used the very force which had been so long used against themselves by the British to establish order in the State. Now the police served as guardians of



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peace, engaged by a democratic Government, so that revolutionary administrative changes and the bold development plans might proceed unhampered. Naturally both the Government and their agents were misrepresented and misjudged. Towards the end of the year (1950) the activities of Ranjit Singh Bariha and other Ministers, among the tribal population, contributed to a very great degree to easing the tribal situation by bringing about a broad outlook of unity among them. The foundation of the Nikhil Utkal Adibasi Congress was laid which, in the succeeding year was to grave the Jharkhand movement of Odisha a go-by.³

Tribal uprising in Odisha

There were tribal risings in 1948 in Bamra, Gangpur, Bonai, and Pal-Lahara. These were put down by the Armed Police, some people were killed, others were detained, and collective fines were imposed on villages. In Kharsawan there was a particularly unpleasant outbreak, resulting, according to the official enquiry, in 14 deaths, and according to an unofficial estimate, several hundred⁴.

In Gangpur the Bihar tribal leaders had a hand. At about this time some rulers started an agitation for a States' Union. Demonstrations were arranged in Kalahandi, Bolangir-Patna, Keonjhar, and Bamra, and extensive leafleteering urging the masses to nullify the merger was indulged in. The centers of activity were shifted to Calcutta, Chaibassa and Monoharpur (Singbhum) to avoid legal action by the Provincial Government. Tribals in Keonjhar, Gangpur, Bonai, Bamra and Kalahandi were regularly contacted and incited to violence. In spite of the arrest and internment of prominent agitators, the Royalists continued to excite the tribals of Bamra, who were worked up to demand an immediate transfer of power to them. Mob lawlessness broke out with the result that at Deogarh (Bamra) on 26th July firing had to be resorted to resulting in 3 dead and 13 injured. The situation was soon brought under control. The Union movement continued with the financial hacking of the Rulers, but in October 1948 the Rulers agreed to accept the merger and the movement died out.

The next phase in the integrated States started with the Maharajas of Kalahandi and Bolangir-Patna aided by the Rajas of Gangpur, Sonapur, and Bamra sponsoring a new political organization called the 'Khoshal-Utkal Praja Parishad', the members of which consisted chiefly of Prajamandal separatist and anti-merger agitators with headquarters at Bolangir (Patna). Branches of the Parishad were opened in Kalahandi, Sonapur, Gangpur, Bonai, Keonjhar, Athmallick, and Boudh and paid workers were busy



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propagating the party's ideals vilifying the Congress Government and Government employees, and canvassing support from the States people who were advised to vote for the Parishad candidates in the next general election.

Following the merger of Mayurbhanj in 1949 the leaders of the Adibasi Mahasabha and the anti-mergers incited the tribals to a wide-spread lawlessness and defiance of law and order. With the arrest of some of their leaders, the agitation took a more violent form and felling of reserve forests started on a large scale. Armed tribal mobs moved about in the interior and threatened the non-tribals, two of whom were killed. They damaged the ghat roads and telegraph communications in their attempt to march upon Rairangpur and Baripada. To check lawlessness, fire had to be opened on a few occasions and the movement gradually died out with the quartering of detachments of the Military Police Force, rounding up of agitators in specific cases, a few detentions, and the imposition of collective fines⁵.

Emergence of Ganatantra Parishad

It was in this background of chaos and disorder that the Ganatantra Parishad emerged due to the following reasons:

The main lesson to be drawn from the events of 1948 and 1949 was that the Odisha Congress Government was not welcomed into the hill areas. There were many reasons for this. Firstly, and fundamentally, there was the long-established antipathy between the hill and the coastal areas: the feeling against '*Katakis*'. This meant that not only the ex-rulers, who had their own particular grievance and reason for being 'disgruntled', but also the small middle-class and the common people of the hill areas looked with alarm on the new incursion of '*Katakis*'. Nor, so it seems, was much attempt made to win them over. The officials and the police descended upon the ex-state areas looking for trouble, as they could hardly do otherwise in 1948. They came, 'with the mentality of conquerors': complaints and protests were treated as 'subversion'. People were imprisoned or internment from their home areas, and the ordinary mechanisms of democratic protest did not exist.

Secondly, there were certain administrative discomforts following on the merger. A startling and immediate one was the price of rice. The ex-states were, in many respects, closed economies and shielded from the market prices ruling elsewhere in Odisha. The price of rice increased fourfold overnight in some states. In addition to this came the inconveniences of a large-scale bureaucracy. The personal local rule of



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the Raja vanished and in its place came an organization which could be moved into action only by unfamiliar and lengthy and complicated procedures, and often located many miles further away. It would have been miraculous if the take-over had occurred without friction, and whatever went wrong was naturally blamed upon the administrators who had been sent up from the coast by the Congress Government. In their turn the administrators blamed their difficulties on local 'subversive elements' and 'agitators'.

After the merger things were bad, the people could not swallow the merger as they were never consulted. Local officials were transferred to far off district. New official stumbled upon the local area to govern in new way. There was a heavy price rise in all goods and commodities including rice. The free medical facilities of pre-merger were no longer available. The administration did not care for the people, rather they behaved like victors over vanquished. All this molded the mind of the intelligentsia. Previously people had direct approach to the Raja and they used to get their remedy. But the remedy now was too far away. All educated people felt something had to be done. Bribery and corruption were rampant and vivid. Everyone thought that something must be done. The intelligentsia went to the rulers and wanted them to start a party. It was at this juncture, there was firing in Seraikeila and Kharsawan and Bamra and Mayurbhanj which all led to a cumulative effect. People were actually being killed. This situation further infuriated the people and result was formation of political party. First a party that was called Khoshal-Utkal Praja Parishad was formed at Sambalpur, just after the firing at Bamra. There was also a demand for an Eastern States Union. One thing we considered was that they had not taken the consent of the people, but only of the rulers in getting us merged with Odisha. Secondly, people had lost their own administration and were being ruled by outsiders in the name of democracy and self-rule. There was a demand of right to self-determination. The solutions to these problems were creation of a political outfit and that emerged in the form of Ganatantra Parishad. It was strong, for one reason, because it has the backing of the local intelligentsia.

Nature of the Ganatantra Parishad

This is not to deny that life was difficult for subjects in many of the states, nor is it to imply that there is no foundation in the allegations made against the Rajas in the States Enquiry Committee Report, which the Congress published in 1939. But it does seem that either people have very short memories only four



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years intervened between the merger and the first general election in which many Rajas or candidates supported by Rajas came out victorious-or else that whatever odium there was, it fell not so much upon the persons of the Raj family, but upon their administrators. It is also to be remembered that the exactions and impositions of the Rajas were sanctioned by tradition, and that they would not appear as outrageous to the state subjects as they did to the democratically-minded agitators who came from outside. A king even a bad one belongs to his people, and for the greater part of the population in the ex-state areas the king alone symbolized their existence as a political unit, and indeed as a religious unit. With the merger and arrival of new officials, it seemed as if a gang of outsiders had descended on the state and driven out their ruler. The states people would have preferred to deal with their problems them-selves, and not to have a solution thrust upon them. All these factors gave those Raj families who chose to go into politics a head start, and many of them turned out to be able organizers and energetic campaigners. But even those who were not energetic had the dicevery much loaded in their favour, and against the Congress⁶.

In terms of administrative organization a feudal system exists when functions are not specialized and divided between different persons, but the one man performs all functions in the area over which he has control. These powers are delegated downwards from a king, the division being made on the basis of territory. The obverse of 'feudal' is 'bureaucratic', rule by officials, where functions are divided between different offices (bureaucrats), and within one territory there are several persons performing the functions which in a feudal system would reside in one man. In this sense, most of the feudatory states, if not all, are direct and simple paternal government with the bureaucratic setup. But clearly the Ganatantra Parishad is not to be distinguished from other parties in Odisha by this meaning of 'feudal'. In its internal organization it is no closer to and no further from the feudal or the bureaucratic models than are the other parties.

The second meaning which we might attach to 'feudal' is that the party support is in some way connected with the feudal organization which existed formerly in the Feudatory State. Undoubtedly it was because various local feudal, the Gaontias or Nayaks or Bisois or Patros as they are called in the different districts, are men of influence and lend their support in electioneering to the Ganatantra. But even today also every party tries to approach the electorate not as individual voters but in groups and congregations, and it is hard to make any mortal distinction between an approach which uses the groups of a 'feudal' system and



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one which works through contractors, the heads of caste-groups, village schoolmasters, or any other local man of influence.

Thirdly, the party might be considered feudal because it makes use of loyalties and affections which the people in some states felt for their Raja. But again, it is hard to see how they could be expected to do otherwise, for from a moral point of view this is no different from the advantage which the Congress enjoys in the person of Nehru and of various local leaders. It is alleged that in certain areas among the backward people for instance parts of Koraput-Ganatantra canvassers proclaimed that a vote for their party would mean the restoration of a member of the ruling house who was held in great affection by the people. Such tactics would certainly be a perversion, for it is obvious that no member of the ruling houses is likely to be restored to his throne. But, apart from dishonesties of this kind, to which all parties stoop at times, there can be no legitimate complaint if the Ganatantra makes use of the affection and regard in which some of their Rajas were held. In both respects in making use of a feudal organization and of feudal loyal the Ganatantra is a feudal party, but it is no worse than any other party for that: all parties make use of existing loyalties. By and large these loyalties are morally neutral: what matters is the use successful candidates' make of the power given to them.

It is an easy fallacy to think that a party which rested initially on feudal loyalties is there by dedicated to restoring feudalism. It is impossible for an outsider to know what is in the hearts of men, and one can judge only from what people do and what they say is their intention. Judged in this fashion the Ganatantra is not feudal. It's published manifestos and declarations of other kinds say nothing about restoring the kingship. Certainly, the members of the party, the Raj families and the rest, are out for power, but the power they seek is just that which is held now by the Congress: it is kingly power. Like all the other parties which are at work in Odisha they are pledged to bring about socialism. Given their background, there is certainly a temptation to question their sincerity in this: but the same exactly might be said of many members of the Congress⁷.

Thus, the data collected from the old people we have an impression of the Ganatantra members, particularly those who belong to Raj families, is that on the whole they have more faith in the integrity and intelligence of their constituents, than do the members of other parties.



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The Ganatantra was rather a middle-class party than a party of aristocrats. Of its 51 members in the 1957 house, twenty-five occupy reserved seats. Of the remaining 26, eleven belonged to Raj families and fifteen come from the professional or commercial middle-class.⁸ Of the eleven Raj family members, three had been rulers of states. In the Coalition cabinet (July 1959) there are five Ganatantra Ministers: of these two were rulers and three are middle-class, one a doctor and two who combined a law practice with politics. Even the Congress after the 1957 elections was not so very different in this respect.⁹

Conclusion

There is very little evidence that the Ganatantra represents reaction or feudalism or only the 'disgruntled princelings'. One can only make out a case for this by picking out one or two of the more spectacularly atavistic rulers, assuming (wrongly) that they were typical of all rulers, and then resting the argument on the maxim that a leopard cannot change its spots. What the Ganatantra Parishad in fact represents is the hill area of Odisha. In this respect it differs from the Congress in ideology and outlook there is no obvious discernible difference. For almost two decades the Ganatantra Parishad played a crucial role in the politics of Odisha. However, the victory of the congress in 1961 mid-term election, and the led to the consequent decline of the Ganatantra Parishad.¹⁰ The working committee of the parishad reviewed the possibility of its merger with the like-minded Swatantra party. Finally, on March 3, 1962, the Ganatantra Parishad became the Odisha branch of the All-India Swatantra Party adopting the star as its election symbol¹¹.

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