CHAPTER - 3

THE PEASANT LEADER
BISWANATH DAS : AS A PEASANT LEADER

3.A. Introduction:

Biswanath Das was born in an affluent family of land-based aristocracy. The joint family of Das owned more than ten thousand acres of land. With such background, does it seem natural that Das should have spent a decade of his life time for the upliftment of the poor peasants? Yet, he was the first ever Congressman in India to engineer a struggle to emancipate the poor farmers from the dark shadow of exploitation perpetuated by the Maharajas and Mustadars (Zamindars or Landlords). Not to be surprised such

1. "Man's behaviour is both self-oriented and other oriented. He works both to advance himself and to help others. The desire to help others, the altruistic want, appears early in childhood. It is from such simple beginning in the childhood that the altruistic want is elaborated into the ameliorating and philanthropic works of men. The promotion of men's welfare is a major pre-occupation of many people in many parts of the world and seems to be highly valued in most societies".

See, Krech, David et al., in 'Individual and Society' op. cit. p. 98.
attitude towards and activities for the poor peasant of Das inspired many Congressmen in other parts of India to adopt and implement similar programmes. Even Gandhiji was highly impressed with the missionary zeal and performance of Das.

By 1920's, Orissa was not a separate State; its southern portion (Ganjam-Koraput region) was the part of the Madras Presidency of the British India. Accordingly a revenue system known as the "Rayatwari System" was in operation as per the Madras Estate Land Act. Biswanath Das and his ancestors were royats under the Act. They were severely exploited and tortured by the Maharajas, Zamindars and their Revenue Officers. The royats put their hard labour for production but the lion's share was being taken away by the greedy Zamindars.

3. A.(i) Formation of the Royat Movement:

Due to the spiritual indoctrination in the childhood and adequate political socialization in his youth, Das developed inclination towards the 'ideal self' - towards the sufferers of the society. And, the poor peasants were the first for him to be considered
as the class of worst exploited. To develop such an attitude towards the cause of the peasants, Das did not need any second hand information\(^1\). Like other royats, Biswanath Das himself suffered the inhuman activities of the Rajas. Immediately he involved himself with the problems of the peasants. Initially he kept the area of operation restricted only to the Zamindari of Khallikote. He had the unique distinction and the rare calibre in organising peasants and led the foundation of India's first "Kisan (Peasant) Movement" in 1920\(^2\). Subsequently, enlarging the sphere of his activities he went on organising the Royat's of the Ganjam district and started claiming remedies to their problems. He formed the Royat's Union in the Northern

1. He had the direct experience of exploitation perpetrated by the Maharaja of Khalikote as the latter was a Land Lord over a portion of Das's estate.

See, 'Das, Dr. S.C. "Our First Prime Minister" op.cit.

2. Das organised the Ganjam District Zamindari Royat's Association in 1920.
Province of the Madras Presidency and became its President. The V.V. Giri was the Secretary of the Union.

As the representative of the Royat's Union, both Das and Giri were elected to the Madras Legislative Council and Das remained as its member till 1930\(^1\). Working with such eminent persons with Das had the practical leadership training and thorough knowledge in legislative procedures and practices which lateron helped him to be a successful parliamentarian.

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1. Das resigned from the Council in 1930, as he was inspired by the call of Gandhiji for Civil Disobedience. During his membership of the Council nearly for a decade, he had the occasion to work with such eminent people as A. Ramaswami Mudalier, Subramaniam Aiyar, Sibaswami Aiyar, Sammukham Chetti, Satyamurthi and Chakravarti Rajgopal Chari.

See, "Biswanath Das: A Patriot", by Hazary Dr. N., in "Biswanath Das: A Tribute, "Department of Political Science, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Orissa."
As the representative of the Royat's union and as a labour leader, he relentlessly fought almost for a decade to safeguard the interest of the poor peasants. Outside the Council he was gradually extending his sphere of activities. Actively supported by Gopabandhu Das and Nabakrushna Choudhury (the two top leaders of Orissa advocating a set of radical programmes and ideologies), Das organised the peasants in other parts of the states like Kanika and Dhenkanal.

The more and more the peasants started organising themselves clearer became a division in the Orissan Society. As the days rolled on it was clearly became evident that the two classes were heading towards a collision.

1. The two divisions were - the poverty stricken peasantry supported and guided by a sympathetic middle class on one side and on the other side, the zamindars with some educated people who were naturally their employees.

See, "Tenant Movement and Biswanath Das ", by Patnaik, Dr. A.K., in "Biswanath Das Personality and Politics ", ed. by Baral, J.K., Published, Berhampur University, 1990.
The mission of Das of uplifting the status of the peasants cast him into grave difficulty. Das fought the movement both inside and outside the Legislature, he fought it in the press or on the floor depending upon time and situation. Outside the Legislature he was organising the regular meetings to perpetuate the spirit of protest against the privileged. He was inviting leaders from outside the State for its better advertisement and to stimulate in the peasants. The spirit of confidence and more vigorous resistance.

3.A.(ii) The Movement did not yield much:

It is to be admitted, Das even during his membership of the Council, for almost a decade could not achieve much for the peasants. The immediate reasons were mainly two:

1. Such difficulties involved, "heavy financial loss, crossing mental agony and unmerited social censure".
   See, Pattnaik, Lalmohan, "Resurrected Orissa", Cuttack, 1941, p. 22.
(a) Gandhiji's visit to Berhampur in December 1927, and

(b) The simultaneous movement for the unification of the Oriya-speaking tracts, spearheaded by the Utkal Union Conference.

3.A.(ii)(a) Gandhiji's visits Orissa:

Gandhiji in course of his visit to Orissa, came to Ganjam. During his stay, he used to Rambha Palace, the health-resort of the Maharaja, on the bank of Chilika the biggest natural lake of Orissa. The struggling peasants unfortunately interpreted royal hospitality to Gandhiji as Gandhiji supporting the Maharaja's against the poor peasants. Thus Gandhiji's visit, unfortunately and at least partially had a debilitating effect upon the revolutionary zeal of the peasants. But such a line of interpretation by the peasants and their leader do not seem convincing in as much as Gandhiji, during his stay might have prevailed upon the hosting Maharaja to grant concession to the peasants.
(b) **Movement for the integration of Oriya-speaking tracts:**

The second immediate reason was the amalgamation of the Oriya-speaking tracts movement becoming more intense in 1919. The province of Bihar and Orissa came to exist since 1st April 1912, much against the wishes of Oriyas. The reorganisation of provinces on linguistic basis was recommended by the Montague-Chelmsford Report on Constitutional Reform. The province of the government of India Act, 1919 accepted these recommendation as its main basis. The demands of the Oriyas for a separate province also got endorsed by the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council on 25th November, 1921. Logically, the Utkal Union Conference met the Oriya language movement more intense to make it more meaningful as a result the attention of all the top leaders of Orissa including Biswanath Das was diverted from the Royat Movement to the Oriya Language Movement.

The Royat Movement received the final damaging blow when Das himself resigned from the Council Membership to join the National Freedom Struggle in 1930. With the exist of Das from the
forefront of the Royat Movement, the movement lost its natural tempo.

However, the dream, long cherished by Das, did not go unrealised. When Das became the Premier of Orissa in 1937, he utilised the political power. The resources, and his personal abilities and geared up the entire governmental machineries to uplift the status of the Royats. His government to the last day of the tenure went on introducing a series of legislations (mentioned later on in detail in Chapter-V) towards the goal and his dream was realised finally with the passing of the abolition of Zamindari Act made by the Congress Government of India after the framing of the Constitution. ("Biswanath, as the Peasants' Leader" has also been dealt with in Chapter-1 and Chapter-2.)