CHAPTER – I

History of Orissa (in a nutshell)

And

Rise of Biswanath Das (1918-19)
The early or ancient history of Orissa which begins with the transformation of Ashoka in 261 B.C. following his victory in the Kalinga war is enveloped with an aura of haziness around it. The extent and boundary of present Orissa went through constant and frequent changes from time to time. Her geographical boundaries were never fixed at any point of time. The political geography of this land once included regions in the names of Kalinga, Odra, Odivisa, Toshali, Utkal, Kongoda, Kosala etc.

The later vedic literature, Buddhist and Jaina texts and the puranic scriptures give interesting accounts of the history of these regions and territories. However, in the Rock Edict XIII it is mentioned that Ashoka, the grandson of Chandagupta Maurya invaded Kalinga and achieved a tremendous victory in the war which is famous as the ‘Battle of Kalinga’ of 261 B.C. and with it begins the dated history of Orissa.

Orissa rose to prominence under Kharavela, the Chedi ruler in 1 century B.C. The important dynasties that followed the Chedi rulers were the Matharas, Sailodbhavas, Bhauma-Karas and Somavamsis who ruled in succession till the early part of 12 century A.D. It is to be noted that during the period of rule of the Somavamsi dynasty, Yayati II, the political unification of the present tracts of Orissa become possible for the first time. He annexed Kosala to Utkal first and then conquered Kangoda. The Gangas who followed further expanded the kingdom and
built an empire constituting roughly the eastern part of the district of Raipur, the present capital of Chhatisgarh, the southern districts of Bengal adjacent to Balasore and Godavari and Vizagapatam areas of what was to be later known as the northern parts of Madras presidency.\(^7\)

By the fag end of the Ganga rule, who ruled from 12 to the middle part of 15 century the rise of Vijayanagar empire and Bahamani Sultanate in the south coupled with the repeated invasions of Muslim rulers of Bengal from the north threatened the territorial integrity of Utkal.\(^8\) However, under Kapilendra Dev, the founder of *Suryavamsi* dynasty who followed the Gangas, medieval Orissa not only recovered much of her glories but expanded much farther at the cost of the neighbouring states.\(^9\)

The empire of *Suryavamsi* rulers, also known as the *Gajapati* empire, roughly extending from the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal i.e. from around Hooghly in Bengal to the areas around the Krishna river in deep south which included Kalabarga, Malwa and Kanchi,\(^10\) experienced decline during the reign of Prataprudradeva, a subsequent ruler of the dynasty. The reasons which contributed to the decline were the Muslim invasions from north and south, loss of territories to the south of the Godavari, challenges posed by Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagar empire etc. Govinda Vidyadhar of Bhoi dynasty further lost territories to the south of Simachala.\(^11\) The territorial disintegration
of Orissa became faster due to Afghan advancement from Bengal and Qutb-Shahi power of Golkonda from the south during the reign of Chalukyan king Mukundadeva. When Mukundadeva, the last independent king of medieval Orissa was engaged in a war with Sulaiman Karrani of Bengal, the declaration of independence on the part of Ramachandra Bhanja, the chief of Sarangagarh, complicated matters and out of desperation he entered into a peace treaty with the Bengal ruler in order to fight against Ramachandra Bhanja. But in the war Mukundadeva fell fighting in 1568. Ramachandra Bhanja also got killed in the hands of Sulaiman Karrani, the Bengal ruler, on the same day and at the same place of battle i.e. Gohiratikiri in 1568 as a result of which Utka lost her political independence.

The death of Mukundadeva signaled the beginning of the rule of the Afghans in Orissa. But very soon the Afghans were engaged in a prolonged struggle with the Mughals who tried to establish their sway over Orissa. Ibrahim IV of Golkunda took full advantage of the disturbing conditions prevailing in Orissa and established his supremacy over areas near the Godavari and in the adjacent regions in the south as far as Chicacole. The Mughals, however, successively defeated the Afghans in 1590 and 1592 and annexed Orissa to the Mughal Empire.

Orissa in the 16 century under Akbar’s regime constituted of five unequally divided sarkars called Jaleswar, Bhadrak, Cuttack, Kalinga
Dandapata and Raja Mahendry. Jaleswar *sarkar* included areas like north Balasore, nearly the whole of Midnapore (except Hijili islands and the eastern half of Ghatal Subdivision) and small parts of the districts of Bankura, Manbhum, Singhbhum and of the Mayurbhanj tributary state. Bhadrak *sarkar* consisted of northern Cuttack and the greater part of the present Bhadrak subdivision. Cuttack *sarkar* was situated roughly between the river Baitarani on the north and the river Risikulya on the south, with the sea on the east and the ill-defined *Garjat* state of Baud on the west. It had therefore almost the whole of Cuttack and Puri districts, the northern part of Ganjam district and several *Garjat* states on either bank of the river Mahanadi. Kalinga Dandapat *sarkar* was limited on the north by the river Rishikulya and extended as far as Vishakapatnam in the south. It comprised thus the greater part of modern Ganjam and the northern part of the district of Vishakapatnam. Rajmahendry *sarkar* could be identified with the present district of Godavari and the southern part of the district of Vishakapatnam. The medieval Orissa in the 16th century had the entire region stretching from Tamluk and Midnapur on the north to Rajmahendry on the south.19

With the gradual decline and disintegration of the Mughal empire following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, Murshid Quil Khan I, the then *Subahadar* of Bengal asserted himself and declared independence and made himself the *Nawab* of Bengal, Bihar and
Orissa. Mursid Quli Khan I separated Midnapore from Orissa and added it to Bengal for the sake of administrative convenience of revenue collection.21

In 1740, Alivardi Khan became the Nawab of Bengal Subah who ruled as such for a period of sixteen years.22 During his reign, he was greatly disturbed by the Maratha inroads and got pre-occupied in resisting their attacks mostly undertaken at the instance of Raghuji Bhonsale, the Raja of Nagpur. In order to overcome this constant problem Alivardi Khan had to sign a peace treaty with Raghuji Bhonsale in 1751. 23 As per the terms and conditions of the treaty the river Suvarnarekha became the boundary line between Bengal and Orissa; Midnapore, an Oriya region on the other side of this river getting detached permanently from the mainland in the process. Mir Habib who had played a key role in the process of signing the treaty on behalf of the Marathas became the first Maratha governor of Orissa. Though he was under the de jure authority of Nawab of Bengal the de facto control rested with Bhonsale Raja. Mir Habib’s duty was to send twelve lakh rupees received as chauth from the revenues of Orissa belonging originally to the Nawab of Bengal to the Bhonsale Raja. Besides he was also required to arrange an additional sum of four lakh rupees annually to be sent to the court of Nagpur. Thus the Marathas became the de facto rulers of Orissa.24
Since the defeat in the Battle of Plassey the *Nawab* of Bengal became a mere puppet in the hands of the English East India Company. Once in 1761 when the *Nawab* refused to pay the agreed money to the Maratha Governor, the Marathas invaded Midnapore but were forced to beat a quick retreat when they perceived threat in the presence of English troops.\(^{25}\) In 1765, the British Company received the ‘Grant of Diwani’ of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa from the Mughal authority.\(^{26}\) But ‘Orissa’ as mentioned in the records only meant areas on the other side of the river Suvarnarekha roughly denoting areas around Midnapur. The mainland of Orissa continued to be under the Marathas till 1803.\(^{27}\)

Since the British had already taken possession of both the south and the north, the presence of the Maratha ruled Orissa in the middle of their territories annoyed them. They were determined to oust the Marathas and open the north-south corridor in eastern India for their consolidation. At the same time an end to frequent Maratha incursions into the territories well inside the northern part of the river Subarnarekha would come about, they thought. Several efforts were made to acquire Orissa peacefully. They attempted to persuade the Bhonsale *Raja* of Nagpur to this end in lieu of a stipulated annual sum but to no avail.\(^{28}\)

The sudden demise of the able and astute Prime Minister of *Peshwa*, Nana Fadnavis in 1800 witnessed an internecine struggle for
supremacy in the Maratha camp. As a result of this fissiparous tendencies developed. It led ultimately to the defeat of Peshwa in 1802 in the hands of Holkar which forced the former to enter into the humiliating subsidiary alliance proposed by the English. But Sindhia and Bhonsale, two other Maratha groups, defied the system of subsidiary alliance and Lord Wellesley, the imperious Governor-General then decided to conquer them and this he did very quickly.

A war was declared on the Marathas on 3 August 1803 following which the company's troops marched on Orissa by making a three pronged attack and crushing the Marathas, brought Orissa under their control. It was followed by the 'Treaty of Deogaon' which was concluded between the East India Company and the Bhonsale Raja of Nagpur on 17 December 1803. By this treaty Bhonsale Raja gave away the present coastal belt of Orissa to the company. Coastal Orissa as it existed then was mentioned as the 'Province of Cuttack' in this treaty.

The administrative divisions namely 'Mughalbandi' (plain areas) and 'Garjats' (hilly tracts) were carved out of the ex-Maratha possessions of Orissa. They were bounded by the sea on the east, Chattisgarh territories on the west, the lake of Chilka on the south and the districts of Jaleswar, Midnapore and Birbhum on the north. The portion called 'Mughalbandi' was actually under the possession of the
British Government and paid rent on regular assessment. The 'Garjats' were the hilly tracts ruled by local kings but paid overall tributes to the British Government. Thus the 'Garjats' or tributary states of Orissa were kept under the Superintendent of Tributary Mahals in 1814.

As regards present south Orissa, the Nizam of Hyderabad occupied the whole territory south of the lake of Chilka till about 1730. Following the death of Asaf Jah in 1745 a war of succession started among his progeny and Muzaffar Jang with the support of the French came out successful. However on his death in 1751, Salabat Jang, the third son of the late Nizam became the new ruler again on French support and out of gratitude he offered the Chicacole sarkar in 1753 to the French. But following the victory of the English in the third Carnatic war, French control over Chicacole sarkar came to an end giving place to the English East India Company.

Thus by the end of 19 century many territories of Orissa got dismembered in some way or the other and annexed to the neighbouring kingdoms or territories. The old Jaleswar sarkar which comprised of Jaleswar, Tamluk, Kasijora, Kharagpur, Maljeoteah, Midnapore and had under it a portion of the modern district of Bankura and Hooghly and the whole of Midnapore with a small part of Balasore also got transferred to the sprawling and ever increasing Bengal presidency. The princely state of Patna-Sambalpur region in the west of Orissa were put
under the Central Provinces. Singhbhum, Saraikella, Kharaswan, Gangpur and Bonai also got detached from Orissa proper and kept under the Chhotanagpur Division. The tributary states of the ‘Garjat Mahals’ remained under a separate administration, called the Superintendent of Tributary Mahals. On the south, the Oriya tracts beyond the lake Chilika including Ganjam gradually came under the ever-extending Madras presidency.  

The British rule in Orissa proved to be no way better. They created new problems instead of solving the old ones. After the British conquest, Orissa was placed under the sprawling Bengal presidency and came to be identified as an extension of it. In 1805, the rules and regulations prevailing in Bengal were extended to Orissa in total disregard of the existing conditions prevailing in the region.  

Under this new system, failure of payment of revenue in time by the zamindars led to the immediate sale of zamindari tenures in Bengal. The people of Orissa had not experienced heavy taxation under the Marathas which they now started to face under the British rule. Frequent and heavy assessments became the marked feature in the land policy of the British. Kauri currency was abolished and revenue had to be paid in coins only. They also intervened in the salt business and set up their own monopoly. All these early measures of the alien British rule caused a great commotion and disturbed the very economic fabric of Orissa.
Further the Oriyas were excluded from all administrative posts, which were now filled up mostly by people from Bengal. Since they could communicate with the British well in English they joined hands with the British bureaucrats to promote their own vested interests at the cost of the native people. Unfortunately, the British administration had by then fragmented the Oriya-speaking tracts by placing them in bits and pieces under Bengal, Madras and the Central Provinces in utter disregard to the language, culture or wishes of the native people. Thus, the initial period of British rule in Orissa speaks of nothing but the exploitation and harassment caused to the Oriya-speaking people at the hands of the aliens.

A wide-spread movement, popularly known as ‘Paik Rebellion’ in the region of Khurda broke out in 1817. It was mainly a revolt of the ex-militia men (paiks) of the deposed king of Khurda under the leadership of the commander Bakshi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar Mohapatra Bhramarabara Ray; commonly called Bakshi Jagabandhu. The rebellion broke out mainly due to the number of grievances of Bakshi Jagabandhu and the paiks against the alien rulers. The rebellion had its epicenter at Khurda. It soon spread far and wide right up to the western border of Orissa.

Though it was crushed by the British ultimately, it exposed the weaknesses and defects of the early British administration in Orissa.
In spite of this uprising Orissa continued to be neglected by the British administration for long. The policy of apathy and callousness on the part of the British towards the people of Orissa received a serious blow after almost half a century of the ‘Paik Rebellion’. In 1866, Orissa was affected by a severe famine known in the history of Orissa as the *Naanka Durvikhya* since it occurred in the ninth year of coronation of the *Gajapati* of Puri. Nearly one third of her entire population was wiped out by the famine. The unprecedented death of innocent people as revealed subsequently by the enquiry committee was mainly due to the lack of responsibility and failure to assess the ground realities on the part of British officials. All officials, including the Lieutenant Governor, the Commissioner of Cuttack, the Member of the Board of Revenue were criticised for their willful negligence. The tragedy was also taken up for discussion on the floor of the House of Commons. The Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Northcote observed:

The catastrophe must always remain a monument of our failure, a humiliation to people of this country, to the Government of this country, and to those of our Indian officials of whom we had perhaps been a little too proud. At the same time, we must hope that we might derive from it lessons which might be of real value to ourselves, and that out of this deplorable evil, good of no insignificant kind might ultimately arise.
Hereafter a sense of urgency was marked in the British administration. The Government started taking steps to improve the general condition of the people by providing better roads, communication, irrigation and progress of education at all levels. Thus, the great famine of 1866 served as a turning point in the history of the British administration in Orissa.

In Orissa as elsewhere in India in the nineteenth century, social movements and the growth of national consciousness were facilitated mainly due to two factors, the rise of a middle class intelligentsia or the elite and the growth of mass media like the native press and literature etc.

Several steps were taken by the government to promote primary and secondary education in Orissa by providing financial assistance, scholarships and establishing a normal training school. As a result, more students joined educational institutions. The establishment of Cuttack College later on called Ravenshaw College at Cuttack was a landmark in the growth of education in Orissa. This college helped the emergence of a progressive elite in Orissa contributing to the beginning of a kind of renaissance. This elite consisting of both ethnic Oriyas and domiciled Bengalis involved itself in many socio-cultural organisations in promoting social resurgence of the Oriya-speaking people. Persons like Madhusudan Das, Nanda Kishore Bal, Radhanath Ray, Gouri Shankar
Ray, Pyarimohan Acharya, Fakirmohan Senapati and many others contributed immensely to the growth of socio-cultural resurgence. Their leadership qualities gave a new orientation to the social life in Orissa. The effect of all these activities was the growth of consciousness and political awakening among the Oriya speaking people.

The growth of education and the emergence of an educated class led to the establishment of vernacular press in Orissa. Although the Christian missionaries were the first to establish the ‘Orissa Mission Press’ at Cuttack in 1838, the most important Oriya paper that came out in 1866 was “Utkal Dipika” edited by Gouri Sankar Ray from the Cuttack Printing Company. It began as a weekly newspaper from Cuttack from 4 August 1866. In 1868 another important paper ‘Bodha-Dayinee’ and ‘Balasore Samvad Vahika’ came out from Utkal Press of Balasore, ‘Sambalpur Hitaisini’ was published from 1889 under the editorship of Pandit Nilamani Vidyaratna from Bamanda, a small feudatory state in Orissa. Besides these there were many other important papers, journals & periodicals which enriched the socio-political life of Orissa as nothing before. They mostly carried news, literary works, writings on social issues, educational needs, economic and various other problems faced by the Oriya speaking people not only in Orissa proper but also in the dismembered outlying parts of the region held under different administrations.
The second half of the nineteenth century in Orissa was marked by the formation of a large number of associations by the elite which were all devoted to the cause of all-round improvement of the people. The first such organisation was the “Mutual Improvement Society” organised at Cuttack in 1859. After the famine of 1866 in Orissa the number of organisations increased. Few important organisations among them were the Cuttack Debating Club (1869), Cuttack Young Mens’ Association (1869), Utkal Bramho Samaj (1869), Utkal Bhasa Uddipani Sabha (1873), Ganjam Nisha Nishedhini Sabha (1875), Orissa Islamic Association (1875), Balasore National Society (1878), Dhenkanal Hitaisini Sabha (1881), Utkal Sabha (1882), Orissa Peoples’ Association (1882) etc.

The political consciousness of the new Oriya elite manifested itself in taking up the cause of safeguarding Oriya language through a language movement which was unseen and unheard of before. The clandestine move of Kantilal Bandopadhyay and Umacharan Haldar supported by Rajendralal Mitra for the extinction of Oriya language found serious challenge from the Oriyas who received timely help from some British officials like John Beams, H.T. Coolbrooke and some domiciled Bengali elites of Cuttack and Balasore who came out at this hour to fully identify themselves with cause of their fellow Oriya brethrens. The threat and the open challenge to their language and
culture not only united the Oriyas for a long time but also ignited within them the determination to fight for the cause of Oriya-speaking people. However, the movement for the unification of Oriya-speaking tracts which took roots under the banner of the 'Utkal Sabha' and 'Utkal Sammilani' continued unabated to ultimately bear fruit in 1936 in the formation of a separate province of Orissa after a lot of trials and tribulations. Led by a group of intellectuals, the amalgamation as well as the national movement did not run counter to each other. There was no threat of conflict of interest as far as Indian national issues were concerned. The intelligentsia co-operated with the nationalists on national constructive issues and regularly attended the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress. The foundation of Indian National Congress in 1885 attracted to its fold people belonging to various walks of life and Oriyas were not found wanting. Recent studies show that they started attending its sessions from the very outset. A meeting was organised at Cuttack with Madhusudan Das in the chair, which discussed and approved the resolutions passed in the first All India Congress session held at Bombay. Madhusudan Das kept up his interest in the congress organisation and influenced the 'Utkal Sabha' in supporting the moves of the Congress till 1902. Hereafter, he appeared to have severed his connections with Congress as the Indian National Congress was not ready then to entertain the amalgamation issue of the Oriyas. Madhusudan continued to fight the cause of the Oriyas...
through the 'Utkal Sammilani' by keeping away from the Congress activities from 1903 onwards⁷⁶. Owing to this a more intimate relationship between the Oriya amalgamation movement and the Congress movement could not be maintained in the first two decades of the twentieth century. But things began changing when Gopabandhu Das held the centre-stage in the political field in Orissa beginning from 1919.

With him a new trend emerged within the Oriya movement. Most of the leaders barring some old guards demanded complete integration of the movement with the Congress as it now agreed to take up the Oriya cause. Gopabandhu Das worked assiduously for the Congress organisation and influenced his associates to do so. He even used the platform of the 'Utkal Sammilani' to carry on his mission amongst the masses⁷⁷. It was due to him that the 'Sammilani' formally accepted the Congress ideals of taking up national issues at Chakradharpur⁷⁸. Once the Congress accepted the Oriya cause its supporters did not feel the necessity to remain tagged to the 'Sammilani' for pursuing its programme and instead preferred to maintain a distinct identity. This tendency developed mainly due to the creation of the U.P.C.C. or Utkal Provincial Congress Committee in 1920 under Pandit Gopabandhu Das⁷⁹. The visit of Gandhiji to Orissa in 1921 during the spread of the Non-Co-operation Movement further strengthened the resolve of the Congress workers and leaders alike⁸⁰. They took up both the tasks—one, the amalgamation movement for
uniting the outlying dismembered Oriya tracts into one unit and building a new and separate province of Orissa. The second one was to fight for the national cause i.e., the movement leading towards the independence of the nation.

**EARLY LIFE OF BISWANTH DAS**

Four years after the establishment of Indian National Congress which became the most important political platform against British rule in India, a child was born in a little known village of the district of Ganjam who was destined to play a leading role in the all round development of not only his own area but also entire Orissa and India as a whole. He became the first nationalist Prime Minister of Orissa\(^1\) in 1937 and Chief Minister in 1971 besides playing significant roles in many other respects as well.

Biswanath Das was born on 8 March, 1889\(^2\) to Krushna Das and his second wife Manikya Das\(^3\). His native place happened to be a village called Belagaon near Polsara in the undivided district of Ganjam\(^4\). Later he was adopted by his uncle Sri Madhusudan Das\(^5\). The district of Ganjam at the time of his birth was a part of Madras Presidency\(^6\). The state of Orissa was a distant dream then and had not been created at that time. Ganjam became one of the six districts when Orissa was formed on 1 April 1936\(^7\). Thus it was sheer providence that the man who was to become the first nationalist Prime Minister of
Orissa in 1937 following her creation as a separate province had to spend more than half of his life outside Orissa in this situation.

Biswanath Das belonged to a large family consisting of more than 100 members. All the members of the family lived jointly and had a common mess and dining. Members of the family were very much attached to each other due to a strong and intimate bond. This was perhaps responsible for Biswanath's habit of never staying alone. In tune with the prevailing socio-economic circumstances and age, Biswanath Das, who was born into an aristocratic Brahmin family, had to spend much of his childhood under the cloud of orthodox values and superstition. He was able to free himself from the prevailing atmosphere of his childhood only during later years.

As was the practice in those days Das was persuaded to study Sanskrit under the guidance of eminent and learned teachers at home. He also made a deep study of the Bhagbat Gita, the Ramayana, the Mahabharat, the Vedas and the Upanishads. The study of Sanskrit at an early age and the knowledge of Hindu scriptures proved to be a boon to Biswanath Das in his later public life as it helped him to communicate effectively to the people by way of narrating and quoting various anecdotes as depicted in the mythologies, puranas and niti sastras.

After obtaining primary education at Khallikote Collegiate School Biswanath Das shifted to Cuttack under the Orissa Division and
received his secondary school education in the Town Victoria High School now known as Bhakta Madhu Vidyapitha. Afterwards he got enrolled in Ravenshaw College, Cuttack for graduation.

It was while pursuing his higher studies at Ravenshaw College that young Biswanath came in contact with two great leaders and builders of modern Orissa, *Utkal Gaurav* Madhusudan Das and *Utkalmani* Gopabandhu who dealt a heavy impact on his life. Young Biswanath was a regular visitor to the library owned by Madhusudan Das. It was here that Biswanath came in close contact with Madhusudan Das, then considered ‘the Grand Old Man’ of Orissa. Both Madhusudan Das and *Pandit* Gopabandhu were great patriots and nationalist leaders of the first rank and had sacrificed their worldly possessions for the cause of the motherland. This had a deep and abiding impact on young Biswanath who got inspired to an uncommon degree by the ideals and noble deeds of Madhusudan and Gopabandhu.

On completion of his graduation at Cuttack Biswanath Das decided to go to Calcutta, today’s Kolkata, to pursue higher studies in Law. There he came in close contact with the prevailing nationalist ideas. Calcutta at that time presented a picture of many political hues where various streams like moderates, extremists, terrorists and trade unionists continued their activities in full swing. This fuelled and
encouraged the nationalist and patriotic fervour of Biswanath Das and in his inner self a deep hatred towards British colonialism was aroused which based itself on exploitation of India and her people. Biswanath Das as a child and a product of his time and age felt drawn like many leaders of his period towards the philosophy and programme of action of the leaders of the Indian National Congress. At the outset, the party was dominated by the moderates and the 'safety-valve' theory worked. Soon it became more radical and posed the greatest threat to the existence of British imperialism in India, particularly when the extremists took over. Biswanath Das, being a champion of the cause of individual freedom, became a life long admirer and follower of the philosophy and ideology of the Indian National Congress here.

After obtaining his law degree from Calcutta, Biswanath Das first of all began his training under Madhusudan Das at Cuttack. Subsequently he switched over to Berhampur in the district of Ganjam where he started his own career in legal profession independently. He had a humble beginning as a householder as he got married to Gouri Debi, the daughter of Raghunath Panda, a lowpaid revenue employee. But as ill luck would have it in 1924, when he was only thirty five years of age, he lost his wife, who left behind two sons, Harihara Das and Bhikari Charan Das. A thought of second marriage never entered his mind although he came under a lot of pressure from friends and relatives.
Though he started his legal career at Berhampur, he was never fully content with it as his soul was elsewhere. His heart yelled for carving out a career in public life and work for the upliftment of his fellow countrymen whose life was a continuous tale of misery. It should be remembered that with his affluent family background and academic attainments, had he wished, it would not have been at all difficult for him to get any high governmental post and he could have led a prosperous and comfortable life out of public focus. But as it appeared destiny had cut out his career and personality on a different plain altogether ostensibly for the purpose of higher and nobler deeds through dedicated work, suffering and sacrifice.

Having been brought up in the house of an agriculturist, he was very familiar and aware of the difficulties that faced the peasants. This led him directly to the ‘Kisan Movement’. He started organising people against all sorts of tyranny and oppression. His familiarity with the problems faced by the peasants made it all the more easy.

The contributions of Indian peasantry to the national movement during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth can never be denied. The poor and hopeless raiyats or tenants were the worst suffering unit of the society under British misrule and mis-governance. It is proved beyond doubt that the pathetic condition of the peasants was mainly due to an unholy alliance between the
zamindars and the colonial power. The situation in Orissa, as a part of the country, was no exception to it. Agrarian discontents and disputes arising out of this unholy alliance also vitiated the land structure not only in the northern and western parts but also in southern Orissa, consisting of undivided districts of Ganjam and Koraput. Biswanath Das belonged to Ganjam which was a part of the Madras presidency then before being transferred to the newly created province of Orissa in 1936. About twenty three permanently settled zamindari estates with adjoining raiyatwari areas were seen in Ganjam and Koraput then. While there was no raiyatwari tract in the district of Koraput, there were a number of raiyatwari tracts in the district of Ganjam. Out of twenty three permanently settled zamindari estates, as many as nineteen belonged to Ganjam and four to Koraput.

The conditions of the peasants here continued to be far from satisfactory. They led a sub-standard and sub-human life mainly due to the wrong interpretation of the zamindars proprietary rights on lands according to the Madras permanent settlement Regulation XXV of 1802 and the legislations passed subsequently. The result was that the pattadar raiyat was treated no more than a tenant for a temporary period of one year. The outcome of this was horrendous for the farmers. The zamindars were armed with a clever ploy and considered it a matter of sheer whim to lease out the lands at pleasure. In Ganjam and Koraput, the zamindars went ahead by including such a
clause in the pattas. The raiyats had no alternative but to give their consent. The institution of pattas and muchilikas thus became legal ways in the hands of the zamindars to rack-rent them. A raiyat therefore found him in a very poor and wretched state—just a prey before the ever exploitative zamindars. Although the Madras Estates Land Act of 1908 was passed and a subsequent amendment was made thereon in 1909, the sufferings couldn’t be fully mitigated because the raiyats in these areas continued to pay higher rent and that too, in terms of kind which amounted to fifty percent of the gross produce of the land.

The produce-rent system thus vitiated the zamindar-raiyat relationship in southern Orissa for a very long time. Due to lack of necessary survey and settlement of lands in these areas, the zamindars felt free to extend their claim to receive half of the gross produce of the land as their legal rent. In estates like Khallikote and Jarada, the zamindars became so obsessed with their powers that they often demanded more than fifty percent. It was arbitrary and unjust on the part of the zamindars as a later government report put it:

That the produce rent system which is inconsistent with many of the statutory rights of the raiyats continued as late as 1936 and even thereafter in Ganjam and Koraput conclusively proves that the statutory provisions were more or less a dead letter.

The relationship between the zamindars and raiyats as such was very strained and it became a marked feature in almost all these estates,
more specifically in Parlakhemundi, Khallikote, Atagada, Chikiti and Badakhemedi. The peasantry in Orissa in general and particularly in these estates thus led a sub-human existence. Even the Indian National Congress in its early phase was little interested in the problems of the tenants as few politicians had face to face relations with them. The fact to be noted is that the Indian National Congress prior to 1899 did not adopt any resolution relating to tenancy. It only highlighted the tribal peasants’ problems and asked for an amendment to the existing forest laws. It was only under Gandhiji that the Indian National Congress took up their cause and engaged itself in mobilising the peasants and linked itself to their fate.

The World War I came as the greatest catastrophe for the already suffering peasants. Moreover, the coastal areas of present Orissa including Ganjam were the worst affected in 1918-1919 by a serious drought. The non-Oriya bureaucrats here failed to make the government aware about the conditions of the drought affected peasants. As a result little or no government relief could reach them at this critical hour. When the peasantry looked up to the zamindars for help, they drew a blank face. The zamindars instead coerced them for more revenue when they were getting it difficult to make both ends meet.

In Orissa, the Congress protested vehemently against the stepmotherly attitude of the colonial government and appointed a 'Famine
Enquiry Committee’ to report on the suffering of the people and detect the lapses of the Government in providing the much needed help to the drought affected peasants. The members of the committee were:

1) Gopabandhu Das
2) Sashibhusan Rath
3) Jagabandhu Singh
4) Laxminarayan Sahu.

The appointment of this committee was a matter of great concern and dissatisfaction to the zamindars.

In 1918 there was hardly any peasant organisation at the national level and no leadership was forthcoming to channelise the grievances of the peasantry. The peasantry in most parts of the country was still awaiting the much needed succour in the form of leadership. Fortunately the leadership was readily available to the peasantry of Ganjam in the person of Biswanath Das, the son of the soil who along with N.G. Ranga came forward to champion the cause of the peasants. It is surprising that the family of Biswanath Das owned more than 10,000 acres of landed property in Khallikote zamindari, and in spite of that he could throw off a life of luxury so easily to join the freedom movement and that too, through the Raiyat movement of Ganjam. As a tenant his family was regularly put to humiliating restrictions and
rigorous taxations of the zamindar of Khallikote estate. The educated and independent minded young Biswanath felt his status of a tenant under Khallikote zamindari challenged his dignity out and out.

During his stay in Berhampur the main township in Ganjam, he came in close contact with other important leaders like Sashibhusan Rath, Niranjan Patnaik and Lalmohan Patnaik. This interaction thoroughly acquainted him with the problems of the peasants. Under the circumstance, he took a vow to work for the just cause of the peasantry. Thus, he got the rare and most unique distinction of leading India’s first ever Kisan movement in 1918 from the soil of Ganjam. He became the President of the Ganjam Zamindari-Raiyat Sabha in 1920. He started this organisation for the protection of the rights of peasants covering almost all zamindari estates in the district of Ganjam then under the Madras Presidency. This organisation carried on its fight both against the colonial rule as well as the zamindars. Persons like V.V. Giri and Prof. N.G. Ranga, both of whom became eminent later on had worked with him as his associates and rose to prominence in their political career in due course.

Biswanath Das finally joined the Indian National Congress in 1919. He was elected as the President of the Ganjam Taluk Board in 1920. This was the period when Gandhiji took charge of the overall leadership of the Indian National Congress and gave a call to all to join
the Non-Co-operation movement. Responding in full measure to the clarion call of Gandhiji, he joined the Non-Co-operation Movement along with Niranjan Patnaik and Dibakar Patnaik etc.\textsuperscript{138}

Thus started the multifaceted and multi-dimensional socio-political career of Biswanath Das. There were two important tasks before the leadership of Orissa. One, participation in the national movement and the other, pursuance of the amalgamation movement for a separate province of Orissa. He took upon himself both the tasks with great commitment. He continued his fight for the preservation of the rights of the peasants in the form of peasant movement which had already started under his guidance and leadership way back in 1918.
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38. earlier Nawab of Golkonda.


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134. V.V Giri earned reputation as a trade union leader and became the fourth President of India. Prof N.G. Ranga remained one of the oldest octogenarian Congress M.P. from Andhra Pradesh for a long period.


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