

**Oraon Unrest & Its Repercussions: British Raj's Discontent with
Amrita Bazar Patrika
A Case of Subaltern Anti-colonial Struggle in North Bengal**

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***Abstract:**The Oraon Unrest of 1916 is one of the significant subaltern reactions during colonial rule in the tea districts of Northern West Bengal. This unrest was nonviolent and it was indeed a remarkably different type of anti-colonial reaction to establish Oraon Raj in lieu of the British Raj. From Oraon Raj to Gandhi Raj, the movement was primarily based on rumours and songs. The Oraons were accused of singing a song, imposed sedition charges and ultimately, they were convicted under the Defence of India Act. For two such cases against the Oraons, i.e. the cases of Tashati T.E. and Gurjanghora T.E., the Amrita Bazar Patrika vehemently criticized the conviction and made strong arguments against the sedition charges. During wartime, the Amrita Bazar's reaction was not taken lightly by the British Raj. In fact, the Government criminal intelligence reported against Amrita Bazar's articles stating that the newspaper seemed to have committed criminal offence.*

***Key Words:**Amrita Bazar Patrika,Oraon,Tana Bhagat movement, Sedition, Tea Estate,etc.*

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Introduction

The Oraon unrest spread across Duars in 1915-16¹.The movement, also popularly known as Tana Bhagat, originated in Ranchi of Chhotanagpur in 1914². This movement initially broke out in the Tea Gardens at the Shishubari areas in Birpara Belt³. Then, subsequently, the Oraon's discontent spread in Champaguri T.E., Thaljhara Bazar and Gendra Para T.E. of Nagrakata

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Belt, Gurjanghora, Kailashpur, and Anandpur T.E. of Malbazar Belt and Hatipota T.E. at Sheemultala of Alipurduar Belt⁴. In 1917, W.L. Travers, the Chairman of the District Planters Association (DPA), first warned the officials about the emergence of this latest threat at the annual meeting of European Planters⁵. Addressing the meeting, he clearly stated that a new and dangerous movement amongst the Oraons had been outbreaking in the early months of 1916⁶.

Jatra Oraon was the man who started 'Tana Bhagat' in Ranchi in January 1914⁷. However, the activities of the Oraons first came into prominence in January 1916 at Dhupguri Police Station⁸. Charua Oraon murdered his wife and made a suicide attempt to kill himself. In police custody, Charua Oraon made a statement that the villages had asked him to 'sing the name of the Germans' and threatened that if he didn't, a devil named Lego would kill him. He and his wife resolved to kill themselves rather than be killed by the devil⁹. What had Charua been pressurised for? The answer is quite simple – he had been instructed to sing a song! Now, what was that song that he had been asked to sing? The song was to desire the 'German's Victory'¹⁰. The fact to be considered here is that the year 1916 was in fact wartime. The First World War had been fought between the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance. The Germans and the British had been fighting against each other. In that situation, desiring the enemy's victory in spite of being a British subject, was considered as sedition. Although the activities of the Oraons were completely non-violent, the Oraon movement was solely based on rumours and songs. The Oraons believed that after the end of British Rule, 'Oraon Raj would be established'¹¹.

In Tashati T.E., a few Oraon labourers met and sang a mysterious song. Their activities seemed to be highly suspicious¹² to the officials. Hence, the Police arrested ten Oraons from Tashati T.E. Among them, three major accused were Bania Oraon, Laudha Oraon and Mongra Oraon. The other seven were warned and released¹³ by the British Police. Following this, the Government appointed a commission under the Defence of India Act to trial the three accused namely Bania, Laudha and Mongra Oraon under section 124 A, IPC, and Section 25(1)(a) Defence of India (Consolidation) Rules¹⁴. This commission was set up under the leadership of Mr. Garlick¹⁵. The song for which the Oraons had been accused of was -

*German Baba is coming,
Is slowly-slowly coming;
Drive away the Devils Manaaldanal;*

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*Cast them adrift in the sea.
Suruj Baba (the Sun) is coming;
The devils of the Oven will be driven away
And cast adrift in the sea.
Tarjan (the stars) is coming,
Is slowly-slowly coming,
Is coming to our very courtyard
The chirgi devils will be driven away
And cast adrift in the sea¹⁶.*

After the trial, the commission passed its judgement. Bania, Laudha and Mongra Oraon were found guilty of offences under section 124A, IPC, and section 25(11)(a) of 1915, and sentenced to three years imprisonment under each section. It was stated that the sentence would occur concurrently¹⁷.

After the judgement, Amrita Bazar Patrika published two articles respectively on 2nd May and 10th May 1916¹⁸. The first article, entitled "*The Oraon Unrest. Three years for singing of song*" strongly criticized the commission's judgement. In that article, Amrita Bazar raised the question "*Now why has all this fuss been made about the alleged seditious movement of the Oraon? Why should the Govt. attach such importance to the matter as to constitute a special commission for the trial on three coolies who are all but savages? Why should Mr. Garlick, President of the Commission, astound and dumfound the people of Bengal¹⁹?*" Amrita Bazar, criticized the Verdict and concluded, "henceforth it (sedition law) is to be applied to also savage aboriginal tribes, even when they sing fantastic songs without understanding their meaning²⁰."

The other article published on 10th May 1916, and having the title "*The Oraon Unrest, The Second Case: Five years for sing songs*"; pointed out that ". . . three more Oraon coolies belonging to the Gurjonghora Tea Estate have also been convicted by him of attending certain meetings and singing objectionable songs and given five years each with hand labour on charges at sedition and promoting feelings of hatred against classes²¹." The song sung by the Oraons was -

'Munda ko gunda karo, Baba

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*Mussalman ko kato, Baba
Anger ki kshoy, German ki jo*²².

Amrita Bazar, clearly indicated that *'There was no direct evidence against the accused and yet they were each sent to jail for five years with hard labour. And the commissioners take credit for their leniency!'*²³

The article suspected that the song was couched rather in Hindi than Oraon languages²⁴. Even during the trial, the accused completely denied that they had even wished any ill to it²⁵. Such being the case, the finding of the commissioner will cause a painful surprise in the public mind.

After the publication of these two consecutive articles, the colonial ruler considered them much sensitive and the Criminal Intelligence Branch prepared a report which showed the discontent of the Administration. The official report suggested that the two articles published by the Amrita Bazar Patrika made them upset. 'It is difficult to mark any particular passage in two articles in the 'Amrita Bazar Patrika' which seems to be within law's grip but ... the two articles taken as a whole, do constitute an offence, particularly at present tim'²⁶. This Report was made on 2nd May 1916. This report carped Amrita Bazar with those articles²⁷. In his notes, the official clearly stated, "These remain to show the whole tone and purport of the article, and, to me, it seems that the articles are at such a nature as to come within the purview of section (25)(i) at the Defence of India Act: Who even circulates any statement with intent to promote or is likely to promote feelings of enmity and hatred between different classes of His Majesty's Subjects."²⁸.

There were two cases that were criticised in 'Amrita Bazar Patrika'. Firstly; the case was the one in which Bania, Laudha and Mongra Oraon were convicted and sentenced to 5 years Rigorous Imprisonment under section 124A, IPC and 25(i)D Defence of India Act. This case was dealt with in the article published in the issue of 2nd May 1916. And the second case was the one where Gaja, Sarna and Bersa were convicted and sentenced to 3 years of Rigorous punishment under S. 124A, and 153A, IPC²⁹.

The notes in the criminal intelligence office made strong comments against Amrita Bazar Patrika regarding their article published on 2nd May. With some given references the Criminal Intelligence Department made a stern statement that 'The article is not written in good faith and makes no effort to ameliorate the state of feeling'³⁰.

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Finally, the intelligence report argued that the criminal nature of the article of May 10th is similar to that employed regarding the article on May 2nd, and even though the case was not so strong but such licence of publication to evilly disposed newspapers needs a real¹ check during the wartimes (First World War).³¹

Thus, it is evident that the Oraon Unrest had succeeded in creating much apprehension among the British rulers and they were evidently much discontented, rather concerned, due to the nature and impact of the subaltern reactions which they considered to be a sedition movement. This certainly situates the Oraon Unrest or the Tana Bhagat Movement, at a significant position in the long tradition of national movement against the foreign rulers.

Notes & References

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² Ibid, p.94

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⁴ Ibid, Pp.36-37

⁵ DPA Report For 1916, P.vii

⁶ Ibid

⁷ www.ranchi.nic.in/history.htm, accessed on 11.12.2023

⁸ Simla Records (5) 1916, Government of india, Home Department. Political-A. Proceedings, June 1916, nos. 280-281, NAI, Oraon Unrest in Bengal and Bihar and Orissa.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

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¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Amrita Bazar Patrika 2nd May 1916

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¹⁸bAmrita Bazar Patrika, May 2, 1916 and May 10, 1916

¹⁹Ibid, May 2nd 1916

²⁰Ibid

²¹Ibid

²²Ibid

²³Ibid

²⁴Ibid

²⁵Ibid

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³⁰Ibid

³¹Ibid