

# **The Great Tribal Revolt in Mayurbhanj and the Role of Sunaram Soren in 1949 A.D.**

**Subha Prakash Rout**

*Research Scholar &*

*Lecturer in History, Marshaghai College, Marshaghai, Odisha*

---

Date of Submission: 22-03-2026

Date of acceptance: 04-04-2026

---

Due to its unique geographical location, and rich flora and fauna, this state Mayurbhanj now a district of Odisha state played a very vital role and made its impact throughout the history of India as well as Odisha. When India free from British paramount in the year of 1947 all British occupied States automatically free from British administration. Soon after the transfer of power from the British hands a Mayurbhanj State Legislative was constituted, during Sri Sarat Chandra Das as the Prime Minister of the State.<sup>1</sup> Sri Sarat Chandra Das was a prominent leader of Praja Mandal party which later on came to be popularly known as the Mayurbhanj State Congress.

Orissa was split up into Twenty-six Garjats and the Mughalbandi district of Cuttack, Puri, and Balasore during the colonial era. Mayurbhanj was the largest Garjat in terms of size and population out of all of them. Mayurbhanj was dominated by the tribes like the Santhals, Bhumijas, , Hos, Bathudis, Kols ,Bhuyans, Lodhas, Karias ,Dharuas and others. The tribes are generally peace loving people who believe in honesty, frankness and austerity. The Garjat ruler of Mayurbhanj appointed the educated Bengali and coastal people in high administrative posts. They also appointed most of them as zamindars and pradhans in seventeen parganas and ninety-six pirs of the state. The Garjat rulers were paying tribute and royalty to their state. In turn the British army helped them to suppress internal problems and external invasions. Under the British rule the rulers felt safe. They forcibly collected various taxes from the poor subjects.<sup>2</sup> Civil liberties did not exist. Additionally, they had no easy way to voice their complaints. On the basis of petty offenses, the individuals were detained, fined, put in jail, and tortured. Tribal peoples are deeply devoted to their community and his mother land. Tension between the tribes was brought on by the state's periodic land settlements and land grabs. The Mayurbhanj tribal uprisings in the 19th and 20th centuries were caused by all these circumstances.

## **Agitation against British Govt. & Hatuas:**

The British government's divide and rule policy, which caused the tribes to become estranged from non-tribes, was the inspiration behind the rebellion. It was an agitation against the autonomous Indian regions, not actually the British authority. The non-tribes of Mayurbhanj were known as Hatuas, and the tribes were known as Kalapithias at that time. They who took use of the Kalapitha were the Hatuas, or Dikus.<sup>3</sup> Basically the Royal families played the vital role in Mayurbhanj State and King as the nominal head of this state.

## **A Great Tribal Leader Sunaram Soren:**

Spring was almost here; winter was almost over. On February 4, 1918, Champai and Durgi Soren of Hesela village in Jamda block were fortunate to have a son at this moment in time. As per the santal community's customary social code, the boy was named after his grandfather, Sunaram Soren. Among his parents' seven sons and four girls, Sunaram was the oldest. It is reported that Sunaram was taken to the agricultural field a few days after his birth, when he was discovered dozing on a tiny cot beneath an umbrella while his parents were at work.

One day a miracle happened and he was found sleeping under the hood of a king cobra and when his parents noticed it, the cobra left and baby Sunaram was found unhurt. Santals, since earlier days, believe in spirits and the supernatural. It was said to be the Almighty's grace and blessings.<sup>4</sup>

Sunaram Soren started his career as a dynamic tribal leader with enormous courage and confidence. He was born and brought up in the village Hesla near Bahalda in the District of Mayurbhanj on 4th February 1918. Earlier, during his high school studies at Baripada, he too came in contact with Pt Raghunath Murmu, the creator of Santali script OL CHIKI, who at that time was trying his best to disseminate the script among Santals at the initial stage. He completed his graduation and law degree at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack; and then practiced law at Baripada in 1940. Being influenced by the freedom movement, Sunaram organized the Adivasis

in a meeting at Badamtalia near Rairangpur in 1939. In spite of the restrictions of the British government, more than 5000 Adivasis from all parts of Mayurbhanj gathered there. He addressed the Adivasis to unite and come to street leaving forests and fields for the sake of the mother land. His fearless speech created awareness and confidence among the tribe.

Jaipal Singh a western educated tribal leader of South Bihar organized the tribals under the banner of Adivasi Mahasabha in 1937 with its headquarters at Ranchi. The aim of the tribes had to demand for a separate tribal state called Jharkhand within the Indian dominion. His movement gained momentum in Bihar in 1947 and the adjoining areas of Orissa, West Bengal and undivided Madhya Pradesh.

#### **Mayurbhanj Adivasi Mahasabha:**

Inspired by Jaipal Singh's political philosophies, Sunaram Soren founded the Mayurbhanj Adivasi Mahasabha in 1946, based in Rairangpur. The Adivasi Mahasabha chief commander Ghasiram Sandil, vice president Mahendranath Murmu, general secretary Shyam Charan Murmu, councilor Sundar Mohan Hansdah, and president were all duly elected. Everyone was welcome to join, regardless of gender, caste, or religion. In the political landscape of Mayurbhanj state, the Mayurbhanj Adivasi Mahasabha gradually became a political party akin to Prajamandal.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Logo of Mayurbhanj Adivasi Mahasabha:**

The green flag and green cap have been approved by the Mayurbhanj Adivasi Mahasabha as their logo, which can be used by any member. The president's cap had the symbols for a plough and the sun. A plough and three strokes on its left and right were incorporated into the design of the commander's cap.

#### **Influence of Non -tribal Leaders from Adivasi movement:**

Sunaram proceeded to arrange the tribal's by traveling from village to hamlet. From the bottom of their hearts, the locals hailed him everywhere. His feet were cleaned with turmeric water, and in certain areas his entire body was adorned in garlands of different wild flowers. As a sign of their love and affection, he was even given garlands made out of money and banknotes. The Sunaram Soren Adivasi movement had a significant impact on even non-tribal leaders like Pramod Ghose, Nilamani Tripathi, and Jainarayan Singbabu. He had a tiger-skin jacket on, and he carried a kendra in his hand along with a garland of boiled eggs, veggies, greens, and dried fish. Using tiger skin is a sign of bravery.<sup>6</sup> "Mayurbhanj is practically same with the Chhotanagpur ethnically, culturally, and geographically," stated Sunaram Soren in a letter dated September 16, 1947, to Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanjdeo. As a result, there is no need for the state and Orissa province to merge. The Adivasis want the state to merge with Jharkhand, the projected Adivasi province, if it will merge with Orissa province at all. If this happens, then such a province will eventually constitute.

#### **Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanjdeo & Constituent Assembly:**

One of the kindest kings of Mayurbhanj state was Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanjdeo. He took some corrective action after deftly judging the Tribals' feelings. Out of the 51 members of the Vyavastha Parisad, or Constituent Assembly, he nominated 12 tribal leaders. They included Sunaram Soren, Karunakar Majhi, Baidhar Majhi, Bholanath Majhi, Mahendra Majhi, Sakila Soren, Jadabananda Murmu, Rama Chandra Tudu and Shyam Charan Tudu,

At first, Sunaram Soren provided the Praja Mandal government, led by Sarat Chandra Das, with unwavering backing for its development initiatives. Because the tribal's opposed the merger with Orissa, and they interfered with the Socialist Party leaders' attempts to conduct gatherings in Mayurbhanja. Mayurbhanj will not amalgamate with any other province, as stated by Prime Minister Sarat Chandra Das on July 4, 1948. Under the Union Government, it would continue. He attempted, but was unable, to get the state ministry's consent in Delhi. Sardar Patel rejected the Premier's proposal while India was in a dire situation. He replied, "Try swimming in the deep sea instead of being a frog in the well. His final warning was to combine with Orissa."<sup>7</sup>The Mayurbhanj tribal leaders were greatly impacted by Sarat Chandra Das's defeat in Delhi. The details of his conversation were made public by the press, and the Vyavastha Parisad was notified of Mayurbhanj's union with Orissa. The central location of the three subdivisions, Kharam Bera in Bisoi, was the meeting place for the Adivasis of Bamanghati, Panchpir, and Sadar Subdivisions on September 12 with a unanimous vote, the tribal leaders decided that Mayurbhanj would not amalgamate with Orissa in order to better serve the interests of the Adivasis. The indigenous people then swore to oppose the union of Mayurbhanj and Orissa indefinitely. Additionally, they chose to protest a sizable gathering of the public at Baripada.

By September Maharaja saw that the administration had become chaotic and the ministry divided in this issue. Sri Satat Chandra.Das went to Delhi with Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanjdeo on the 16th Oct 1948 and the Maharaja signed there the instrument of the merger. Hence the state of Mayurbhanj merged with Orissa.

The formal handing and taking over of the state by the Govt. of India took place in Nov. 1948 when Dr D.V. Rege, I.C.S was appointed as the Chief Commissioner of Mayurbhanj.

Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanjdeo and Premier Sarat Chandra Das went to Delhi and signed the merger agreement. The Dominion government took over the charge from 9th November 1948. The tribals openly began their agitation against the merger of Mayurbhanj with Orissa. The political vision of Sunaram Soren was to merge with Bihar and be a part of the proposed Jharkhand state. Being supported by the leaders of Bihar, the Adivasi Mahasabha selected nine tribal leaders to go to Delhi to present their demands. But their meeting with Sardar Patel and V.P. Menon was not peaceful. Patel said, "Merge or be ready to face the bullets". Sundar Mohan Hansdah, a courageous tribal leader said, "We are ready to face your bullets" and left the place. Thus they returned in vain with sorrow and disappointment.

#### **Gira Dak( Emergency call of Tribal's):**

The tribal chiefs put Gira Dak into practice and spread the word from village to village. Gira Dak is the term for the tribals' emergency call when they are trudging a knot of rope from door to door. It was harvest time, thus Sunaram's motto was "Country first, harvest next." With a massive procession of men and women, Sunaram arrived in Baripada from Rairangpur.

The administration of the central government in Mayurbhanj lasted only for a short duration or less than two months during which the chief commissioner studied closely and carefully the situation before finalizing his recommendation about the future of the state. After he submitted the momentous decision of the Govt. of India. In a written address to the Maharaja and the Representative of the People, Menon explained the overwhelming desire of all sections of the people except the adivasis to join Orissa as the integral part of Orissa Province and the alike decision of the state ministry, declared the report to the State Ministry V.P. Menon visited Baripada on 16th Dec 1948 to announce before the assembly.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Non-Cooperation & Civil disobedience movement in Mayurbhanj:**

The Mayurbhanj Adivasi Mahasabha, having learned about civil disobedience and non-cooperation from Gandhi, took the decision on January 8 and 9, 1949 A.D., to launch a movement. The tribes opted not to pay taxes, abstain from using the Oriya language in schools, and boycott the legal system and other government institutions. However, they also made the decision to import firewood without a permit and to sell food grains, rice, and paddy without regard to limits. The state's status regarding law and order had been disturbed. 19 tribe members and two non-tribal leaders were taken into custody on 4<sup>th</sup> February. Karunakar Hembram, Lalmohan Murmu, Kandra Pigu, Sundar Mohan Hansdah, Laxman Murmu, Ram Chandra Majhi, Laxman Singh Purty, Sunaram Soren, Ghasiram Sandil, Dhyanchand Tudu, and others were among the notable tribal leaders. The Communist Party's Pramod Ghose and Nishamani Tripathy were the two non-tribal leaders.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Gundurua Massacre:**

The collector, B. Mukharjee, proclaimed Section 144 to apply to the whole Bamanghati Subdivision and outlawed the Adivasi Mahasabha. On 6th February the tribes assembled at Gundurua in the paddy field of one Prahallad Mohanta which was beside a stream Gudia Gada violating the declaration of Section 144 under the leadership of Sido Murmu of Andbandh. Their demand was to release Sunaram Soren, the hero of the movement and the other leaders. The tribals had their traditional weapons like the lathis, tangias, bows and arrows.

When other leading Santal leaders addressed the meeting in the absence of Sunaram, who the Government of Odisha arrested to quell the rebellion, suddenly, Amar Singh Sardar, who was deployed as SDO, Rairangpur, arrived with a large police force and started firing at the assembly. Within a moment, the people dispersed hither and thither and within a blink, about 2,000 Santals were killed and many sustained severe injuries. It is looked upon as a Black Day in the history of Indian Santals, which is so far known as the Gundurua Massacre.

A insurrection occurred at Jamda, near Rairangpur and Bisoi, following the Gundurua event, where there were far more gunshot casualties. Innocent individuals were detained in Nimdihi, Rairangpur, Chandikhamari, Janubutu, Bijatala, etc. while the homes of the tribal people were set on fire. Two non-tribal members of the Pan Community were slain by the tribes of Tiring on February 23 after they were thought to be police. The government acted decisively against them. The victims were hit with a penalty fine of one lakh rupees by the government. Some tribes abandoned their homes and made their way into the jungle as a result of the stiff fine that was collected without any compassion.

#### **Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab visit to Baripada:**

Dr Harekrushna Mahatab, the Prime Minister of Orissa Province paid a visit to Baripada and Bamanghati on 19,th April 1949, to meet the tribal leaders in jail.<sup>11</sup> After all he convinced all the tribal leaders

of mayurbhanj and he sanctioned one core rupees for the welfare and the development of the tribes .He also granted rupees 25 Lakh for irrigation and drinking water facilities in the villages. At that time he promised for an Engineering College.

On April 18, the Adivasi Mahasabha promptly withdrew their civil disobedience and non-cooperation campaign from Mayurbhanj. Adivasi Mahasabha secretary Julian Tiga was a key figure in maintaining the tribes' composure. It was requested of Dr. Mahatab to take steps to bring the tribe members who had left their settlements back together. Mahatab was a political astute man. He was able to convince Sunaram Soren, Ramchandra Majhi, and other leaders to put an end to their rebellious actions. Soren was then let out of jail. The government said they would receive their money back in full. Consequently, the criminal cases were dropped.

The newly appointed Mayurbhanj Collector is V.S. Mathew. He addressed a letter to the government, "What the Tribal's needed not bullets, but books for their children, medicine for their sick and potable water in the villages." The tribal's warmly welcomed Mahatab at his subsequent visit to Rairangpur. Once they had accepted the merger and shared Handia, drank together, they forgot about the past and went back to the political battlefield.

He jumped into active politics taking his earlier name fame and popularity as an asset. In 1952, he was elected to the Odisha Assembly as a candidate of Utkal Adibasi Congress from Bahalda Assembly Constituency. He became a Cabinet Minister in Naba Krushna Choudhury Ministry with portfolios of Tribal and Rural Welfare, Transport and Commerce and he continued till 1957. In 1958, he was appointed as the Asst Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes by the Government of India for the state of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. In 1962, he was again elected to the Odisha Assembly from the Bahalda Assembly Constituency as a candidate of the Jana Congress Party. And in 1967, he was elected as an MLA from Bahalda Assembly Constituency for the third term as a Congress nominee. But in 1977, he contested the Assembly Election from Bahalda as a Janata Party candidate and was elected. He continued as MLA till 1980.<sup>12</sup>

He was also a poet, musician and mridangam player. Some of his notable Santali works include "Bhanja Kanka Kunki", "Adivasiar Andar", "Sibyl Serenij" and "Jatra Pat Bagi Gira".

Writer Jairam Tudu was honored with the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2020 for writing an autobiographical book "Bhanja Kul Bhur Ka: Ipil Sunaram Soren" in Santali on his life.<sup>13</sup>

Being a social reformer, Sunaram always worked to dispel the superstitions that were common in Santal and other tribal societies. He had come to understand the detrimental effects of these superstitions, which would be a key contributing element to the terrible backlash against societal progress.

#### NOTES & REFERENCES

- [1]. Nilamani Senapati and Nabin Kumar Sahu, *Orissa District Gazetteers Mayurbhanj*,Cuttack, 1967,p.83.
- [2]. Jatindra Nath Singh Dev Sachan, *Tribal Uprising Of Mayurbhanj In 1949*, Proceeding of IHC,Vol-71,2010-11,p.712.
- [3]. Shyam Sundar Sarangi, *A Short History of Mayurbhanj*, Baripada, 1936, p.34.
- [4]. Subhrajit Murmu, Bhanj Bir Sunaram Soren: *The Man Determined to Lead the Tribal People of Mayurbhanj*, www.youthkiawaaz.com,2021,p.2.
- [5]. J. N. Singh Dev Sachan, *Tribal Uprising Of Mayurbhanj In 1949*, Proceeding of IHC,Vol-71,2010-11,p.713.
- [6]. Devendrá Mohan Praharaj, *Tribal Movement and Political History of India, A Case Study from Orissa 1803-1949*, New Delhi,1980,pp.196-199.
- [7]. J.N.S.D. Sachan, op.cit, p.715.
- [8]. Dr. Kalpana Das, *Tribal Revolt of 1949 in Mayurbhanj*, Odisha Review, 2010, p.47.
- [9]. Dr. Kalpana Das, op.cit. pp.47-48.
- [10]. J.N.S.D. Sachan, op.cit, p.717.
- [11]. Ashok Momin, *A peep into history of mayurbhanj*,Odisha Review,2014,p.109.
- [12]. Subhrajit Murmu, Bhanj Bir Sunaram Soren: *The Man Determined to Lead the Tribal People of Mayurbhanj*, www.youthkiawaaz.com,2021,p.12.
- [13]. [https://peoplepill.com,Sunaram Soren: Politician \(1918-1988\) Odia, 2023, p.1](https://peoplepill.com,Sunaram Soren: Politician (1918-1988) Odia, 2023, p.1).