

**MANDESWARA SARMA AS PEASANT LEADER****M.Suseela Rao**

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Rebbapragada Mandesswara Sarma was born on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1898 in Rajahmundry. His father was Venkataramayya, and his mother was sitamma. He is the only son who survived out of eight children. Ramayya and Sitamma felt that the Lord Saneeswara angered with them and in order to avoid the anger of Lord Saneeswara they named him as “Mandeswara”. His father left Rajahmundry and constructed a house near Taluk Office at kovvur. He had one younger sister called Vemuri Ammayamma.

**AS A PEASANT LEADER**

Mandeswara Sarma, being a Ryot in one village and the son of an Estate Manager in another village, was fully aware of the sufferings of the Ryots in the hands of the Government and Zamindars. He studied the problems of Ryots and on their dissatisfaction towards British revenue policies and high rent demand, and atrocities of zamindars on ryots. He stood on the side of ryots of both Ryothwari and Zamindari area.<sup>i</sup>

Britishers introduced new land revenue systems in India which are different from the earlier revenue systems. British Government introduced these new land revenue policies for their political and economic advantage.<sup>ii</sup> In 1853, Karl Marx commented that “The both systems which the British introduced, Ryotwari and Zamindari are revolutionary in their style in India. Both are contradictory from each other. One is democratic another is feudalistic in nature. One represents British feudalism, and other represents the French peasantry system. Both the systems are mixture of opposites and at the same time harmful to the peasants, but beneficial to the Government.”<sup>iii</sup>

Even in the Ryotwari area, the land rent was very high. The surplus production even in actual yield had to paid in the shape of rent. The result was vast land, being driven into barren land, which led to famine and drought. Finally, it resulted in hunger, poverty, epidemic and loss of property and life to both men and animals.

The Ryot was caught in the web of indebtedness. The situation favoured money-lenders and middlemen, who ruthlessly exploited the Ryots by imposing false usury. The precarious condition of ryot forced him to sell his lands at very cheap rate and as a result he became a landless person. Finally, the ryot became a tenant in the hands of money lenders and landlords.<sup>iv</sup>

In the history of mankind, peasantry played a vital role. For the last hundred years the peasant movements rocked the world. The awakening among the peasants came during the period of national movement. With this new awakening the ryots also supported the National Movement<sup>v</sup>. Among the Indian people nearly eighty percent were based on agriculture. From times immemorial India was basically an agricultural country. It is truth, Mr Hamilton’s statement that “The Rayat is India, and India is the Rayat”.<sup>vi</sup>

**PEASANT ASSOCIATION**

Enhancement of land revenue was the immediate cause for the peasant unrest. As a result of exclusive dependents on agriculture, excessive land revenue demand, growth of landlordism, increasing indebtedness, Indian agriculture began to stagnate and even deteriorate resulting in extremely low yielding per acre.

1857 Sepoy mutiny is not only a revolt but also a peasant movement. There were some other revolts took place for instance, 1858 Santhal Ryot revolt, 1860 Indigo Peasant revolt in Bengal and the agency tribal revolts in East Godavari.<sup>vii</sup>

There are some prominent persons who worked for the ryot’s welfare prior to Mandeswara Sarma, in the early stages of freedom movement like Ganjam Venkataratnam, an important man in public life. His articles on agricultural problems and interest in agricultural co-operative movement made him a popular figure. Mocharla Ramachandra Rao and Nyapathi Subba Rao also worked for the peasants.<sup>viii</sup>

The Non-cooperation movement in 1920 gave impetus to the ryots to be united and wage a war on the Government and it turned into no-tax campaign. It was the genesis of peasant movements rose in Andhra in general and establishment of Ryot Association in West Godavari in particular.<sup>ix</sup>



Mandeswara Sarma and Dandu Narayanaraju established 'Pachchima Godavari Zilla Ryot Sangam' in 1923 at Eluru, which was the first of its kind, in the entire Madras presidency. Mandeswara Sarma, Dandu Narayanaraju, Maganti Bapineedu, Venneti Satyanarayana were the champions of peasant movement in West Godavari District. The leaders of the West Godavari District stood front fore and took up the issues of the ryots. The Ryot Sangam's main motto was to defend the ryots issues and to safe guard the rights of the ryots in Ryotwari area.<sup>x</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma, Dandu Narayanaraju and other leaders started a 'Ryotanga Vidyalam' in the Town hall at Tanuku in 1931. It was the first of its kind in the Andhra area. Mandeswara Sarma, Dandu Narayanaraju, Kommareddi Satyanarayana Murthy, Kovvali Gopala Rao, Maganti Bapineedu used to teach lessons to the ryots on resettlement, land revenue, water cess, peasants' problems like minimum rate for paddy and other agricultural commodities and the methods to get good yield from the crops.<sup>xi</sup>

### LAND REVENUE RESETTLEMENT

Due to great economic depression which occurred in 1929-30, the paddy prices decreased heavily from Rs.6-25-0 to 2-00-0 per quintal, which incurred heavy losses to the peasant. The decrease of the agricultural commodity prices led to several problems like fall of the land prices, indebtedness and high rent demand. In these circumstances the Government proposed to raise the land revenue cist.<sup>xii</sup>

The peasant leaders of West Godavari District formed into an association to fight against the unjust resettlement. Mandeswara Sarma was one of the members of the association, who conducted public meetings and gave call to the people to arise at the right time to protect their rights. He published many articles in the newspapers in which he discussed about the land revenue settlement and resettlement. According to 1866 settlement Manual the Government was empowered to fix land revenue, on the basis of land division. For instance, in the fertile lands taken into the consideration of aggregate yield of twenty years the Government should exclude the cost of crop production, and on the remaining balance the cist should be fixed not exceeding to fifty percent. Once the cist was fixed it should be in force for thirty years. After thirty years, an enquiry Committee might be constituted and the Committee might recommend new rate of land rent which was called resettlement.<sup>xiii</sup>

The Government of Madras appointed a special officer Holdsworth to submit a report on the enhancement of land rent. He recommended that on the lands of delta the Government should enhance the rate of land revenue at the rate of Rs.18-8-0 per hundred rupees per acre in Krishna Godavari Districts. Sri Vavilala Gopalakrishnaiah and other members of the Legislative Council of Madras raised their objection and passed a resolution to constitute a Committee under the chairmanship of Sri Arogya Swamy Mudaliar, N.G.Ranga was the secretary and Dandu Narayana Raju, Bikkina Venkataratnam were the members.<sup>xiv</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma and other leaders brought awareness among the peasants. They conducted public meetings, printed and distributed pamphlets and gave sufficient information to the enquiry Committee headed by Arogya Swamy Mudaliar. Arogya Swamy Mudaliar worked as the Executive Engineer in the delta Districts for several years. He had sufficient knowledge regarding the problems faced by the ryoths in the Krishna and Godavari Districts. He and other Committee members visited the villages which were surveyed earlier by the settlement officer and contacted the people and tried to find out the fact. The Committee studied the economic conditions of the ryots, and after investigating thoroughly submitted a report favourable to the peasants. But unfortunately, the report was thrown into the dustbin.<sup>xv</sup>

The members of the Committee expressed the view that agriculture was the main occupation of the country. Due to high rates of the land rent, the condition of the ryot was deteriorated and led to impoverishment. The farmer had no option but to pay all the taxes imposed on him only through agricultural yield. If the situation had not been changed, they had no other option than to leave the land.<sup>xvi</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma wrote a book on 'Resettlement' in 1929, which had immense effect on the ryots and enlightened the peasantry of Krishna and Godavari Districts. Mandeswara Sarma and other peasant leaders intensified the movement against the rent enhancement when the movement was at its height, the Government appointed a single man Committee with Marshbank, the member of Revenue Board to probe into the resettlement issue for immediate solution. Mr Marshbank recommended that the enhancement should be two Annas per acre in delta and one Anna per acre in dry land.<sup>xvii</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma appealed the people to agitate against the unjust enhancement of the land revenue. He pleaded with the Government through press articles and sent open letters to Sir Norman Marjori Banks, the revenue minister. He condemned the principle of ability instead of liability principle which was implemented by the Government.<sup>xviii</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma conducted a public meeting at Sri Durgavilasam, a choultry at Vijayawada on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1929 on the issue of resettlement. The prominent leaders of Andhra were participated in the meeting and gave a call to the ryots not to pay taxes. Some of



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the prominent members who attended the meeting were Konda Venkatappaiah, Nyapathi Subba Rao, Ayyadevara Kaleswara Rao, Gadicherla Harisarvottama Rao and Atmakuri Govindacharyulu. As the organizer of the meeting, Mandeswara Sarma stressed on the need for change in the land revenue system according to the time and need, otherwise ryot would not survive at all. Dandu Narayanaraju, lodged a complaint in the district court of Eluru in the capacity of Secretary for the resettlement Committee on behalf of the ryots.<sup>xix</sup>

The ryots and the Andhra people got strength from the Bardoli Satyagraha victory. The echoes of Bardoli Satyagraha reached Andhra. Mandeswara Sarma started 'Andhra Land League' on the lines of Bardoli, with the help of Dr. Bhogaraju Pattabhisitaramayya, A. Kaleswara Rao and N.G. Ranga. Several hundreds of ryots and their leaders were arrested even though peasants never went back from their stand. The Andhra Provincial Congress Committee at its Conference held at Vizagapatam on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1931, strongly condemned the arbitrary action of the Madras Government in enhancing the land revenue settlement in Krishna and Godavari Districts, knowing fully the economic conditions of the people.<sup>xx</sup>

The peasants participated on large scale in the civil disobedience movement. At last, the Government yielded to the public opinion it withdrew from the intension of implementation of the enhanced land revenue resettlement which was postponed to the year 1944. It was the success of the Andhra ryots. Mandeswara Sarma was the only leader who refused to pay the land tax for the year 1932 and faced the consequences. He was arrested by the Magistrate of Kovvur and imprisoned for one year. In the Historical Ryoth Yatra which took place in 1937, from Itchapuram to Madras all the peasant leaders including Mandeswar Sarma actively participated.<sup>xxi</sup>

#### ANDHRA RASTRA ZAMIN RYOT SANGH

Mandeswara Sarma, while he was fighting against the Government for the protection of the ryotwari ryots, he also took up the cause of Zamindari ryots along with Bachu Viswanda Dasu, former Chief Minister of Orissa. Mandeswara Sarma and Viswanada Dasu were the only two persons who came forward to rescue the ryots of zamindari area from the tyrannical rule of the zamindars in Andhra area as early as 1929.<sup>xxii</sup>

Viswanada Dasu as a member of the Legislative Council of Madras Presidency, raised the question of the ryots of zamindari area and Mandeswara Sarma raised the same issue from outside.

Mandeswara Sarma founded the "Andhra Rashtra Zamin Ryot Sangham" in 1929 and he raised it to the state level organization. As the founder member of the Zamin Ryot Association, he started the office in his own house at Kovvur. The first meeting of the Andhra Zamin Ryot Association was held at the town hall, Eluru at 12.30 pm on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1929. Viswanda Dasu as the President presided over the meeting and several prominent ryot leaders and hundreds of ryots gathered in Town hall. The meeting was a great success. It was resolved in the meeting that Bhupathi Raju Venkatapathi Raju, Member of the Legislative Assembly was the President and Mandeswara Sarma was the Secretary of Andhra Zamin Ryot Sangham. It was also resolved that Estate Land Act should be amended to protect the rights of the ryots in the Zamindari area.<sup>xxiii</sup> There are many causes led to the formation of Zamin Ryot Association. The Government proposed to amend the Madras Estate Land Act of 1908. Viswanada Dasu as a member of the revenue board demanded the amendment of the Estate Land Act in the Madras Legislative Council and he also tried to bring awareness among the ryots through his articles in the newspapers like 'Satyagrahi'. Mandeswara Sarma had to face a strange situation in his life. He was the son of a zamindari manager, but he helped the ryots of Dharmavaram in their suits against the zamindar on the issue of rent enhancement. His position was in a very delicate condition. As his father was working under the zamindar, he supported the ryots against the same zamindars. One must possess a great moral courage otherwise one cannot discharge his duties in a right path. He described his position as "Yugadharm", and he acted according to the times and circumstances. The illiteracy of ryots and the defects of the Act of 1908 favoured the zamindars. The zamindars lodged several cases against ryots and they were successful. The Government became the kitchen of the zamindars. The ryots were repeatedly defeated in the courts as well as in the council. All these circumstances led to a powerful agitation against zamindars.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The District Zamin Ryot Associations were formed in accordance with the state level organization. Mandeswara Sarma convened a public meeting at Vizagapatam on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1929. The prominent peasant leaders who participated in this Conference were Viswanada Dasu of Berhampur, Vemulakonda Ramadas, Bhupathi Raju Venkatapathi Raju, Advocate, Vizagapatam, Pattabhi Rami Reddy and others. Under the leadership of Mandeswara Sarma, Zamin Ryot Movement spread throughout the District. When Parlakhemidi zamindar tried to enhance the land rent for three times the ryots agitated against the zamindar under the leadership of Viswanada Dasu. The High Court issued a decree in favour of the ryots. The Parlakhemidi ryots gained the success over the zamindar.<sup>xxv</sup>



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## ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF ZAMIN RYOTS

The British with their increasing interest to rule India considered land revenue as the important source. The Permanent settlement introduced by Cornwallis and Ryotwari system brought out by Thomas Munro was the consecutive developments. They continued the then existing collection machinery like Zamindars, Poligars etc., and created their own machinery to fill up the void and also watch to report on the proper collection and timely accounting of the revenues from the land left under the care of zamindars.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The Madras presidency stretching over 1927 square miles was having 1654 zamindari of them 219 were from the Telugu speaking tracts 59 among them were ancient zamindari.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The second 'Andhra Zamin Ryot Conference' held at Eluru on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1934 constituted an enquiry Committee on the economic condition of the zamindari ryots called 'Economic Enquiry Committee' on zamindari' consisting of Mandeswara Sarma, N.G. Ranga and N.Venkatarama Naidu.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The Committee toured all over Andhra from Parlakhemidi to Venkatagiri Estates. After five months incessant tour and hard work in the farthest villages and areas like Madugole agency, this had not been touched till then by the Congress leaders. They prepared the report in the month of December 1933 and submitted it to the Zamin Ryot Association<sup>xxix</sup>. Various chapters of it were being published in the English dailies like Swarajya and Indian Express, as and when the enquiry completed in different estates. Thus, the public mind was prepared and sympathizes with the victims of the zamindari system. With the publication of the report, the movement against the zamindari system attained an all-India publicity and political stature.

The daily newspapers of Calcutta, Allahabad and Bombay took note of this movement and drew the attention of the public and the Government to the insufferable conditions of the peasants in the Estates. Thus, was added a new chapter to the activities of the Indian nationalists who had till then done little for the Zamindari ryots.<sup>xxx</sup>

The Committee members toured almost all the estates, met thousands of peasants, interviewed local leaders, delved deep into the zamindari records, inspected irrigation channels, tanks and passed through forests. Many local Congressmen of the District level gave some help by way of shelter or information to them. The zamindars and the zamindari parties made many hindrances to them as well as to the peasants.<sup>xxxi</sup>

The Zamin Ryot Association passed the following resolutions under the leadership of Mandeswara Sarma, N.G. Ranga and Viswanadha Das.

1. Abolition of zamindari system
2. Zamindari ryots to be placed on the same footing as the ryotwari ryots, that is to bring them into direct contact with the Government and to lower the zamindari rent to the level of ryotwari land revenue rates.
3. Remission to be granted in case of failure of crop and other calamities.
4. Irrigation source protection fund to be established.
5. Distraint powers to be abolished.
6. Forests to be entrusted to forest panchayats.
7. Communal lands to be entrusted to village panchayats.
8. Survey of the estates and settlements of rents should be made.

The Conference called upon the Government and the members of the Legislative council to bring the above minimum demands under statutory law.<sup>xxxii</sup>

## ZAMINDARI MOVEMENTS

When compared to the condition of ryots in the Bobbili Estate, the conditions were worst in the Vizianagaram zamindari. The zamindars made their own settlements and tried to enhance the land rent. It was the main cause for the resentment of the ryots against the zamindars. Mandeswara Sarma and Viswanadha Dasu started movement against zamindars in the Bobbili Estate. Mandeswara Sarma organized Ryot Mahasabha at Vizagapatam on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1929. Several peasant leaders participated in the Mahasabha like Vemula Konda Das, Bhupatiraju Venkatapathi Raju, advocate, Vizagapatnam, Pattabhi Rami Reddy, advocate and Pentakota Sreemulu Naidu<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Under the leadership of Mandeswara Sarma, the anti-zamindari movement was popularized in the District of Vizagapatam. The vital force behind the anti-zamindari movement in the Ganzam District was Viswanadha Dasu. Both the leaders agitated against the Estate Land Act and fought for the amendment of the Act.<sup>xxxiv</sup>



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Mandeswara Sarma took up the cause of tribal ryots of the agency area of Polavaram in West Godavari District. The majority of the people in the agency area were the tribals. The Koyas, Erukulas, Kondareddy, Savaras were the main tribal groups that made the agency their homeland. These people were found in the Polavaram agency area of the district. They earned their livelihood by cultivating lands and their cultivation was called 'Podu'(chelaka) and Kondapodu.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma conducted a public meeting of Ryot Mahasabha at Polavaram on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1938 to protest against the atrocities of Hukumpet (Gangoli) Estate on tribal ryots, for which thousands of tribals attended. The Hukumpet Zamindar created many hindrances to make it a failure. The Rowdies of the zamindar objected the procession of pracharaks and ryots to propagate and to bring awareness among tribal ryots. The followers of the zamindar poured water on the Perth, when the ryots wanted to offer coffee to the volunteers. In spite of all these obstacles the peasant meeting was success.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma, PusuluriKodandaramayya, Inuganti Narayana Rao and Korrapati PattabhiRamayya delivered speeches on the necessity of abolition of zamindari system and implementation of the report of Prakasam Committee. In later days a few skirmishes occurred between Koya Ryots and the followers of the zamindars.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Under the Rajagopalachari ministry, a committee was appointed in the year 1937 to enquiry into the conditions prevailing in the zamindari areas and it was headed by T. Prakasam, the then Revenue Minister. The Congress Government passed the Madras Agricultural Relief Bill in 1938 by which it sought to give relief to the indebted agriculturalists.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In 1937, The Andhra Provincial Congress Committee constituted a sub-Committee with Mandeswara Sarma as the secretary to help the Prakasam Committee on Zamindari enquiry. After completion of the enquiry, Mandeswara Sarma brought a book on the Committee's report called 'one hundred thirty-six years under zamindaries'.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The historical Ryot Yatra in 1937 from Etchapuram to Madras and the report of Prakasam on the abolition of zamindari gave impetus to the anti-zamindari movement in Andhra area. Mandeswara Sarma and the other peasant leaders strongly believed that in the near future, the zamindari would be abolished. In support of their idea, they conducted several Ryot meetings, conducted processions in order to project the sufferings of the ryots under zamindars for one hundred and thirty-six years.<sup>xl</sup>

As the secretary of sub-Committee on the zamindari enquiry, Mandeswara Sarma, toured and travelled extensively and incessantly throughout Andhra to get information from the ryots about the economic condition and atrocities of the zamindars. He noticed that the rent system varied from zamindar to zamindar. He went into deep forest and the agency area of Vizagapatam. For the first time he came in to contact with Madugole hill tribe people. He was very much upset with the sufferings of the tribes since many years.<sup>xli</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma made a deep study of the conditions prevailing in the zamindari and submitted a detailed and historical report to the Andhra Provincial Congress Committee. He wrote the entire information into a small book. He also wrote a book on the problems faced by ryots in the zamindari area called 'Zamin Ryotu Pradhana Samasya'. In this book he described the functioning of zamindari system and also the origin of zamindari system during the East India Company's rule. Further he argued that zamindars had right to collect revenue from the ryots and that they had no right at all on the land of the ryot. The zamindar was only a middle man between the Government and the ryot. He described that the zamindari system as they saw at the time was purely the creation of East India Company for perpetuating its political domination over the country and for the successful collection of the company revenue.<sup>xlii</sup>

Mandeswara Sarma gave an account of the zamindari system and its salient features. The Madras presidency having 1654 zamindari and these zamindari had to pay Rs. 44.00 lakhs as peshcush and it was fixed permanently. But the zamindars were collecting Rs.218 lakhs from ryots as land rent which was higher than the fixed rate<sup>xliii</sup>. Ryot had proprietary right on land; but the zamindar had neither right on land nor right to enhance the land rent. But practically zamindars raised the land revenue abnormally.<sup>xliv</sup>

In his report Mandeswara Sarma gave the following recommendations. 1). the land revenue should be reduced to the rate which was fixed in the year 1802. 2). Government should treat the zamindars own settlements as illegal. 3). Distraint provisions of the zamindars should be abolished. 4). Zamindari system should be abolished.<sup>xlv</sup>

Tanguturi Prakasam, the then Revenue Minister submitted his report in the Madras Legislative Assembly on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1939. Prior to that Mandeswara Sarma as the president of Andhra Zamin Ryot Sangh camped at 'Sreebagh' in Madras. He issued a paper announcement and made a plea that the ryots should make representation before Rajaji, the then Chief Minister. He also



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demanded the implementation of Prakasam report and Government should make enactment of abolition of zamindari. Nearly one thousand ryots and prominent peasant leaders met Rajaji on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1939. Rajaji posed several questions regarding the zamindari system and on the report prepared by Mandeswara Sarma as the secretary of the sub-Committee. Mandeswara Sarma gave a vivid and clear picture regarding the origin of zamindari system and suppression of ryots by zamindars, high revenue rents and the tyrannical rule of zamindars. Under these circumstances, he put forth the demand of zamin ryot sangam i.e. the abolition of the zamindari before the chief minister.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The ryots and the 'Zamin Ryot Sangh' conducted public meetings in every District and organized processions, demanding the implementation of Prakasam report and abolition of zamindari. Mandeswara Sarma convened a grand public meeting at Anakapalli on 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1938 as the fourth Conference of Zamin Ryot Sangh and several thousands of ryots participated in it. The Andhra Provincial Congress Committee Conference which was held at Bandar on 20<sup>th</sup> December, 1938 appreciated the efforts of the sub-Committee and passed the resolution that the Committee's recommendations should be implemented before the month of August 1939.<sup>xlvii</sup>

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