



IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION AND POPULAR PROTEST IN ODISHA

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Abstract- The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 considered to be the second mass movement waged against the British power in India. Though it failed to get tangible result to overthrow the colonial dominion, but it was a unified effort from all sections of Indian society. It ended in the year 1934 and criticism started emerging within the Congress Party, leading to the birth of leftwing parties in Indian politics during freedom movement. Amongst them the Congress Socialist Party, Communist Party and Kishan Sabha were prominent. In the Princely States in the early 1930's there was the emergence of Prajamandals under the banner of State Peoples Movement. With this ideological shift the various issues pertaining to lower strata of society started cropping up giving new dimensions to India's march towards freedom.

Index Terms- Civil Disobedience Movement, Congress Socialist Party, Communist Party, State Peoples Movement, Kishan Sabha, Prajamandal, Harekrishna Mahatab, Surendranath Diwvedy

The Civil Disobedience Movement came to an end May 1934. The Gandhian method of non-violence earned criticism from various quarters as it failed to achieve Swaraj for India. It was out of disenchantment that there emerged the socialist trend and the realization among the socialist youths of the need to have a fighting front for the millions starving of rural peasants. With this ideological inclination within the Indian National Congress the Congress Socialist Party was born. The first session of the Congress Socialist Party was held at Patna on 17th May 1934 under the Chairmanship of Acharya Narendra Dev. Subsequently the Patna meeting, branches of the Socialist Party was opened in numerous parts of India.¹ In Odisha the most youthful leaders within the Congress who had a propensity towards Socialism tried to address the socio-economic disabilities of the toiling peasants² and set up the *Utkal Samyabadi Karmi Sangh* (Odisha Socialist Workers League) in 1933. Finally along the line of Congress Socialist Party of India they established the Congress Socialist Party of Odisha in 1934, in a provincial conference held at Cuttack. The following members were the office bearers:

Naba Krishna Choudhury – General Secretary

Malati Choudhury – Treasurer

Other Office bearers:

Dibakar Patnaik

Gaurisankar Samanta

¹. M.A. Zaidi, *The Story of Congress Pilgrimage*, vol.III, New Delhi, 1990, pp.184-5.

². Biswamoy Pati, *Of Movement, Compromise and Retreat: Orissa; 1936-39*, *Social Scientist*, vol. 20, nos 5 and 6, May-June, 1992, p.64.

Nripendu Narayan Sen

Gour Chandra Das

Prananath Patnaik

Gati Krishna Swain.

However, Dibakar Patnaik and Gati Krishna Samanta resigned from the membership. Only Naba Krishna Choudhury, a Congressite who was elected as Secretary of the Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee in 1937, remained with it till the end.³ The Socialists made solemn efforts to organize peasants of Odisha against the oppressive landlords of British Odisha and rulers of states. Explaining the peasants' consciousness and tyranny of the landlords and rulers, and the position of the colonial state, Surendranath Dwivedy said, after visiting a few villages we found it was extremely difficult to organize the peasants. They were scared to death by the zamindars. Moreover, British Government was in league with them. It was impossible to launch any activity from fear.⁴

In order to sensitize the peasants about their rights, the Congress Socialists published a journal called Sarathi 1933. In 1935, the Congress Socialist Party launched another monthly journal named Adunika and formed a cultural organization called Naba Yuga Sahitya Sansad. The literary initiative in the form of Adunika was dominated by a reasonable extent of discussion on Marxian thought, which heavily inclined to Soviet Union for a divergent Communist direction. The writings of Bhagabati Panigrahi such as Sikar' (Hunt) and Hatudi O Daa (Hammer and sickle), and Sachi Raut Rautray's Angutihi' (Finger) and Visarjana (immersion), and⁵ Gangadhar Mishra's poems Chasa Bhai (Brother Cultivator) and Daridra Nian (Flame of Poverty) addressed to poor peasants emphasized on class struggle and gave a pro-Soviet orientation.⁶

Regarding the political activities of the socialists at the beginning of 1930s as veteran socialist leader Surendranath Dwivedy remarked, "we decided to go from village to village holding meetings getting peasants' signature on a printed appeal to the Government; they (zamindars) might not also oppose our moves as they would also be benefited by a corresponding rebate in revenue. Secondly, we would easily the village and organize the peasants by setting up Krushak Sanghas. In the zamindari areas the peasants had no rights over trees in their own fields or over the fish in the ponds near their house. So the Zamindars and the moneylenders found it easy to extract *illegal cesses or abwabs* from the peasants. In such circumstances, it was unrealistic to conceive of organizing the peasantry on the basis of class struggle". For this, our programme was to work in such a fashion to make peasants fearless and consequently sought the need to be inside Congress and preferred to work with the non-socialists in the peasants conferences.⁷

Around this time, as the Congress became less active, and the Communist Party had not yet been organized, the peasant leadership passed into the hands of the Congress Socialists. The May Day was celebrated in Odisha at Cuttack in 1933 and the socialists started a weekly journal Sarathi by the end of the same year. The floods of 1933 had devastated the coastal districts of Cuttack and Puri. The peasants of these areas faced enormous difficulties. This provided enough opportunities to the socialists to organize the peasants.⁸

Towards the close of 1933 and the beginning of 1934, an attempt towards organizing peasants at district levels was made. Hare Krishna Mahatab mobilized the peasants at Balasore to secure remission of rents towards the close of 1933. On 6 February 1934, at Bhadrak (Balasore), a peasant meeting was held and was attended by more than 2000 peasants. Hare Krishna Mahatab and Lingaraj Mishra stressed the necessity of forming peasant organizations to compel the authorities to reduce rents.⁹ Throughout 1933, the officials apprehended that the followers of Jawaharlal Nehru in Odisha were fostering the possibility of a peasant movement. They were also afraid of the fact that taking advantage of natural calamities like floods, the leaders might persuade the ryots to join in a no-rent campaign.¹⁰ The apprehension of the possibility of a peasant movement in Balasore due to the activities of Hare Krishna Mahatab remained strong in the minds of the official in the beginning of 1934. The efforts of Hare Krishna Mahatab to form Krushak

³. Surendranath Dwivedy, *Quest for Socialism (Fifty Years of Struggle in India)*, New Delhi, 1984, p.36.

⁴. Ibid., p.51.

⁵. Chandi Prasad Nanda, *Ideological Transformation of Congress Movement: A Case Study on Orissa of 1935-39*, Orissa Review, vol.XLVI, No. I, 1989, p.145.

⁶ Government of Orissa, Special Section File, File No.21, Acc. no.651, 1937.

⁷ Dwivedy Surendranath, op.cit., pp.52-3.

⁸ Pati, Biswamoy, op.cit., p.65.

⁹. Chandi Prasad Nanda, op.cit., p.148.

¹⁰. H.K. Mahatab, *History of Freedom Movement in Orissa*, vol.V, Cuttack, 1957, pp.22-5.

Sangh merged with that of the socialists.¹¹ Although his attempt of organizing peasantry confined to British Odisha, the peasant unrest did exist in other parts of Odisha as well.¹²

Mahatma Gandhi commenced his Harijan tour in November 1933 in different parts of India to study the issue of untouchability and the best way of resolving it. The General Secretaries of Indian National Congress remarked “the tour had an extraordinary propagandist value. The response evoked at the gatherings in each province and the attendance at the meeting organized were only less than those witnessed in the country in the days of 1930”.¹³ Mahatma Gandhi visited Odisha on 5 May 1934 for the Harijan Movement. He addressed a huge gathering at Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Anugul and Puri from 6 May to 8 May 1934. He began his foot march on 9 May at 5.30 a.m. along the Puri – Cuttack road. Many Congress leaders of Odisha joined him. In a mammoth meeting on the riverbed of Kathojori, Gandhiji explained to the masses of Odisha the need to promote social reform and village reconstruction programme of the Congress. He left Cuttack on 16 May 1934 in order to attend the meeting of All India Congress Committee at Patna. Again he returned to Odisha on 21 May 1934 to resume the second phase of his foot march in Odisha. During his visit to Bhadrak he met Harijan workers and emphasized the need for focusing on flood relief and the spinning wheel. After covering 156 mi in coastal Odisha by foot, Mahatma Gandhi left for Wardha in June 1934. The visit of Mahatma Gandhi for Harijan welfare and village reconstruction programme had a tremendous impact on the national life of Odisha. It ushered a new era of social reform movements in Odisha. Most of the Congress workers by then had wholeheartedly committed themselves for Gandhian programmes.¹⁴

By 1935, the political activities of the Congress in Odisha slowed down. However, the Congress Socialist Party in Odisha undertook to organize Krushak Sangh in the districts of Puri, Cuttack and Balasore. It was only in 1936 that the Congress in Odisha tried integrating the peasant agitation to remove their grievances and to relieve them from distress.¹⁵

Thus, it was against this historical background that the Utkal Pradesh Krushak Sangh (Odisha Provincial Kisan Sabha) was formed in June 1935. The first Utkal Kisan Conference was held at Cuttack Town Hall on the 10 June 1935, under the Presidentship of Mohanlal Gautam of Uttar Pradesh, the then Secretary of Uttar Pradesh Provincial Kisan Sabha. Naba Krishna Chaudhury, Godavarish Mishra and other leaders attended the conference. It was reported that, nearly 2000 peasants participated in the conference.

Mohanlal Gautam explained the trouble being faced by the tenants under British Colonialism. The aim of the conference was to make the peasants conscious about their various disabilities, and to ameliorate their poor condition. Godavarish Mishra, the Secretary, said that unless the peasant grievances are addressed their condition was not going to improve. A number of resolutions the formation of Kisan Sabha, at districts level, abolition of zamindari and false cases which were imposed upon the peasants were passed.¹⁶ Finally, the Utkal Provincial Krushak Sangh was formed with Hare Krishna Mahatab as President, Malati Devi Choudhury and Surendranath Dwivedy as Secretaries.¹⁷ Besides these Congress leaders Raj Krishna Bose, Lingaraj Mishra, Bhagirathi Panigrahi, Mohanlal Gautam, Acharya Harihar Das, Godavarish Mishra, Gorachand Pattnaik and Jagabandhu Singh organized a number of peasant meetings in the remote areas of Balasore, Cuttack, Puri and Ganjam districts from the beginning of 1936. In these gatherings they addressed a number of problems concerning the peasants, including the amendment of Odisha Tenancy Act, abolition of landlordism, formation of Kisan Sangha's at district levels and appointment of an Enquiry Committee to redress the grievances of the peasants in Odisha. Hare Krishna Mahatab in a meeting of Balasore District Congress Committee held on 28 May 1936 planned to arrange a Provincial Kisan Conference during the proposed visit of Jawaharlal Nehru in November 1936.¹⁸

¹¹. Chandi Prasad Nanad, op.cit., p.148.

¹². Biswamoy Pati, op.cit., p.65.

¹³. M.A. Zaidi, op.cit., p.179.

¹⁴. Bidyut Kumar Samal, *Orissa During Civil Disobedience and Satyagraha Movement*, *Orissa Review*, vol.XLVI, no. I, 1989, pp.114-6.

¹⁵. H.K. Mahatab, op.cit., pp. 22-3.

¹⁶. *Home Political Department (Confidential)* File, Acc.No.467, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

¹⁷. J.K. Samal, ed., *A comprehensive History and Culture of Orissa*, vol. III, New Delhi, p. 370.

¹⁸ History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No 29/3, NAI, New Delhi.

The new province of Odisha as the first linguistic state of India came into existence on 1 April 1936. The people of Odisha celebrated the moment with great enthusiasm.¹⁹

In April 1936, the All India Kisan Conference was held at Lucknow beneath the leadership of Sahajananda Saraswati of Bihar.²⁰ A number of delegates attended the conference. Hare Krishna Mahatab, Naba Krishna Choudhury, Malati Choudhury, Gati Krishna Swain and Dibakar Patnaik were the representatives from Odisha. Subsequently they were elected as the associates of Working Committee of All India Kisan Sabha.²¹ In this conference the All India Kisan Sabha prepared an election manifesto for the upcoming election in the provinces. A peasant's charter of demands was also formulated which was all India in nature. N.G. Ranga criticized the election manifesto of the Indian National Congress as it fell short of the peasant demands. He pleaded that the kisans should support those Congress candidates, who would support and strengthen at least the minimum demands of the kisan. He thus pressurized the Congress to accept the charter of peasant demands in the forthcoming provincial elections. In the Lucknow conference of the Indian National Congress, an alliance was formed between the Indian National Congress and the All India Kisan Sabha as Jawaharlal Nehru supported the demand made by the Kisan Sabha.²² In this session the Indian National Congress passed a resolution regarding the agrarian programme for the peasants. The Indian National Congress strongly felt that the appalling insufficiency, joblessness and indebtedness of the Indian peasant society were due to the antiquated and repressive land tenure, revenue systems and phenomenal fall of agricultural prices. The Congress therefore desired to furnish itself with facts and figures and considered opinions of the provinces and peasant organizations, before drawing up an all-India agrarian programme and recommendation to particular provinces. For this the provinces were asked to draw up detailed reports of agrarian conditions and rent and revenue system prevalent in the area under their jurisdiction and send those to the All India Congress office.²³

The leaders from Odisha who attended the All India Kisan Sabha, after coming back, convened the Utkal Provincial Kisan conference at Puri in August 1936. They set up an Enquiry Committee consisting of Hare Krishna Mahatab, Malati Devi Choudhury, Lingaraj Mishra and Raj Krishna Bose to investigate into the indictments of the peasants and submit a bang to the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee so that it could take up those demands.²⁴ Yusuf Meherali, a socialist leader with an invitation of Naba Krishna Chowdhury reached Cuttack and addressed a gathering at Cuttack and Puri in October 1936. In these meetings he pleaded to the masses to enroll themselves as Congress members in order to fight against imperialism and the system of landlordism in Odisha.²⁵

The Faizpur Session of the Indian National Congress was conducted in September 1936 with Jawaharlal Nehru as President. Sahajananda Saraswati and N.G. Ranga once again pressurized the Indian National Congress to accept the demands of the peasants. Jawaharlal Nehru supported the cause of the peasants and the Indian National Congress adopted the historic agrarian programme on behalf of the peasants.²⁶ Nehru was absolutely clear that the zamindari system was most detrimental to the interest of the peasants was determined to end it as permanent class group.²⁷ The Indian National Congress in the Haripura session clarified its questions with regards to Kisan Sabha as some Kisan Sabha leaders created a delicate situation and some tended to weaken the Congress and create confusion in the minds of the peasants. It declared that the Congress itself was a kisan organization and consistently stood for the demands of the peasants. The Congress then invited the peasants to join in large numbers and carry their struggle under its banner. It directed every Congressman to work for the spread of the Congress organizations in every village and not do anything which would weaken its hold on the peasantry.²⁸

After the Faizpur session of Indian National Congress in 10 November 1936 Jawaharlal Nehru visited Odisha for the election campaign. He addressed meetings in a number of places like Salepur, Chandol, Kendrapara, Jagatsinghpur (Cuttack district), Puri and Ganjam. Everywhere he was enthusiastically received and large number of people, especially peasants, crowded his meetings.²⁹

¹⁹. Nabeena (Oriya Weekly Newspaper) 1st April, 1936.

²⁰. M.A. Rasul, *A History of All India Kisan Sabha*, Calcutta, 1974, p.26

²¹. Sushil Chandra De, *Diary of Political Events in Orissa (1st April, 1936-15th August, 1947)*, Cuttack, 1964, pp.1-10.

²² *Indian Annual Register*, vol.II, 1936, pp.280-2.

²³. M.A. Zaidi, op.cit., pp.292-4.

²⁴. Sushil Chandra De, op.cit., p.5.

²⁵. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No, 29/3, NAI, New Delhi.

²⁶. *Indian Annual Register*, op.cit., pp.280-2.

²⁷. B.N. Pandey, ed., *Centenary History of India National Congress: 1919-1935*, vol. II, New Delhi, 1989, pp.483-4.

²⁸. M.A. Zaidi, op.cit., p.308.

²⁹. K.M. Patra, *Orissa State Legislature and Freedom Struggle: 1912-1947*, New Delhi, 1997, p.96.

Jawaharlal Nehru in his inspiring speeches advocated that peasants must organize for the attainment of Swaraj. The best way of organizing was to join the Congress and set up branches of krushak sangh through out the province. Swaraj would be a form of government in which the ultimate power would be vested in the people.³⁰ Besides, he also pleaded that the peasants should support the Congress candidates in the forth coming elections who can work for their betterment.

In November 1936 the second session of the Utkal Provincial Kisan Conference was held under the Chairmanship of Swami Sahajananda Saraswati. Some Congress leaders like Nilakantha Das however, carried on an anti-kisan sabha campaign. In this conference provision was made to establish kisan organizations at different levels besides the state level. Thus, besides (1) Pradeshika Krushk Sangh (state levels) (2) the Zilla Krushk Sangh (district level) (3) Thana Krushak Sangh (Thana level) (4) Grama Krushak Sangh (village level) was also set up so that the peasants could actively participate in the movement. It was in the year 1937 that the scope of the movement expanded along with its area of operation.³¹ There were thus four different levels of peasant organizations that functioned in Odisha, and were responsible for organizing and mobilizing the peasants within their jurisdiction of operation. Consequently, the membership of Utkal Provincial Krushak Sangh rose to 20000 in Cuttack, Puri and Balasore and to 30000 in the princely states of Odisha.³²

In 1936, a peasants' conference was held at Bhagatpur under the Chairmanship of Hare Krishna Mahatab and it was resolved that the peasants should not pay salami to the zamindars. During 1936, a good number of kisan meetings particularly in the districts of Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Sambalpur and Ganjam were organised and the kisans were exhorted to resist the unjust exactions by the zamindars.³³

In Odisha between 1935 to 1937, a series of peasant meetings were held. The leaders who championed the peasant cause were Malati Choudhury (Secretary, Utkal Provincial Kisan Sabha), Naba Krushna Choudhury, Hare Krishna Mahatab, Surendranath Dwivedy (Socialist) Nilakantha Das, Dibakar Patnaik, Gati Krushna Swain and others. They also made regular contact with the All India Kisan Sabha.³⁴

Around this time the provincial legislative election was about to be held. The leaders of the Utkal Provincial Krushak Sangh prepared an election manifesto, which the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee accepted for the 1937 election, by which the kisan support to the Congress was ensured.³⁵

It was against this background that the election campaign in Odisha was officially inaugurated on 13 September, 1936. A meeting was held at Cuttack Town Hall, where the election manifesto of All Indian Congress Committee was read and the peasants were persuaded to stand by the Congress. All political parties in Odisha started their election campaign in various parts of Odisha.³⁶

The Congress Election Manifesto issued by the Utkal Provincial Congress Committee pointed out various issues of an all-India nature. It also added a number of issues, specially designed for Odisha. The following demands were included (1) elimination of permanent settlement in Kanika, Paralakhemndi, Ganjam, Cuttack and Joyepur, (2) reduction of land rent arrears and revenue, (3) decrease of rents and water tax to half a per cent, (4) amendment of Tenancy Act (5) rights of the villagers to the forest lands (7) proper living wage of labourers, etc.

The Utkal Provincial Kisan Sabha held meetings in various parts of Odisha like Balasore, Bhadrak, Bramahagiri, Gop, Kakatapur, Nimapada (Puri district) to celebrate the All India Kisan Day on 1 September 1937. As the meetings were held in the district and village levels the peasants protested against the landlords for their rights. Although the Congress was the dominating force over the movements, it took a more socialistic turn.³⁷

³⁰. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No. 29/3, NAI, New Delhi.

³¹. Bichitra Nanda Mishra, *Peasants Protest Resistance in Orissa: 1937- 39* in M.A. Karna, ed. *Peasant and Peasant Protests*, New Delhi, 1989, p.131.

³². J.K. Samal, op. cit., p. 340.

³³. Sushil Chandra De, op. cit., p.13.

³⁴. Ibid., pp. 1-10.

³⁵. J.K. Samal, op.cit., pp. 340-1.

³⁶. N.K. Sahu, and S. C. De, *Who's Who Freedom Workers of Orissa: District of Cuttack*, 1970, p. ix.

³⁷. Home Political Department (Confidential) File, Acc. No. 7/12, Government of Orissa, 1937, Orissa, OSA, Bhubaneswar.

Throughout the year 1936 the Congress Party was busy preparing for the forthcoming Assembly Election. They raised the issue the peasants including illegal system of bethi and beggar and organized Kisan Sabhas meetings in various parts in the province of Odisha.³⁸

The Congress in order to get the support of the peasants, held a number of meetings with the peasants. Godavarish Mishra addressed a meeting at Sambalpur and asked the peasants to support the Congress. Similarly, a mammoth meeting of Oriya peasants was held on 29 November 1936 at Albert Hall, Calcutta under the Presidentship of Hare Krishna Mahatab. In this meeting, he requested to the peasants to support to Congress Party in the election. By January 1937, there were a number of election meetings of the Congress.³⁹ The methods the Congress adopted during the election campaign were; chanting election songs, broadcasting leaflets and posters, exhibition of the portrait of the leaders, leading processions and kirtan parties in the streets by eulogizing their own leaders and condemning the rivals. Another method they adopted was issue of election manifesto with promises of reduction of land revenue, remission of rent, free salt manufacturing, prevention of floods, famine and malaria by which the Congress Party became victorious.⁴⁰ On the other hand the Odisha Nationalist Party formed in 1936 under the leadership of Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik with the Raja of Dharakot and Paralakhemdi, proclaimed it had no coalition with the Odisha Provincial Congress and it proposed to launch a vigorous campaign to contest the election. The Nationalist Party held election meetings close to the meeting organized by the Congress in different parts of Odisha, which often led to violent clashes with each other. However, the campaign conducted by the Congress was more vigorous and effective than the others.⁴¹ Jadunath Mahapatra remarked thus: the Congress Party had the most efficient organization and had a vast number of well disciplined and active workers who came in direct contact with rural masses and were familiar with their needs. They mobilised the masses in the name of Mahatma Gandhi. Alongwith the visit of Jawaharlal Nehru, in the second week of November 1936 also had significant influence on electors in support of the Congress.⁴² Following was the result of Odisha Provincial Legislative Assembly Elections of Odisha.

Odisha Provincial Legislative Assembly Election Result: 1937

Total Seats – 60

Congress Party – 35

United Party – 5

Nationalist Party – 5

Independent- - 11

Nominated – 4⁴³

Source-Indian Annual Register

Office acceptance was the most important question considered by the Congress.⁴⁴ In February 1937, a meeting of the Congress leaders was held at Wardha on the issue of ministry formation. Mahatma Gandhi said that “the Congress party may be dishonouring its words to the electorates, if it accepted office without receiving any gesture that can be obtained only if the Viceroy agreed to some parleys or make speech hinting that the verdict of the electorate has changed the governments view about Congress”.⁴⁵

Again the matter was discussed in the Congress Working Committee meeting at Delhi on 15 March, 1937. A resolution was passed unanimously favouring the ‘conditional acceptance’ of office as suggested by Mahatma Gandhi, which provided that the Congress can accept the office, but it needs assurance from the Governor that he would not exercise his special powers as long as the Ministry acts ‘within the constitution.’ On the same day, the Viceroy appealed to the Governors in the provinces to extend their support and cooperation for the formation of ministries. Accordingly, the Government of Odisha issued a communiqué on 28 March, 1937. The Governor invited Biswanath Das, the Congress leader, to form the Ministry. However Das made it clear that he was unable to accept the invitation unless the Governor agreed to give him an assurance that the Governor would not exercise his special power of

³⁸. Jadunath Mahapatra, *Orissa in 1936 – 37 to 1938 – 39*, Cuttack, 1941, pp. 15-6.

³⁹. Sushil Chandra De, op.cit., pp.6-8.

⁴⁰. Jadunath Mahapatra, op.cit., p.10.

⁴¹. History of Freedom Movement Papers R-I, File No.29/3, NAI, New Delhi.

⁴². Jadunath Mahapatra, op.cit., p.10.

⁴³ *Indian Annual Register*, vol. I, 1937, p.168.

⁴⁴. Sushil Chandra De, op. cit., p.8.

⁴⁵. *Indian Annual Register*, op.cit., p.237.

interference. The Governor of Odisha, declined for an assurance of the demand made by the Congress Party leaders in terms of the All India Congress committee resolutions. Finally, the negotiations broke down.⁴⁶

In these circumstances the Governor invited the Nationalist Party leader Krishna Chandra Gajapati (Maharaja of Paralakhemdi) to form the Ministry and he accepted the office on 1 April 1937 with following office bearers.

Krishna Chandra Gajapati - Chief Minister.

Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik – Revenue minister

Maulvi Muhammad Latifur Rahman – Education Minister.⁴⁷

Although most of the District Congress Committees were in favour of acceptance of the office, the Provincial Congress Committees, according to the All India Congress Committee resolutions, decided to take up organizational, constructive and propaganda work. Besides, the Congress devoted itself to organizing peasant conferences in various parts of Odisha. By March 1937, the Congress placed the kisan movement on a firm basis so that it could successfully stand against the oppression and high handedness of the zamindars.⁴⁸

The formation of the Ministry invited much criticism from various quarters. In Cuttack, Puri, Balasore and Sambalpur districts a number of peasant meetings were organized by the Odisha Kisan Sabha. It vehemently condemned the formation of the ministry by a party that was in minority.⁴⁹

The Ministry was thus in an anomalous position. It had no majority in the legislature and was faced with certainty of defeat as soon as the legislature met. Thus in early 1937 Congress Working Committee decided to occupy office where Congress was in majority. In Odisha the Maharaja of Paralakhemdi thereupon tendered the resignation and the Governor again invited the Congress Party to form the ministry.⁵⁰ Rajendra Prasad, the member of AICC Parliamentary Committee and Zonal Officer of Bihar, Odisha and Assam arrived at Cuttack on 17 July 1937 and discuss the issue of selection of the New Cabinet. It was finally decided that the following people should form the Cabinet;

1. Biswanath Das – Chief Minister
2. Nityananda Kanungo – Revenue Minister
3. Bodhram Dubey – Health Minister
4. Mukund Prasad Das – Speaker
5. Nanda Kishore Das – Deputy Speaker

The members of the Odisha Congress Cabinet as proposed in consultation with Rajendra Prasad was duly sworn in and took an oath of Office on 19 July 1937. The acceptance of office by the Congress was celebrated with much enthusiasm through out Odisha.⁵¹

The Congress after assuming office, in the first budget session on 30 August 1937, Biswanath Das announced to work to ameliorate the poor conditions of the masses. He states the “wellbeing of the masses is our immediate objective”. Besides that he made special announcements to enhance the conditions of the poor peasantry of Odisha.⁵²

As explored a number of peasant meetings were held in different parts of Odisha with the support of the Congress, Kisan Sabha and Congress Socialists from the beginning of 1936. The leaders of Congress supported the cause of the peasants demanding the end of

⁴⁶. Ibid., pp.238-9.

⁴⁷. Jadunath Mahapatra, op. cit., p.11.

⁴⁸. Sushil Chandra De, op.cit., p.8.

⁴⁹. Jadunath Mahapatra, op. cit., p.11.

⁵⁰. Ibid., p.11.

⁵¹. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No.29/3, NAI, New Delhi.

⁵². *Indian Annual Register*, vol. II, 1936, p.202.

oppressive taxes and landlordism. It led to the wide expansion of peasant movement throughout Odisha in 1937.⁵³ Besides that due to certain peasant activities in Odisha great difficulty was experienced in the collection of land revenue and other illegal *cesses*.⁵⁴

In Ganjam the peasant movement took a vigorous turn in 1936. The tenants claimed remission from the landlords due to the fall in prices of the product of the land. In 1937 a ryots Association was set up at Berhampur with an objective to study the condition of the peasants in Chikiti, Surangi, Jarada and Borokimedi zamindari areas. During this period the peasants of Sukinda and Kora (Cuttack) estates agitated to stop bethi, payment of grazing fees and manure tax to the landlords. Similarly in 1937 the relation between the thikadars and the landlord of Borasambar estate (Sambalpur) strained as the latter did not render anything during the election. The Raja assumed an attitude of vengeance upon the thikadars and demanded the immediate payment of revenue suits. Strained relation prevailed between the tenants and the Raja also at that time in that area. During the month of July 1937, the peasant agitation took an active and vigorous form in Anugul. Some of the Congress leaders including Girija Bhusan Dutta visited Baurpal Hat on 13 March 1937 and taught the tenants to be fearless and take the woods from the forest freely. In Parikud zamindari area the dissatisfaction did exist between the Raja and the peasants on the issue of salami *tax*. The Congress leaders requested the Raja to give it up but he declined to do so and the situation became tense.

The peasant agitation in Kanika estate entered into an alarming stage in 1936. The Raja of Kanika followed a divide and rule policy to suppress the movement. The Superintendent of Police visited the area and expressed the opinion that the peasants were responsible for the trouble and promulgated Section 107 of IPC to quell the peasant protest.⁵⁵ However, in October 1937 the peasant agitation in Kanika became more widespread under the leadership of Chakradhara Behera, a Congressite. Though the Raja agreed to give certain concession but it was considered insufficient by the peasants. The Congress leaders urged them to remain firm in their demand and to continue the agitation.⁵⁶ In the Koraput region Radhakrishna Biswas Roy, a Congress leader actively tried to mobilize the peasants. He held a number of meetings and set up a branch of Gandhi Gumasta consisting of every 25 villages to whom the popular complaints were reported for necessary action.

In Paralakhemdi the tenants had given stiff resistance for a couple of years, when the Raja enhanced land revenue by 300 per cent of the prevailing rate of Rs. 7 per acre. After a prolonged fight towards the close of 1936, that the Revenue Board lowered it down to 36 per cent. Even then the hike was pretty high and expectedly the tenants appealed to the Congress government against the unfair decision.⁵⁷

Malati Devi Choudhury, the Secretary of the Utkal Kisan Sabha arranged a huge kisan protest demonstration at Cuttack town, numbering 8000-10000 on the All India Kisan Sabha Day, i.e. 1 September 1937.⁵⁸ The kisans carried on foot march in the streets with placards and shouting slogans to end zaminadri system and presented their demands to the Chief Minister and pressurized the Congress Ministry to bring out agrarian reforms in Odisha. The Chief Minister advised them to be patient and he assured that the Ministry would do its best to advance the interests of the peasants.⁵⁹

As the peasant movement in Odisha was becoming more and alarming, the Zamindars with the support of the police force let loose a reign of terror upon the peasantry. The police prosecuted many of them under section 107 IPC. In Jenapur (Cuttack) in order to defame the Kisan Sabha a number of false cases were registered against the activists.⁶⁰

In 1937 the Odisha Provincial Kisan Sabha requested the Congress Ministry to set up an Enquiry Committee to enquire about the oppressions by the landlords upon the peasants and to put a stop to all such injustice suffered by them.⁶¹ Accordingly Enquiry Committees were set up at the districts level under the leadership of Congress to look into the complaints lodged against the landlords and the police force. Radha Krishna Biswasray a Congress leader personally conducted an enquiry in the Jeypore estate of

⁵³. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No.29/3, NAI, New Delhi.

⁵⁴. Jadunath Mohapatra, op.cit., p. 11.

⁵⁵. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No.29/3, NAI, New Delhi.

⁵⁶. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No. 30/3, NAI, New Delhi.

⁵⁷. *Indian Annual Register*, vol. 1936, p.202.

⁵⁸. *Home Political Department (Confidential)* File, Acc/No – 7/12, 1937, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁵⁹. Jadunath Mahapatra, op. cit., p.16.

⁶⁰. *Home Political Department (Confidential)* File, Acc/No – 7/12, 1937, Criminal Investigation, Government of Orissa, 1938, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁶¹. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No.30/3, NAI, New Delhi.

Koraput. Raj Krishna Bose, the Congress leader, advised the peasants at Cuttack to stop payment of illegal tax to the zamindars and motivated them to protest. On 11 October 1937 kisan conference was organized at Padmapur (Sambalpur), under the leadership of veteran socialist S. M. Joshi. Presiding over the conference he stated that “zamindars would be powerless if the tenants adopted the attitude of the people of Bardoli and took to satyagraha in the form of non-payment of rents”. Another gathering was held at Jaleswar (Balasore) on 5 December 1937 under the leadership of Raj Krishna Bose. In this meeting he stressed the necessity of organized and collective resistance to the oppressive zamindars and moneylenders. He also asked to the peasants to adopt peaceful and constitutional means, while resisting the zamindars and moneylenders.⁶²

The year 1937 witnessed peasant unrest regorously proportion in many parts of Odisha against the non-payment of unauthorized taxes to the landlords and abolition of forced labor. The peasants rallied much under the banner of Congress and carried on an organized and systematic fight against the tyranny and oppression of the landlords of Odisha province.⁶³

On the other hand Congress Socialists of Odisha who upheld the cause of peasants and carried on active campaign against the zaminadari system⁶⁴ and chalked out an agrarian programme for the Congress Ministry in 1937. It included the following demands (1) remission of 50 per cent rent and revenue (2) zaminadari abolition and compensation (3) non-payment of illegal taxes such as salami to the zamindars (4) amendment of tenancy laws and withdrawal of British army from the princely states of Odisha, *etc.*⁶⁵

Finally, the Congress Ministry in Odisha followed the resolution of the National Convention, held on 19 and 20 March 1937 conducted by the Indian National Congress. The Congress leaders were directed to carry out the Congress programme as delineated in the election manifesto. They were specifically instructed to work for a substantial reduction in rent and revenue, fixation of tenures, rural debt, arrears of rent and revenue and restoration of lands and property confiscated during Civil Disobedience movement, *etc.*⁶⁶

The popular Congress Ministry during its tenures brou ght out the following agrarian legislative measures to ameliorate the poor condition of peasants in Odisha.

Madras Estate Land Bill

The Madras Estate Land (Odisha Amendment) Bill 1937 was applicable to the area which joined Odisha in 1936 separating itself from the Madras Presidency especially Ganjam and Koraput districts. The rent collected in this area was very high than the adjoining areas of the province. Consequently, the Bill aimed at rationalizing the rent structure by reducing it to the rent prevailing in the nearest ryotwari areas in the province with similar conditions. It was referred to the Select Committee and was brought back to the House before the Provincial Congress Committee made an attempt for a compromise with the landlords of southern Odisha by offering some concessions. The Bill became highly controversial and the opposition vehemently protested against it by which the passage of the Bill was delayed for as long as 5 February 1938. The Raja of Khallikote termed it as a revolutionary measure unknown in the history of the legislation in India. Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik called it a hasty piece of legislation.⁶⁷ The every clause of the Bill was discussed in the Select Committee. Steps were taken for a compromise between the Congress and the opposition, but the attempt failed. The zamindars of southern Odisha directed by the Raja of Khallikote and Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik, did not agree to reduce the rent. The Bill thus, again was brought before the House on 26th January 1938 and was passed on 5 February 1938 by the Congress Ministry. In spite of repeated appeals by the Congress to give his assent, the Governor General kept silent for three years and vetoed the Bill in February 1941, stating that there had been no general investigation prior to the promotion of the Bill and that no negotiations had been conducted between the representatives of both the parties.⁶⁸ Thus, the attempt for reform of Tenancy legislation to improve the condition of peasants of southern Odisha

⁶². Chandi Prasad Nanda, op.cit., p 149.

⁶³. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No.30/3, NAI, New Delhi.

⁶⁴. J.K. Samal, (ed.), op.cit., p. 340.

⁶⁵. Ibid., p. 149.

⁶⁶. *Indian Annual Register*, vol.I, 1936, pp.280-1.

⁶⁷. K.M. Patra, op.cit., pp. 118-9.

⁶⁸. *Indian Annual Register*, vol.I, 1941, p.37.

ended in failure. Accordingly, Kisan Sabha started demanding the resignation of the Ministry if the bill was not passed by June 1938.⁶⁹

The socialists held meetings in various parts of Odisha and planned to stage a protest demonstration showing black flag and boycotting of the proposed visit of Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, if he did not give his nod to the Bill. The Socialist made appeal to the Congress and to the Kisan Sabha to organize protest demonstrations on the arrival of the Viceroy to India.⁷⁰

Jagannath Mishra, President the Ganjam District Congress Committee, and Banamali Maharana another Congress leader, advised to the Ganjam District Ryot Association to offer Satyagraha or no-rent campaign. In Kodala and Athagarh (Ganjam), secret meetings attended by the tenants were held. Rajendra Prasad visited Odisha and a meeting was held between the zamindars and the Congress leaders, like Biswanath Das and Nilakantha Das. They attempted for a compromise between the zamindars and tenants. It was believed that Nilakantha Das (Congress) played into the hands of the zamindars.⁷¹

Odisha Tenancy (Amendment) Bill

In the province of Odisha, by 1938, there were 11,328 temporarily settled estates and a lot of the tenants in these estates were miserable.⁷² The Odisha Tenancy Act 1913 was not amended with the changing situation of the tenants of Odisha. Nityananda Kanungo, the Revenue Minister, therefore, introduced the Odisha Tenancy (Amendment) Bill of 1937 in the assembly on 25 September 1937.⁷³ The provisions were transfer of holdings to the tenants, reduction of arrear rent, ownership right of the tenants on all trees and severe penalty was issued for the landlord or his agents for illegal exactions.⁷⁴

The proposed amendment of the Odisha Tenancy Act was severely opposed by the landlords. Outside the legislature they convened a meeting on 29 November 1937.⁷⁵ Raja of Dharakot condemned the proposed amendments of the Odisha Tenancy Act, 1913, and tried to bring about a reasonable settlement between the zamindars and their tenants.⁷⁶

The leaders of the Odisha Zamindari Association Brajasundar Das, Banabihari Palit met Gopabandhu Chaudhury to discuss about the Odisha Tenancy Amendment Bill and to bring out a compromise between the Congress and the zamindars. Gopabandhu Choudhury however kept quiet and did not reply to any of the demands made by the Zamindari Association.⁷⁷

By this time the Bill was passed but a retreat was already visible. However, the Congress Ministry agreed for an amendment also backed out from its position regarding the mutation fees. The Krushak Sangh, pointed out that 'the Bill had nothing to offer regarding the rights of thousands of non-occupancy tenants'.⁷⁸ After a prolonged debate on the Bill, it was finally passed on 3 May 1938 with a little modification.⁷⁹ The final Act provided for (1) abolition of mutation fees by giving free rights of transfer of agricultural holdings to the tenants, (2) rights on trees to the tenants (3) remission of arrear rent from 12 to 6 per cent, and (4) penalty for the exaction of illegal cesses by the landlords.⁸⁰

Odisha Moneylenders Bill

The Congress Ministry introduced the Odisha Moneylenders Bill on 25 July 1938. It laid down the provision that the moneylenders had to register in order to carry on their profession. The bill sought to prevent moneylenders from realizing interests coming to more than the amount that had been advanced. They now had a right to open up old accounts from 1 April

⁶⁹. Biswamoy Pati, op.cit., p.67.

⁷⁰. Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No. 257/39, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁷¹. Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No 196/39, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁷². Indian Annual Register, vol .I, 1938, p.263.

⁷³. Indian Annual Register, vol. II, 1937, p. 271.

⁷⁴. Jadunath Mahapatra, *Government of Orissa at Work: Work of the Congress Ministry from 19 July 1938 to 31 March, 1939*, Cuttack, 1939, p.14.

⁷⁵. History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, File No.30/3, NAI, New Delhi.

⁷⁶. Nabeena (Oriya Weekly Newspaper), 8 February, 1938.

⁷⁷. Biswamoy Pati, op.cit., p.74.

⁷⁸. Indian Annual Register, vol.I, 1938, pp. 262-4.

⁷⁹. Indian Annual Register, vol.II, 1938, p. 218.

⁸⁰. Biswamoy Pati, op.cit., p.74.

1936. Many more provisions were laid down for the benefit of the peasants. It may be noted here that the Krushak Sangh played a significant role the agrarian legislations and finally the Governor gave his assent to this Bill on 30 June 1939.⁸¹

Odisha Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank Bill, 1938

The Congress Ministry introduced the Odisha Cooperative Land Mortgage Bank Bill on 24 January 1938. The Bill ensured the loans to the ryots with lower interest rate from the Mortgage Bank agrarian developments.⁸²

Odisha Inams Bill 1939, Sambalpur Tenancy Regulation, 1938⁸³ Odisha Small Land Holders Relief Act, 1938 were some other legislative measures were taken for the betterment of the peasants⁸⁴ Besides the Congress Ministry took steps for rent remissions and relief measures for ameliorating the condition of the tenants. However, these measures were still not enough to solve the problems of all sections of the peasants in all parts of Odisha.⁸⁵ For the abolitions of bethi and beggar the Congress Ministry also took steps to prevent it.⁸⁶

Thus the most notable benefits that the peasants got during the tenure of the Congress Ministry were; (1) Odisha Tenancy Act (Amendment), (2) Madras Estates Land Amendment Bill (3) reduction of water cess by 50 per cent in North Odisha, (4) reduction of grazing cess by 50 per cent in government forests, (5) abolition of bethi and beggary and (6) Odisha Moneylenders Act.⁸⁷ Although the Congress Ministry took a number of steps to ameliorate the poor condition of peasants however, it did not initiate to abolish the zamindari system in Odisha.⁸⁸

Malati Devi, a Congress Socialist Party was elected to the All India Central Kisan Committee in March 1939. In the meanwhile the All India Kisan Conference deputed Jay Prakash Narayan and Sahajananda Saraswati to visit Cuttack to review the activities of the Utkal Provincial Kisan Sangh. In their report they held that, though the Kisan Sabha had carried on its work till the middle of 1938, its work had remarkably slowed down due to deplorable political factionalism that confronted the Ministry and to the pre-occupation of the Kisan leaders with State People's activities. As per the suggestion to strengthen the Kisan Sabha activities, Prana Nath Patnaik was elected as the Secretary of the Utkal Provincial Kisan Sabha. The agrarian discontent manifested throughout Odisha. Being a flood-prone province, there was constant demand for remission of rents and taxes.⁸⁹

The second session of the Sambalpur Kisan Conference was convened at Baltikar, in December 1938 under the Chairmanship of Pandit Laxmi Narayan Mishra, attended by 2000 - 3000 peasants. The President stated that the peasants should unite against the oppression of the zamindars by forming district committees. Referring to the agrarian reforms of the Congress Ministry he stated that unless there was a majority of the peasants' representatives in the Congress, the Government would not pay so much attention to the peasants. The important resolutions passed were regarding the abolition of zamindari and goantia systems, formation of a District Praja Samiti with Pandit Laxmi Narayan Mishra as President, and Bhagirathi Patnaik, Fakir Behera and Hazaru Patel as members.⁹⁰

In Jenapur (Cuttack) towards the close of 1938 due to oppression of the Chausathipada zamindar the President, Secretary and other members of Kisan Sabha were convicted.⁹¹

The Kisan Sabha movement in British Odisha had tremendous impact on the permanently settled estates of Sukinda, Madhupur and Korai. In Sukinda the kolas' and munda tenants started agitation against the estates oppression in 1938. In January 1939, Phanindranath Pal, a staunch Communist, and his associates Dourjadhan Rai, Laxmidhar Jena, Sachi Rautroy and Bhagirathi Panigrahi started mobilizing the peasants by holding peasant meetings at various parts of Sukinda estates. They guided the

⁸¹. Brajendra Narayan Patnaik, *The First Congress Ministry in Orissa: 1937-39*, Orissa Review, vol. XLVI, no. I, 1989, p. 161.

⁸². Jadunath Mahapatra, op.cit., p.15.

⁸³ Ibid., p.16.

⁸⁴. Ibid., pp.16 -8.

⁸⁵. *Indian Annual Register*, vol. II, 1938, p.243.

⁸⁶. *Indian Annual Register*, vol.I, 1940, p.284.

⁸⁷. *Indian Annual Register*, vol.I, 1940, p.284.

⁸⁸. Biswamoy Pati, op.cit., pp. 75-7.

⁸⁹. Chandi Prasad Nanda, op.cit., p.154.

⁹⁰. *Home Political (Confidential)* Special Section File, No.292, 1938, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁹¹. *Home Political Department (Confidential)* Special Section File, No.298, 1938, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

aboriginal kolas and munda tenants to cut down the timber trees and forcibly reclaimed the estates lands. The agitation reached a boiling point in the beginning of January 1939. In order to suppress the movement, the authorities with the help of the colonial police force targeted the leaders and tried to stop all political activity in the estates. Phanindranath Pal and his two associates Dourjadhan Rai and Laxmidhar Jena were served notice under section 144 of IPC not to hold any political meetings within the jurisdiction of Sukinda, Korai and Dharmasala P.S. for two months. They were also forbidden for entering the Sukinda estate for two months. However, Phanindranath Pal disobeyed the order as he attended a peasant meeting at Gobardhanpur hat in Sukinda as fixed to be held on 9 January 1939. After NabaKrishna Choudhury finished his speech, Phanindranath Pal rose to speak in direct violation of the order, for which he was arrested and was prosecuted under section 188 of IPC. He was then imprisoned for one month and fined with Rs.30.

After his release on May 1939, Phanindranath Pal visited Budapanka refugee camp of Dhenkanal and Anugul refugee camp of Talcher state. He distributed pamphlets in *Kol* language in Oriya script in Sukinda, Keonjhar, Dhenkanal and Mayurbhanj state and formed melis against the British government.⁹²

A peasant meeting was held at Sahada Thakurani (Cuttack) on 14 January 1939 under the leadership of Madanmohan Patnaik attended by 400 peasants. A good number of peasants attended from Keonjhar and Dhenkanal states. In this meeting, British imperialism and the exploitative nature of feudatory chiefs, zamindars and moneylenders were vehemently criticized. Sachi Rautray passed a resolution condemning the notice served against Phanindranath Pal and kisan workers. The leaders appealed to the peasants to unite against the exploitation and adopt non-violent means of struggle in the states. Forces were posted on the border to stop the participation of the peasant masses. Notice was sent to Sachi Rautray and Madanmohan Patnaik for seditious speeches to stop their political activities.⁹³

In May 1939 the third session of the Puri District Peasants' Conference was convened at Astaranga in Puri District. The meeting was held under the leadership of Bhagabati Panigrahi. The other leaders were Pranatanth Patnaik, Gangadhar Mishra and others. Thousands of peasants attended the conference. A number of resolutions were passed asking the peasants to unite against the oppressions of the zamindars and moneylenders. To start the agitation, the leaders appealed to the peasants to enroll as members of Congress as well as Krushak Sangh and to subscribe *Krushak* magazine and defy the false cases instituted against the Kisan Sangh by the zamindars, and to take recourse to Satyagraha.⁹⁴

Another peasant meeting was held at Chhangiri hat, P.S. Khurda (Puri), on 29 August 1939, under the chairmanship of Mohan Das. It was well attended by the peasants. The leaders condemned the zamindar of Khurda and local Sabarkars for their oppressions against the peasants. A number of resolutions were passed.

1. Not to help the British Government in its war efforts
2. Condemned the Government of Odisha in connection with the Khurda Forest Act and a Satyagraha Committee was formed to launch a movement.
3. Condemned the delay in Viceroy's assent to the Madras Estate Land (Amendment) Bill.⁹⁵

In the various parts of Khallikote and Athagarh estates, the tenants uprising was surfaced in August 1939, due to failure of crops. There was a breach of law and order when the estate authorities forcibly tried to collect the revenue. The Ganjam District Congress Committee held meetings with the ryots of Rambha, Mathura and other places who demanded the resignation of oppressive state officials. To terrorise the tenants and to collect the rent the landlords sought the help of the colonial police force. Biswanath Das, the premier of Odisha strongly condemned the landlords for launching prosecutions against the ryots. He requested Ward, the Collector of Ganjam, not to prosecute the ryots till the enquiry was made.⁹⁶

⁹².Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.15/38, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁹³.Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.34/1939, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁹⁴.Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.189/39, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁹⁵. Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.189/39, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁹⁶.Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No. 25/1940, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

Another peasant meeting was held at Patrapur (Ganjam), on 2 October 1939, which was attended by two thousand peasants. The prominent leaders who joined the meeting were Jagannath Mishra, Lingaraj Dhar, Banamali Maharana, and Jugal Kishore Pani. In this meeting, the leaders urged the government take steps to ameliorate the condition of the peasants of Surangi, Jorada, and Chikiti area, which were affected by the failure of crops.⁹⁷

In general, peasants' conferences were held in various districts of Odisha where resolutions advocating pro-peasant laws and abolition of bethi and rasad were passed. Besides these compulsory education for children and facilities for the *dalits* were passed.⁹⁸

In 1930's thus the State Peoples' movement remained a major issue for the leadership in Odisha and it had a far-reaching effect on National Movement. The mass nature of the movement was possible due to the fact that 95 per cent of Odisha states population was peasantry, whether higher castes or Dalits.⁹⁹

The first Odisha State Peoples Conference was organized in 1931 at Cuttack, under the leadership of Bhubanananda Das. In this conference an appeal was made to the rulers for the abolition of the obnoxious bethi and beggar system from the states. When the election of Odisha Legislative Assembly took place, Congress and Krushak Sangh workers organized a number of mass meetings in the princely states of Odisha. Although the Congress was sympathetic towards the Odisha State Peoples Movement, it did not allow itself to be actively involved in their movement.¹⁰⁰

The second session of the Odisha State Peoples Conference meeting was held at Cuttack in June 1937. Pattabhi Sitaramaya, President of the All India States Peoples Conference (AISPC), presided over it. Only about 100 people from eight states attended the conference. Many people failed to attend the conference because of the preventive measures taken by the states administration. A number of resolutions were passed keeping the condition of the peasants in mind. The most important among them were (1) the right of occupancy on their holdings (2) the fundamental right of citizenship (3) a strong plea was made for the abolition of the evil practice of extracting rasad, magan, bethi and bheti, and to set up states people associations in each state of Odisha.¹⁰¹ In this conference a decision was also taken to set up an Enquiry Committee for investigating various issues relating to states of Odisha. The President finally appealed to the masses of the states to come in line with their fellow countrymen in British India and to organize themselves.¹⁰²

The Working Committee of the Conference consisted of Pattabhi Sitaramaya as President, Sarangdhar Das as Secretary, Biswanath Das as Treasurer. A permanent office of the Working Committee was located at Cuttack. The secretary remained in charge of the conference and was responsible for the Working Committee. The conference had also resolved to affiliate itself to the All India States People Conference.¹⁰³

States Enquiry Committee, 1937

The constitutional changes in the provinces and the inauguration of Provincial Autonomy and the advent of Congress Ministry changed the outlook of the oppressed people. The Odisha States People Enquiry Committee was constituted with Hare Krishna Mahatab as President, Balavanta Rai Mehta and Lalmohan Patnaik as members met with a good response and the peasantry came forward in hundreds to lay their grievances before them but many of the rulers tried to prevent such evidence of resistance from being recorded.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷. Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.189/1939, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁹⁸. Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No. 189/1939. OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

⁹⁹. Chandi Prasad Nanda, op.cit., p.150.

¹⁰⁰. Ibid., p.150

¹⁰¹. Bijay Chandra Rath, *Prajamandal Movement in Orissa, Orissa, Review*, vol. XLVI, No.1, 1989, p.119.

¹⁰². *Indian Annual Register*, vol.I, 1937, pp.356-7.

¹⁰³. Bijay Chandra Rath, op.cit., pp.119-20.

¹⁰⁴. Radhanath Rath, *The Story of Freedom Movement in Orissa State*, Cuttack, 1964, p. 18.

Nilgiri

Around 1938, in the Princely state of Nilgiri, the people of the state celebrated a social function and an inter-dinning was organized on the occasion. The Nilgiri Durbar sent a notice prohibiting such inter-dinning in Ayodhya. This was considered by the state as an offence, and heavy fines were imposed upon the peasants. This sparked off a movement of popular protest against the state ¹⁰⁵ by the people under the banner of Yubak Sangh, set up in 1931. The Yubak Sangh used to make regular contact with Congress office at Balasore. It demanded several reforms in the state including the civil liberties of the people. In May 1938, the Yubak Sangh took out a procession from Patapura village to Nilgiri Durbar against the oppression of political prisoners of the state. The state police attempted to disperse the gathering arresting eleven of them.¹⁰⁶

The working Committee of the Odisha State Peoples Conference was held at Cuttack and passed a resolution condemning the oppressiveness of the Nilgiri Durbar.¹⁰⁷ It also stirred unprecedented enthusiasm in the Congress circles in Balasore. The Congress held secret meetings at Balasore in the house of Mukunda Prasad Das, and a Congress center was established at Alsuan (Nilgiri border). The Congress supported the states people in their agitation against Nilgiri Durbar's mal-administration and oppression.¹⁰⁸

In June 1938, the Nilgiri state *Prajamandal* was formed under the leadership of Kailash Chandra Mohanty. The other *Prajamandal* leaders were; Sadhu Prasad, Bidyadhar Mohapatra, Banamali Das, Pranabandhu Agasti, Rama Chandra and others. The *Prajamandal* laid the grievances of the tenants before the Odisha States Enquiry Committee in 1938. The Ruler of Nilgiri forced the tenants to desist from giving evidence to the Committee but they turned up in large numbers and pleaded to the Committee to redress their grievances. The most important demands were (1) change of forest laws, (2) reduction of land rent. (3) abrogation of bethi, beggar and salami (4) abolition of sabarkari system, (5) restriction on rate of interest even if tenants failed to pay the land rent on time, (6) abolition of forest rent in the state, (7) right to hold meetings, processions *etc.*¹⁰⁹

The Raja of Nilgiri at that time did not recognize the *Prajamandal* and did not allow holding of any political meetings in the state.¹¹⁰ The Odisha State Peoples' Conference was held at Balasore in June 1938. Sarangadhar Das, the Secretary of Odisha State Peoples' Conference exhorted the people of the state to disobey the ordinances of Nilgiri Durbar. The state police force harassed the agitators in various ways. Two young boys Giridhari Singh and Dukhi Dalai who were 12 or 13 years of age were beaten mercilessly and left in the forest by the police. They returned to the Congress Ashram in the morning. Although the state authorities with the help of the colonial police force acted in a barbaric manner to dampen the enthusiasm of the people, the popular agitation did not stop. Within eleven days of the movement a total of 116 persons were arrested and many of them were heavily fined. The most notable feature of the popular movement was the participation of aboriginal tribals in the Nilgiri state.¹¹¹

In July 1938, a negotiation for a settlement was started between the Raja and the Nilgiri *Prajamandal*.¹¹² However, in Gariamala village, the tenants of Nilgiri started an Ashram. Banamali Das, the Secretary of the Nilgiri *Prajamandal* with other *Prajamandal* workers used to stay there and soon the number swelled to 1200. Udaynath Birbar of Nilgiri helped them. They published a daily news-sheet named *Ranadaka* (War-Cry) with the help of Gour Chandra Das, Secretary of Balasore District Congress Committee. Kailash Chandra Mohanty, the President of Nilgiri *Prajamandal* handed over a draft of demands to the ruling chief on behalf of the *Prajamandal* and gave two days time to concede the demands. Hare Krishna Mahatab and Sarangadhar Das visited Gariamala and held a meeting in September 1938. The meeting commenced with an opening song specially composed on behalf of the Nilgiri tenants, which described various atrocities committed in the state. A Congress flag was hoisted by Hare Krishna Mahatab

¹⁰⁵.AISPC Papers, Nilgiri, File No.124, (1938-40), NMML, New Delhi.

¹⁰⁶.Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.155/1938, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

¹⁰⁷.Amrit Bazar Patrika, 8 June, 1938.

¹⁰⁸.Home Political Department (Confidential), Fortnightly Report, File No.257/1938, NAI, New Delhi.

¹⁰⁹ . Ibid.

¹¹⁰.Home Political Department (Confidential) File, No.257/1938, NAI, New Delhi.

¹¹¹.AISPC Papers, Nilgiri, File No.127, NMML, New Delhi.

¹¹².Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.155, July, 1938, OSA,Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

and Kailash Chandra Mohanty exhorted the Santals and other tribal tenants to join the *Prajamandal*, and appealed to them not to start an agitation as negotiations were going on.¹¹³

The Raja of Nilgiri turned down the demands of the *Prajamandal*, went back to the settlement and started arresting the leaders. The Nilgiri *Prajamandal* resumed the nonviolent movement in August 1938. A large number of *Prajamandal* workers headed by Purna Chandra Naik marched to Ambodia Maidan, shouting the slogans against the Durbar. The Durbar indiscriminately lathi charged and dispersed the procession in Ayodhya. Many of them were seriously injured and taken to Balasore Hospital for treatment. Arjun Jena, a post peon who used to carry the dak of *Prajamandal* was fatally assaulted. His dead body was first taken inside the palace (Ayodhya) and thereafter buried in the jungle of the Nilgiri hill. This caused unprecedented agitation on the borders of Nilgiri state. Kanei Barik and Domei Charan Naik of Ambodia proceeded to Nilgiri hat and staged protest demonstrations. The Raja's men assaulted them, Banamali Das was arrested and the *Prajamandal* was banned.¹¹⁴

The *Prajamandal* demanded the immediate release of Banamali Das. The situation became tense. The Raja sought the help of the police force from neighbouring Mayurbhanj state and other states resorted to lathi charge and firing.¹¹⁵ After receiving this news the political agent and Hare Krishna Mahatab arrived at Balasore and negotiations for a settlement began between the Raja and the *Prajamandal*. In August 1938, Hare Krishna Mahatab started negotiations with the Dewan of Nilgiri. Kailash Chandra Mohanty, President of Nilgiri *Prajamandal* handed over 31 outstanding demands, including abolition of bethi and beggar. He also tendered an apology letter for certain slogans such as, *down with drunken Raja*, *down with faithless fellow*, raised during the movement. On 9 August 1938, the Raja conceded to 24 out of 31 demands and published the apology letter publicly.

Thus, Nilgiri was the first princely state of Odisha where the *Prajamandal* achieved the civil liberties of the people. It was a great victory for the people of the state and it tremendously influenced the other states people's movement in Odisha.¹¹⁶

Dhenkanal

Around the same time the popular movement started in Dhenkanal, a small state in the Sambalpur Political Agency in Eastern Agency. The *Prajamandal* was formed on 27 June 1938 under the auspice of with the support of the Odisha State Peoples Conference. Harmohan Patnaik and Sarangadhar Das mobilized the people against the state, demanding the abolition of the obnoxious cesses such as bethi, beggar and *magan*, enactment of and the tenancy laws as per the clauses of the Odisha Tenancy Act, 1913. The *Prajamandal* held meetings within the state under the leadership of Sarangadhar Das distributing *Krushak*, an Oriya Organ of the Socialist Party and organized the peasants against the oppressive rule of the Raja.¹¹⁷

Although the Raja declared certain concessions, it did not satisfy the *Prajamandal*. In July 1938 a number of meetings were held in various parts of Dhenkanal state, particularly in Parjang Bisos and Palasuni. The *Prajamandal* in the state took out kirtan parties from village to village singing songs about pann boycott. The Durbar desist the people from holding political meetings but it had no effect and the popular movement took visible shape by July 1938. Again the *Prajamandal* conference was held at Jenapur (Cuttack) and it was attended by 12000 people of the state including of harijans and tribal-tenants. Many resolutions were passed including the establishment of a responsible government including non-violent protest. A meeting was held at Parjang Bisos in August 1938. When the president rose to speak to the large gathering he was served with section 144 of IPC, which he did not defy. However, on his return to Dhenkanal town, he was called by the Raja, who wanted to hear about the grievances of the people, but the talks failed. Later on, Maheswar Subahu Singh, who was considered the natural leader of the whole state, was called by the Raja for a negotiation due to large pressure of large gathering at Dhenkanal town. In spite of the threat and persuasion, the people refused to return home and instead shouted slogans and hoisted the Congress tri-colour flag. Harmohan Patnaik, Laxmidhar Sahu and many *Prajamandal* leaders were arrested. Thousand of people gathered and demanded the immediate release of their leaders. The Durbar ordered the crowd to disperse, when they refused firing was opened in which

¹¹³. Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.155/1938, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

¹¹⁴. Home Political Department (Confidential), Fortnightly Report, File No.400/1938, NAI, New Delhi.

¹¹⁵. All India Congress Papers, File No.G-135, Part-I, 1938, NMML, New Delhi.

¹¹⁶. Amrit Bazar Patrika, 16th August, 1938.

¹¹⁷. Home Political Department (Confidential), Fortnightly Report, File No.400/1938, NAI, New Delhi.

hundred were wounded and taken to Cuttack Hospital. Naba Krishna Choudhury and Hare Krishna Mahatab arrived at Dhenkanal railway station. The people came out with their traditional weapons to save Maheswar Subahu Singh and others who were being tortured in the jail. The repression did not stop. The Raja imported 200 armed police from the neighbouring states which were kept at Dhenkanalgarh to suppress the people's movement. However when the Raja approached the government of Odisha under Congress ministry it refused to send any force on the ground that the people were fighting in a constitutional way to get their rights.

The Raja from 21 September, 1938, raided village after village, looted the houses, and indiscriminately assaulted men, women and children. There was vandalism in Parjang Biso. When this news of suppressive measures reached at Bhuban hundred of men and women locked up their houses and left to the neighbouring village of Sukinda estate as a mark of protest. As women were not safe, the *Prajamandal* declared a *Hizarat* in the state. However, in Bhuban police force let loose a reign of terror and violated the sanctity of the women. The police force resorted to firing in Bhuban which included few deaths and injuring six who were admitted to the Cuttack Hospital. At the Nilakanthapur Ghat on the Brahmani River, Baji Rout, a 12 year old boy when he tried to stop them from crossing the river was shot dead by the police. At Gadidini village looting and molestation of women was very common and they were forced to say *Raja Ki Jai* (long live the king). At Katamunda Harijan village there were six incidents of firing in two months and lathi charge in November 1938 one person suffered fatal injuries and many of them were injured.

In October 1938, the *Prajamandal* adopted Satyagraha in the state. They held meetings and processions in defiance of the Durbar's order. The Congress volunteers marched into Dhenkanal town were oppressed. Many of the satyagrahis' including the President and Secretary were arrested.

In the Dhenkanal movement the total numbers of people died were 15 and the ones wounded were 133. Besides, many hundreds were seriously injured during the course of the movement.

Efforts for a settlement were started and Hare Krishna Mahatab met the Joint Political Secretary at Puri on 19 October 1938, and handed over the charter of demands made by the *Prajamandal*, but nothing materialized. The Satyagraha movement continued. Many of the satyagrahis were arrested. False cases and 'extradition warrants' were issued against them. The Congress Socialists who were fighting the extradition cases criticized this. At that time Naba Krishna Choudhury resigned from the secretaryship of Odisha Provincial Congress Committee and led the first batch of volunteers who adopted Satyagraha in the state.¹¹⁸

On 2 December 1938, a meeting on the situation in Dhenkanal was convened in the Town Hall, Cuttack under the leadership of Pranath Patnaik, attended by 500 people. Pranath Patnaik vehemently condemned the Dhenkanal state. He held British imperialism responsible for mishaps in the state. He attracted the people to start a non-violent Satyagraha on the day after the meeting. Girija Bhusan Dutta conducted a meeting at Budapanka Camp (Anugul). He exhorted the people of Dhenkanal to accompany Naba Krishna Choudhury in thousands for the satyagraha movement. Rabi Ghose, referring to the oppression in Dhenkanal against the leaders, exhorted the people to fight bravely. He accused the British Government of siding with the Dhenkanal Durbar for not holding an impartial enquiry into all the allegations including the killing of 18 people by firing. In December 1938, batches of satyagrahis' started coming from Cuttack, Khurda, Sambalpur and other parts of Odisha to adopt Satyagraha as a mark of solidarity with the people of Dhenkanal.

On 3 December 1938, Bhagirathi Panigrahi, Naba Krishna Choudhury and Ananta Patnaik adopted Satyagraha in Parjang side of Dhenkanal state. The authority attempted to suppress the movement. The leaders were arrested and subjected to severe torture. Ananta Patnaik and Baidyanath Rath, who visited Bhuban to distribute Rs. 500 that had been received from the Bombay socialists, were tortured. While returning, Ananta Patnaik was kidnapped and handed over to the state police. Baidyanath Patnaik, however, managed to escape and returned to Cuttack. As the state authorities dealt with the movement in a highhanded manner, the movement appeared to be collapsing. Therefore, the socialists in order to revive the agitation invited N. G. Ranga, who promised to come to Cuttack towards the close of December 1938 to personally lead the movement in the Dhenkanal state.

¹¹⁸.All India Congress Committee Papers, File No. 135, (1938), Part-1, NMML, New Delhi.

S. P. Sharma, a local representative for The Hindu of Madras, was employed as an advisor to the Dhenkanal Durbar to draft a scheme for constitutional reform of the state. He advised the Raja of Dhenkanal to look into the grievances of the people against the alleged oppression of the police force in order to pacify their anger.¹¹⁹

Towards the close of 1938 that compelled by the situation the Raja declared certain constitutional rights for the people. The All India Congress Committee passed a resolution drafted by Mahatma Gandhi, asserting the right of the Congress to protect the people against an unwarranted use of military or police force by the British authorities. The premier of Odisha, Biswanath Das and Hare Krishna Mahatab opened negotiations with the Resident Commissioner of Eastern States Agency to bring about a settlement in Dhenkanal state. By that time the situation came under control.¹²⁰

Talcher

In September 1938 the *Prajamandal* was set up under the leadership of Pabitra Mohan Pradhan. It started agitation in the state for implementing certain reforms.¹²¹ The ruler of the state expelled a number of *Prajamandal* workers for carrying out agitation against the state. So they took refuge in Anugul, where they started a Volunteers Training Camp to carry on agitation against the oppression and misrule with the support of the local Congress. In September 1938, Laxmi Narayan Mishra, a Congress worker of Sambalpur held a kisan meeting at Anugul attended by people from Talcher. In this meeting discussions were held on the oppression and illegal exaction prevailing in the state. Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, and Maguni, returning from Cuttack to Panigala started mobilizing the people not to pay *hat-tax* in various parts of Talcher state. In order to avoid a crisis the state authority arrested 230 *Prajamandal* workers.¹²²

However this led to further trouble in the state, with 1000 of people gathering and demanding the immediate release of arrested persons. The *Prajamandal* demanded to the Raja, the right to organize popular associations and meetings besides many more demands.¹²³

Ranpur

Ranpur state was all along notorious for maladministration and many old conventional practices and customs. The *Prajamandal* made repeated demands before the ruler of the state to look into the grievances, but the outcome nothing substantial. On 2 January 1939, the state authority declared the *Prajamandal* as unlawful and arrested few of its activists. On the 5 January 1939, a large crowd gathered at the head quarter of Ranpur and there was a protest demonstration against the arrests. The Political Agent of Sambalpur, Major Bazelette used his revolver to terrorize the people and subsequently killed two tenants. The mob became violent and killed the Major and the Subedar was wounded.¹²⁴ The National Front on 15 January 1939, in its editorial depicted the incident as *Another Chauri Chaura*. Sarangadhar Das, the Secretary Odisha State Peoples Conference, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subash Chandra Bose strongly condemned the incident.¹²⁵ Mahatma Gandhi too denounced and condemned the ghastly incident. The state authorities and the paramount power had seen in this solitary act of retaliation by the rural masses a fitting excuse for letting loose a reign of terror.¹²⁶ This had provoked a protest from the Congress government of Odisha. Subash Chandra Bose, the President of Indian National Congress advised the popular masses to conduct the movement in accordance with the principles and policy of the Congress.¹²⁷

The murder of Major Bazelette in Ranpur State caused mixed reaction among the leaders. They considered that it was an accomplished fact against oppressive rule of the state and a fitting response of the people to the injustice suffered by them. On the other hand the important leaders started questioning themselves as to how the Congress policy of non-violence could be

¹¹⁹. Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.286, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

¹²⁰. AISPC Papers, Nilgiri, File No, 127, NMML, New Delhi.

¹²¹. Sunday Statesman, 11th September, 1938.

¹²². Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.211, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

¹²³. Sunday Statesman, 11 September, 1938.

¹²⁴. Mushirul Hasan, *Towards Freedom, Document on the movement for Independence, (Orissa: Ranpur, Report on the Ranpur Incident, AICC Papers, File No G-35, part 6, 1939, NMML), Part I, New Delhi, 2008, pp.727-8.*

¹²⁵. Ibid., pp.728-9.

¹²⁶. M.A Zaidi., op.cit., p.320.

¹²⁷. Mushirul Hasan, op.cit., pp. 727-8.

maintained if the party's platform was allowed to be used by violent and irresponsible elements in politics, whose ideas were based on revolution rather than evolution. F.G. Bailey remarked the movement seems to have lost sight of its non-violent intentions and became a form of guerilla warfare.¹²⁸

Though the leaders professed non-violent means of agitation because of the strained relationships tension mounted and it took a serious turn towards the end of 1938 and the beginning of 1939. The Police Administration Report mentions agitation in the Odisha States had been working towards climax and this was related in the first week of January when Major Bazelette, the Political Agent was put to death by a large mob in the capital of Ranpur State in 1939.¹²⁹

Nayagarh

The movement in Nayagarh also started during this period. The peasants had no property right over their land and the rate of rent was higher in comparison to the district of Ganjam and Puri. The forest rules were very strict and the privileges enjoyed by the peasants were drastically curtailed. Punishment for violating forest law was very heavy. Paying of fees for offering worship in the temples of *Raghunath* and *Ladubaba* was a special feature in the state of Nayagarh. There were a number of occasions in the past where the peasants expressed their resentment against this kind of operation and misrule in the state resulting in inhuman police atrocities.¹³⁰

From 1936 to 37, some tenants had surrendered their holdings as the wild animals damaged the crops and the cultivation was not profitable. They demanded the state to provide of crops by changing the forest rules. The Odisha State Peoples' Conference carried on propaganda against the state to change the forest rules. The tenants of the state consulted Sarangadhar Das and Biswambar Rath and formulated their grievances and represented to the colonial government. In March 1938, they gathered at the Gandhi Seva Sangha at Delang in Puri district. The tenants of the state joined in the meeting in large numbers. In April 1938, forest fires broke out in the state forests. The Raja held the tenants responsible for the incident and false cases were registered against the tenants. The tenants of Orgaon after their return from Delang meeting started the agitation against the state monopoly of sale of betel leaves in the state as the rights was given to certain men with specified rates of betel leaves. The rate was very high in comparison to the bordering market of Puri district. The tenants carried on propaganda not to use betel leaves and distributed placards and pasted them (Raghunath Jiu) in temple and other prominent places which were frequently visited by public. It instilled great enthusiasm among the tenants of Nayagarh. In April 1938, a man named Jumma Malik who was returning home after purchasing some betel leave was assaulted by the tenants. Five of them were charged and sentenced to a month's imprisonment. The arrest of the tenants caused dissatisfaction among the people of Nayagarh. A number of people belonging to Orgaon and other neighbouring village gathered together near the court and started a protest demonstration, shouted Congress slogans and demanded the release of the tenants. The village of Orgaon became the center of the agitation, as it was a place of pilgrimage throughout the year for the people coming to see Raghunath Jiu Thakur. Therefore, it was easier for the tenants to get help and sympathy from the outsiders. The tenants were advised to agitate under the guidance of Odisha State Peoples' Conference and the Congress to get their grievances redressed. The Raja was advised by the colonial government to grant concessions as demanded by the tenants and issue notices similar to those recently issued by Nilgiri Durbar, as it was necessary to keep the movement under control.¹³¹

The Raja, however did not concede to the demands and in Khurda around 10,000 kondhas, and other tribal tenants of Nayagarh surrounded the Rajas' palace in October 1938, demanding reforms in the state. The Congress socialist leader Gangadhar Mishra of Digiri in the border of Nayagarh state incited the tenants to cut down trees from the forests and launched no-rent campaign. The ruling chief of Nayagarh persuaded the tenants not to join hands with the agitators. Gangadhar Mishra and other Congress Socialists told the tenants that all India leaders would soon to arrive lead the Satyagraha in Nayagarh state.¹³²

¹²⁸. Bichitra Nanda Mishra, op.cit., pp.142-3.

¹²⁹. Bijay Chandra Rath, op.cit., p.130.

¹³⁰. Ibid., p.130.

¹³¹. Home Political Department (Confidential), Fortnightly Report, File, No.257/1938, NAI, New Delhi.

¹³². Home Political Department (Confidential), No.15/39, OSA, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

Keonjhar

In the state of Keonjhar *Prajamandal* was formed in 1938 and it held a meeting at Balabhadrapur, where they formulated their grievances to present to the Raja. Along with their various demands the *Prajamandal* demanded for a benevolent government. The leaders of the meeting immediately after their arrival at Keonjhar Garh were arrested and charged under section 124 of I.P.C. Those who attended the meeting were threatened of dire consequences. A similar meeting was held at Anandapur, but the state authority arrested five persons and tried them under section 420 of I.P.C.¹³³

Pallahara and Gangpur

In 1938, *Prajamandal* was formed in the Pallahara state. The *Prajamandal* held a meeting at Tiribi village to protest against excessive bethi, and formulate their grievances to present them to the Raja. After the arrest of Karunakar Behera Pradhan, the leader of *Prajamandal*, 5000 people congregated and protested against it. The demand of the *Prajamandal* among other things, were restoration of civil liberties and the establishment of full responsible government.¹³⁴ After a long protest of the thousands of the *Prajamandal* workers from all over the state Karunakar Behera Pradhan and 17 others were released. The Raja however alleged that the persons coming from Dhenkanal had started the agitation.¹³⁵

In Gangpur state, the peasant under the *Prajamandal* had organized a no-rent campaign against what they considered to be a rightly arbitrary assessment of rent. The Gangpur administration wanted to suppress the campaign, and for that purpose, requisitioned military assistance apprehending violence from the peasants. On 25 April 1939, a police force was sent to arrest Nirmal Munda. But, they were confronted with a crowd of 500 armed Mundas (tribal-peasants.) Military assistance was called for and firing had to be resorted to, when the defiant Mundas did not disperse after repeated warnings. As a result 30 mundas were brutally killed and 21 were severely wounded.¹³⁶

Peaceful civil resistance also started in states like Athagarh, Tigiria, Baramba and Narasinghpur under the guidance of the respective *Prajamandal* leadership. The rulers of these states more or less followed the repressive policy of their fellow rulers of Dhenkanal and Talcher and they also had their share of firing and lathi charge on innocent and peaceful crowds. They also declared the *Prajamandal* in their states as unlawful and went back on the assurance given in response to the agitation and demand of the *Prajamandals*. There were strong agitations in almost all the Odisha states on account of the widespread activities of the *Prajamandals*.¹³⁷

Seeing this peasant unrest in the states the prominent Congress leaders of Odisha and some notable Indian leaders intervened in order to bring about a settlement between the rulers and the ruled. Babu Rajendra Prasad, C.F. Andrews, Miss Agatha Harrison (Secretary of Indian Conciliation Group, London), H.K. Mahatab and N.G. Ranga – the prominent kisan leaders and few others played important roles in bringing about such a settlement. The situation however changed when the Congress Ministry resigned from Odisha. The colonial government tightened its grip over the States. All the *Prajamandals* organized throughout the Princely States of Odisha were banned.¹³⁸

With the beginning of the World War-II the Defence of India rules strengthened the hands of the rulers. Almost all leaders of *Prajamandals* in the princely states were arrested and sent to prison. This resulted in a temporary lull in the movement. The workers of the *Prajamandal* devoted themselves to silent constructive work until 1942 when again a mass movement was started.¹³⁹

¹³³. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 12 November, 1939.

¹³⁴. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 September, 1939.

¹³⁵. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 12 September, 1939.

¹³⁶. N. K. Sahu and Sushil Chandra De, *Who's Who Freedom Works in Orissa: District Dhenkanal*, Cuttack, 1967, p.viii.

¹³⁷. N. C. Behuria, *Orissa District Gazetteers*, Cuttack, 1996, p. 117.

¹³⁸. *Ibid.*, p.118.

¹³⁹. N.K. Sahu and Sushil Chandra De, eds., *Who's Who Freedom Workers in Orissa: Dhenkanal District*, Cuttack, 1967, p. IX.

The imperial power was rather hesitant to press the zamindars and the rulers for taking drastic remedial measures. Invariably, everywhere the colonial power intervened to curb the popular movements when the zamindars and the rulers could not contain it. The British colonialism was condemned everywhere as the root cause of trouble in the states.¹⁴⁰

A series of legislative steps were taken by the Congress Ministry under the pressure of Krushak Sangh and *Prajamandal* to ameliorate the condition of the peasants of Odisha. Legislation was introduced for the provision of a credit system through Co-Operative Land Mortgage Banks, for preventing the eviction of small landholder from their land and *etc.* The most important legislative measures in this direction was Odisha Act III of 1938. Besides, this Odisha Tenancy Law of 1913 was amended and became an Act. It conferred better rights on the cultivators. Two significant amendments made by it were (1) the conferment of full rights of occupancy tenants on the tree standing on the particular land and (2) also permission to transfer their land without payment of fees to the landlords. Necessary provisions to carry out the mutation of landlord's papers were made. The right to sublet or mortgage the occupancy right was also stipulated as a necessary concomitant to these facilities.¹⁴¹ Remission of rents was given in areas where there was failure of crops. Takavi loans were given to ryots. A sum of 20000 rupees was sanctioned under the Agricultural Improvement Act to enable the tenants to purchase bullocks, seeds and not depend on the village Mahajans. The Odisha Moneylenders Bill which became an Act was another notable step taken to curb the oppression of the moneylenders. In north Odisha the water rates under Mahanadi Irrigation System water tax was reduced by 25 percent as a permanent measure from 1938. The Congress Ministry in Odisha had also extended its support to the popular movement in the states of Odisha by refusing to lend police forces and State Protection Act. For the civil liberties of the rural masses in the states the Bihar and Odisha Public Safety Act was repealed with the effort of the Congress Ministry. All repressive bans prohibiting meetings and processions were removed. The Congress Ministry also did not comply with the extradition warrants issued from different states against the *Prajamandal* leaders. All this led to the differences between the Political Department and the Congress Ministry in Odisha. In all government forest cess was reduced for tribals by 50 per cent. The system of bethi and beggar were abolished which became a great relief to the tribal peasants in the states of Odisha.¹⁴²

These measures were indications of success achieved by the popular agitation in Odisha. In fact, both the *Prajamandal* and Krushak Sangh gained enormously through the movement. However, many problems remained and the situation in the states was still very difficult as the Congress Ministry resigned. Several measures had very little chance of being enacted. But the Congress rose to prominence in its way to march for freedom (Purna Swaraj) from colonial dominion.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰. Bichitra Nanda Mishra, op. cit., p. 145.

¹⁴¹. Ibid., pp.144-5.

¹⁴². M.A. Zaidi, op.cit., pp. 352-3 and p.400.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 375.